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The purpose of this thesis paper is to describe the body of work titled *Dark Cozy Place*. This project is the result of immersion and play in the mediated public imagery of the control system that is commodity culture. A mental space that is impersonal and manipulative, that of mass media as it is disseminated in both public and private spaces, was made personal through visual translations such as drawing, printmaking, photographing, painting, building and rebuilding.

DARK COZY PLACE

By

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DARK COZY PLACE

My thesis work began with a simple question: why have I always felt the need to translate, through drawing, each image that confronts me? Magazine photographs, movie stills, television shows in progress, and virtually every other mediated, often commercially motivated, image must pass through my eye and hand, and be scratched on paper or plastic or wood. Since I was a child, I would spend the majority of my free time sitting in a chair in front of the television with sketchbook in hand, drawing from comic books, tracing rocket blueprints, or copying down the dialogue of whatever show was in front of me. At restaurants, I would copy from the children's placemats, or from the menus or table tents. This obsession continued into the schoolhouse. I succeeded in academia because I passed the tests; but I was lucky to do so, as my participation grade was never very high. Complete immersion in sketchbooks and notebook margins and bright florescent light fixtures comprises the bulk of my school time memory.

Every line of questioning needs a starting point, some strangely familiar, although often unnamed, motivation. I have found that those formative years spent engrossed in visual detritus spawned a practice that I cannot escape. I began my graduate work thinking about the mediated image, trying to pick apart

my fascination with the visual onslaught that accompanies every step in this information world. Why must I use drawing, a series of marks built one upon another, to try to understand the visual world and its affects on my life? Is it the images themselves that are so entrancing, or confounding, to me, or is it the process of sifting through them and claiming them as my own that drives me? Does this really claim ownership at all?

Susan Sontag wrote, “the ‘realistic’ view of the world compatible with bureaucracy redefines knowledge – as techniques and information. Photographs are valuable because they give information. Through photographs, the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and *faits divers*.” We may gain a snapshot of time and texture, but what lies beneath becomes further hidden in the process, allowing us to separate pieces from the whole, and deny the perspective that begets understanding. This is essential to a system that is based on commodity culture, as the individual becomes further removed from his own part in the cycle, making it impossible for the worker to estimate his own complicity, or alternately his effectiveness, within the consumer-based economic structure. The bombardment of images that increases daily and exponentially as information technology expands deeper into our personal life experience makes understanding the whole, attempting to see the big picture, a fool’s errand. Trying to see all of the angles clearly in any given situation has become akin to

logically reasoning the future flight patterns of butterflies as they flutter around in the eye of a hurricane.

The general assumption that culture critics, parental watchdogs, and the more liberal leaning subversives in my peer group tend to espouse has moved along these lines for years. There is too much violence, too much information, too much surface reality. The appearance of things obscures the true nature of things. This certainly can be true, but as with anything, there are more arguments to be made.

Philosophers, writers, and artists alike have found other answers as valid or more so. Alfredo Jaar is an artist who has spent most of his career moving back and forth between the use of imagery as illustration, as illusion, and as distraction, all the while attempting to use art and the art world to affect social change. He does not seem to have found any definitive answers. He elicited the philosopher Jacques Ranciere to write an opposing view in the opening essay of his retrospective catalogue *La Politique des Images*. Ranciere wrote that the concept of an overabundance of images that serves to anesthetize and dull our senses is simply a myth that is perpetuated by the powerful, those who seek to control information and communication. Ranciere states that rather than too many images of man's indecency to man, we see too few. Jaar employs Ranciere's words, yet, in truth, the artist sparingly uses images of violence in his work, often opting to show blurry photos of grieving mothers facing away from the

camera, or shots taken from a distance that show a child laying a gentle hand on another child's shoulder. Jaar has spent thirty years of a brilliant and varied artistic career pondering the question of the mediated image, and finds the only answer in balance and variation.

