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ABSTRACT

The human body is a finely tuned organic machine that man has learned to gainfully disturb through modern medicine. In embroidering, making prints and painting, I pictorially expose these disruptions while simultaneously revealing the intricate mechanisms that facilitate the functioning of our bodies. I assemble surgery scenes by building forms that both defy and celebrate flat representation in the hopes of rewarding introspection and inward reflection. Making monumental paintings, some measuring 5 × 7 feet, I hope to inspire reverence for our often miraculous physical integrity.

In layering cumulative marks and working with saturated colors, I seek to investigate our internal configurations through a contemporary form of transubstantiation. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines transubstantiation as “the change by which the substance (though not the appearance) of the bread and wine in the Eucharist becomes Christ’s Real Presence—that is, his body and blood. In Roman Catholicism, transubstantiation, aims at safeguarding the literal truth of Christ’s Presence while emphasizing the fact that there is no change in the empirical appearances of the bread and wine.” I search for modern materials that become their likeness; paint is flesh just as bread is body. I construct layers, facilitating the paint’s corporeal conversion until it becomes more than a physical presence, existing in transformed space.

Nearly two years ago, I underwent surgery that resulted in the removal of a rib. It was a traumatic experience that served to make me aware of my formerly undivided existence. The practice of surgery broke me as a whole, as I am now no longer physically absolute. However, my body has righted itself, compensating for its physical inadequacies and in turn I have found comfort in my partiality. My goal in making artwork is to present the idea that surgery, while a devastating disruption, can serve to make us intimately aware of our bodies as resilient, repairable entities. Especially through paintings, I attempt to inspire confusion about, and reverence for the body as a complete form while destroying perceptions of the individual self. Thus the paintings deal with simultaneously breaking-down and repairing physical realities. My artwork is grounded in personal narrative, but I hope it may also serve as a reminder of the complexity and resilience within all of us.

No Guts No Glory: Dissecting Flesh With Paint

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One black night in the South Atlantic Ocean, while steering a jury-rigged lifeboat from Elephant Island to South Georgia Island in gale winds and cross-seas, the Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton saw a white line so high against the southern horizon that he took it to be a clearing sky. It marked instead the foam cresting a wave huge beyond any that he had ever met in his long years at sea. Meet it he did, headed his tiny craft into the wind and rode it out (Truitt, 11).

In the past year or so, I have held this quote close, remembering that the instinct for survival motivated by daunting natural forces has the possibility to empower my work. While creating has been difficult at times, I've learned to see hardship for its positive sides, and every personal challenge as encouragement for artistic maturity. Over two years ago I underwent invasive surgery, which resulted in the removal of my first rib and the segmentation of my left pectoral muscle. Although it was painful, my recovery permanently altered my purpose as a maker. Desiring to share my physical record and employing knowledge gained from injury, I make paintings to inspire personal reflection in those around me, exploring the similarities in our internal framework as a way to connect us. Our physical components are the only elements of our nature that we fundamentally share. I have found comfort in the production of pieces that embody pain and consolation in the theological notion that our material configurations serve to unite us as beings bound to physicality.

After being diagnosed with Thoracic Outlet Syndrome in the fall of my junior year at Mount Holyoke, I decided to take a semester off to recover fully from the surgery that was necessary to restore blood-flow to my arm. After

three months on bedrest, *TOS* (image 1) was the first painting I upon my return to school. Using each brush as a producer of a measureable mark, I depicted a simple coalescing of line and building of space. Featuring white areas penetrated by dry, fast brushstrokes, *TOS* shows the vibrating animation of surgery. A surgical tool bisects the canvas, eviscerating organic space with its verticality and linear design. Tight, black lines delineate bodily portions through their cartoonlike proximity while vibrant reds, purples, pinks and oxidized irons fill-out a vast body space. The colors are exact—never mixing, and only changing in hue when brushstrokes are layered. On the left, my rib remains highlighted in its isolation, its spare nature serving as a diagram for completeness before removal. Using diamond dust (a fine crushed glass), I approach the concept of transubstantiation, rendering the glistening insides of the human body as three-dimensional. Diamond dust becomes plasma, its physicality serving to explore the lubrication and cooperation of organs within a form. In this piece, the marks of my brush remain untouched after their initial meeting with the canvas, turning paint into permanent bodily alteration.