One final introductory thought by Douglass Rushkoff seems pertinent to the foundation of research that set up my thesis work. Writing about HDTV in *Discover* in October of 2006, Rushkoff lamented his concern over our newfound ability to see every detail in every image, whether mythological narrative or scientific study. Rushkoff writes:

That's why I see HDTV breeding an even less intelligent, less scientific culture than we already have. While sophisticated technologies like this might let us see nature, observe the stars, and even watch the news more clearly, we mustn't let them deprive us of the icons and metaphors we use to describe the things in our lives that are less tangible and more allegorical, less a reality and more a model. For without the ability to model, we don't have any science at all.

My thesis work consists of noisy, confusing images and settings that exist in a space that is neither fully illusionistic nor completely flat. The picture plane is fragmented, as are the images themselves, and every detail is focused on to the point of being unfocused. The narrative is not clear as to either content or where it may begin or end. Instead, by running off the edges, employing repetition of marks, shapes, and even some recognizable images, and working in the serial

format, I hope to convey the feeling that each piece is a part of some greater story, but is so microscopic a segment that the macroscopic may never be fathomable. I build the compositions from marks that come directly and indirectly from visual documentation that I have collected and created over the past two years and more. The documents are interpretations of and reactions to my surroundings, things I see, read, hear, or feel, and these two-dimensional recollections become the pieces of information, the statistics, the news tickers and war photos and advertisements and junk mail, that cross-reference, layer, and combine in a reaction to fragmented thought and one way communication.

When creating the individual components of these unconstrained, negligibly contained narratives, I think about daily experience, memory, the influence of systems large and small, and the many options that face me as I attempt to find a path through the cacophony. Specifically, these components are often reactions to or against, and occasionally in harmony with, the systems-monetary, legal, visual, bureaucratic, medical, nutritional, digital-that inform every decision I make as a member of a large, global collective. I create these components out of accessible materials, although not necessarily everyday items. Traditional tools of the graphic artist, such as ink washes and pens and brushes, are the media that go into making marks and finding some semblance of the things that have shaped my day. There is something joyous about using the tools of commercial industry to subvert its very purpose.

The return to craft is something that has become important to many artists of my generation. Maya Hayuk, Jeff Soto, Sean Star Wars, Neckface, and Banksy are all artists obsessed with creating a portrait of the world around them through various hands-on means. It is not necessarily about the materials themselves, so much as the act of the artist's hands manipulating said materials directly. Maybe it is a reaction to a world that seems mass produced. Maybe it is simply a generational aesthetic that favors the hand made over the machine made. For me, it comes down to getting my fingernails dirty, feeling like a kid with crayons and the urge to mark something up and to make my mom smile. I am fueled by the idea of creating something with energy that needed nothing more than sleep and food to obtain, and leaving behind proof that human hands moved across an object.

Thinking about that childhood feeling is what led me to create *Dark Cozy Place*. For most of my life, since the time I could use my hands consciously, I have been translating previously processed imagery into further translated imagery. I have been trying to stake a claim of ownership to my personal visual space, through a process that is more introspective and reflective than proactive and outward reaching. I feel like I am erasing the intended message, the manipulative affect, through drawing and copying and adding and subtracting. The final product feels like something that is my own.

The time spent here in graduate school has improved my skill, my hand, and my work ethic, but something was missing in the effort to create a body of work consistent with the traditional gallery space. I created scrolls, and books, prints, wall drawings, and photographs. The most recent work is pasted onto florescent light fixtures. But the immersion that I was finding in the work was disappearing in the consideration of the presentation. My practice is about sifting through the visual detritus of the spectacle society, becoming lost in it, and playing and laughing. Finally, from the raw materials that work for the system, I like to think that I am making pictures that live somewhere beyond it. It might be more accurate, however, to situate myself, and in turn the work, within the system, yet somewhat out of control and possibly threatening to spread back into its bone marrow.

Dark Cozy Place was spawned from the urge to invite the viewer into my playpen. I want to offer up some time and a little stimulation, allowing the participant to provide the rest. I am creating a site-specific structure in the gallery space. Simply put, it is a shelter made from my artwork, with a dash of comfort draped over the top and underneath to create a small, separate world. More specifically, the walls are constructed from the various results of my studio practice. One wall is the florescent light fixture, which is in fact a drawing made up of layered and de-contextualized formal elements derived from broadcast television stills. This will be the major light source in the tent structure, recalling

both the general experience of staring at one light emitting entertainment device in the home, and the childhood memory of being under the covers with a flashlight, or turning off the lights and making images on a Lite-Brite. Those memories are warm and fuzzy for me, but the adult realization of the true nature of those fantasies is not. The fact that I was dreaming about being a battle hero or some similarly glorified killer has put a strange spin on the recollection.