Painted marks provide a physical history, manifesting gesture and action in my work, their utilitarian value showing regard for the materiality of painting. Each brushstroke is an opportunity for experience, marks not simply seen but felt. I use exact and brusque strokes to carve through paint, the brush dissecting and manipulating space, furthering the connection between my hand and material. The paint is flesh, constructing a body rather than simply representing it. Using my brush as a scalpel, I reveal the human form to the

viewer, offering humanity and compassion for the body as a familiar ideal. As a physical representation of the surgery I experienced, *TOS* highlights the disruptive nature of the surgeries (necessary or elective) to which we subject ourselves. Overwhelming in production and display (5 × 7 feet), this painting exhibits the devastation possible from the unnatural imposition of surgery. James Rosenquist once said that his “aesthetic may come from [being] close to a huge image and [having it] be exact. [He] felt as though [he] was painting this whale, like a Moby Dick” (Staniszewski 3). The scale of *TOS* was meant to be a personal challenge. I wanted to respect the personal iconography of my surgery while forcing myself to approach difficult subject matter physically. Each action required to produce the piece was demanding, requiring bodily effort and attention, connecting process to subject.

The process of painting is intrinsically connected to this concept of dividing matter in order to reconstitute it with completeness and singularity. I watch surgery videos for both aesthetic value and scientific content, using stills from these videos to inform my work. I trace the paths of a surgeon’s scalpel and draw these outlines as visceral flesh. Making a series of very small (3 × 5 inch) pencil drawings, I arrive at a pared-down image derived from the original, but independently formed. Each drawing further refines the initial video still, as I work to keep only the lines that are essential to understanding the final image. In this way, I produce referential descriptions that are uniquely bodily while maintaining an aesthetic perspective imbued with scientific knowledge. I use a projector to transfer these small drawings

onto the canvas, and in this process create a layer of separation between my viewer and the traumatic subject matter. Process works to dilute the intensity of the original image, making the final product more appealing and approachable.

In the screenprint I made based on *TOS* (image 2), I obscured the disturbing subject in order to make my story more approachable. Bloodied surgical tools sever the first rib, while clamps clutch and expose interior flesh. Bright, garish colors are crossed in the background, serving as a foundation for quick marks depicting surgery. A final layer of gold glitter is encrusted on the surface, further obscuring visual cues. Working with multiple layers of screened images, I built a veiled scene, the details of gore hidden.

Abstraction, either through medium or process, became a tool of accessibility. I use glitter to make the image enticing, it's a material that can be effortlessly identified, but it's also a rough tool for abstraction. Glitter serves to seduce and reward further inspection of my pieces, another device allowing for easy access to my work. This layering screenprinting process has become vital, allowing me to use an image over and over again (changing the colors every time). It's a great tool for painters. Screenprinting became a medium where I could do quick experiments without committing to an entirely new painting.

In *Don't Get It Twisted* (image 3), I collaged silkscreened images of human intestines on found butterfly wing collages. Fine glitter specifically depicts our glistening interiors while simultaneously beautifying subversive content. The layering of the organic butterfly wings offsets these glittering jewel-like

intestinal spaces with particular attention and respect for natural organization. Working with found materials allowed me to subvert their original meaning and insert my own (the original meaning of the pieces became complicated by contradictory visual information). These pieces are small and devout, with a preciousness that admires intricate structures and convoluted assembly.

In addition to the *TOS* screenprint, I created a devotional miniature (roughly 5 × 5 inches) of the large *TOS* painting called *For Easy Transport* (image 4) as a reminder of my personal experience. A relic of sorts, it is composed entirely of drawn lines, like fine calligraphy, with glitter highlighting fleshy aggregates. I realized that my actual rib (returned to me after surgery) had a similar purpose as evidence of trauma. Accepting trauma as a disruption of my own sacred, unexplored bodily space was a significant healing idea in my recovery. These small objects function for individual interaction as a means to commune with God.

I have realized that I am a product of medicine just as I am a product of my religious upbringing. I struggle to avoid narcissistic expression in my pieces, instead aiming to share my own visual language with an audience while obliquely exploring significant personal issues. Philip Guston, an enormous inspiration for my work, relied on paintings that were personal allegories without being explicitly self-indulgent. In doing so, he created a formula to tackle autobiography through abstracted realism. In discussing his return to realism late in his career, Guston said that:

There is something ridiculous and miserly in the myth we inherit from abstract art. That painting is autonomous, pure

and for itself, and therefore we habitually defined its ingredients and define its limits. But painting is 'impure.' It is the adjustment of impurities which forces painting's continuity. We are image-makers and image-ridden (Mayer 141).

This idea of painting as challenge and impure process led to my more current works that aim to recognize our primary similarities. While my past works focused on compartmentalizing and understanding personal trauma, my newer pieces are about universality. These paintings are not of my body, but rather a collective body, emotionally charged through their reverence for the corporeal as functioning relic.