The gradual awareness of the subtle indoctrination that is a large part of my upbringing has been frightening, but also a little bewildering and strangely impressive. The contents of *Dark Cozy Place* are designed to bring about this feeling in the audience. The light drawing is one structural element. Another, less mesmerizing, but infinitely richer wall is created using my bookshelf. Lined with altered books, sketchbooks, scroll-format books, and various nostalgic print publications, the wooden case will hold up part of the tent, and invite participants to enter any one of the book worlds that I have spent so many hours inside. As the images I create are layered and fractured, so is the tent structure itself, and the more time spent inside, the more focused my jilted version of the larger picture becomes. Pillows are printed with instructions on carrying an injured soldier, scrolls whose imagery appears similar to wallpaper are actually made of helicopters and happy pills and male enhancement advertisements. Truthfully, the source material, culled mostly from television and print advertising, is almost entirely related to the false image of masculinity and collective pride mentality

that dominates the G.I. Joe, bigger is better world that has seemed inescapable to me. The editing has a pointedly specific origin, and although the intended meanings of their creators and propagators have become nearly unrecognizable to the viewer, my hope is that they retain some of the iconic and symbolic irony that the initial images held for me, if only as a vague feeling, like a body as of yet undiscovered in the closet. The passive detachment that comes from recognizing the manipulation of my deepest values, while feeling overwhelmingly carried along by the torrent is the feeling that I imagine might find its way to the surface in these drawings.

It goes back to Susan Sontag. She was right that information, statistics, specific images out of context, categorized and separated and made incompatible with the larger view, are what keep the average person in a sleepy trance. I have found, however, that the answer lies not in throwing away statistics, ignoring the close-up and the snapshot and the news teaser, but in blurring your eyes, listening to the white noise, and being receptive when two or three channels actually line up. I hope that the atmosphere of my structure, the strange, excited feeling of sneaking more knowledge after your parents turn out the lights, will lend itself to this way of absorbing what resides in *Dark Cozy Place*.

Beyond that, however, I am interested in affecting the rate and nature of the work's interaction with the viewer through the form of this structure. The

conversation about my work tended, quite inevitably, to skew away from the newly created imagery itself, but rather toward the form of the vessel housing the image. That is where this odd, childlike fort structure comes from. I believe that it puts into context the way to receive the work, and it allows for a different pace at which to experience the drawings, prints, and particularly the books. To ask the viewer to stoop into an improvised structure, to sit on mismatched pillows and an old musty rug, and to take the time that is required to drop into my sarcastic little pit, is risky in some ways. It will inevitably exclude a portion of the possible audience. But in the end, what I felt was missing was the involved conversation that my books and prints and drawings strive to have, and I consider *Dark Cozy Place* successful if just one person comes in, relaxes, and eventually reacts.

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CATALOGUE

1. Indoctrination #36 2009

Ink wash, acrylic, spray paint, graphite, woodcut prints, digital prints, digital transfers on vellum and drafting film adhered to florescent light fixture box
26" x 50"

2. First Aid for Soldiers 2008

Acrylic, marker, pen and ink, found objects, glue in altered military manual
7" x 5" 215 pages

3. I Hold Here Only an Office and No Opinion 2009

Spray Paint Stencil on found pillow
8" x 8"

4. Carrying an Injured Soldier 2009

Printed pillowcase, old flat pillow
24" x 30"

5. ZEE Germans! 2009

Printed pillowcase, old flat pillow

24" x 30"

6. Dark Cozy Place (installation shot #1) 2009

Sheets, rope, rugs, hand-printed pillows, found pillows, framed digital prints, framed family photographs, 36 artists books, artists scroll, lightbox, woodcut print and spray paint on MDF, flagpole, painted plastic eagle, inkwash and thread on drafting film

Dimensions variable

7. Dark Cozy Place (installation shot #2) 2009

8. Dark Cozy Place (installation shot #3) 2009