Intrusions into our interior bodily space can serve to remind us of our natural wholeness. As beings of divine makeup, surgery has become a powerful force that endangers and challenges the concept of our holy significance through corporeal deconstruction. With our reliance on God challenged by changing perceptions, contemporary surgery acts as the creator of our generation. We are no longer bound to the body given to us and understand that God's perceived "failures" in aesthetic production can be provided through medical practice. In my *Real Housewives* (image 5) drawings, I examine body modification and surgery as an elective opportunity. Two women receive facials that are visually reminiscent of bondage while they gossip about insignificant relationship woes. I hope to draw attention to the way we equate status with the contemporary privilege to negligently change our structure in a blasé matter.

As humans, we take for granted the working of our bodies and their potential for adaptation, disregarding the fact that we are resilient and multifarious organisms. In *You Can't Handle the Truth* (image 6), I explore connections between tactility, imagination and faith. This piece features large hands that prod and probe the human body. They can be perceived as either menacing or banal, but nonetheless, they are unnatural intrusions.

The history of art provides many examples of the human touch as verifying presence. An early fifteenth century German woodcut claiming to diagram the exact dimensions of Jesus' side wound (image 7) has been particularly inspirational to my work. The image remains significant due to its insistence on the common human touch as essential to confirmation of corporeal presence. Devotional and accessible in size and construction, images of the five wounds of Christ serve to turn wound into icon. In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry states that:

Belief comes not, as so often in the Old Testament, by being oneself wounded but by having the wound become the object of touch. If in the Hebraic scripture we repeatedly move from the human body to a more extreme materialization of the body in the exposure of the interior ... of Jesus in the final wounds of the crucifixion. The relation between body and belief remains constant in the two scriptures: in each the interior of the body carries the force of confirmation. The difference resides in whose body it is that is required to confer the factualness of the material world on the immaterial realm: in the one it is the body of man that substantiates God; in the other, the body of God that substantiates God. The Artifact becomes for the first time self-substantiating.

Touch, a deceptively simplistic human ability, has both a healing and illuminating purpose. If exposing the bodily interior through wounds made God thoroughly real, could exposing our interiors restore faith in humanness?

Faith has been contested with scientific evidence for centuries. I produce in these traditions, making artwork based in science while still being inexorably tied to aesthetics. *You Can't Handle the Truth* references the body but is not bound to scientific accuracy. I piece together my own reality, a literal representation of an existing body is not my ultimate goal. Instead, I try to find meaning through combinations of recognizable bodily elements. Again, Rosenquist's influence is felt in this work. I respect Rosenquist for the way he combined images, knowing that new associations created through proximity and size would ultimately influence their original meanings. The idea of altering pre-existing images or visual information is particularly appealing to me.

In *Electrocution Painting* (image 8), I exploit the idea of diagramming internal space by using only black paint on raw canvas. Stark contrast and pared down lines allow for strict observance of the human viscera. Four surgical implements hold an incision in tension, pulling in an aggressively practical manner. We see the deep space of the body, an almost never-ending opening made traversable through highlighted organs close to the surface. Images of working or living internal bodies are relatively new, so I take advantage of this fact by forming a cavity that insists on three-dimensionality while utilizing cartoonlike descriptors. The pulled flesh is exaggerated

through simple markings, easily suggesting that the surrounding space should be read as external body.

By using a cartoon-aesthetic in *Electrocution Painting*, I aim to show that we have the capacity to be physically pulled apart and pieced back together. In *The Body and Bread* (image 9), a close-up of Eucharistic bread shows this same action. A bread medallion is ripped apart and shaped again in the form of a cross, exploring the belief that the bread blessed and served for consumption in Catholic mass is the actual (not simply a representation of, but the functioning) living body of Christ.

My most recent work, *All That Glitters Is Gold* (image 10) closely approaches my ideal of modern transubstantiation. In this triptych, each 4 × 4 foot canvas shows paint to be flesh just as bread is body. Working with a wet-on-wet technique, mixing paint directly on the surface of the canvas and thinking of soft tissue, the paintings become enticingly tactile in appearance. This work fills a transitory space between two and three dimensions. In *All That Glitters Is Gold*, successive layers of paint form body. We move through space, seeing the progression of one surgery from closure to opening and finally ending in artifice. The colors are saturated and unnaturally juicy, paying homage to the beautiful systems and organizations unseen within all of us. Wanting to replicate the small, *Don't Get It Twisted* butterfly pieces on a larger scale, this triptych of scope images uses a black, circular framing device satisfying my desire for overwhelming size while simultaneously remaining intimate.

The *All That Glitters Is Gold* paintings show a specified view through a scope, while my larger paintings expose the open body, unframed and unadulterated. Recently, I've been thinking about stained glass windows in relation to my paintings. This triptych reminds me of medieval glass with its stark black outlines, offsetting color and sharp contrast. M. B. Shepard writes that the projection of colored images in stained glass:

transformed natural sunlight into a resplendent gloom interpreted to reveal the Divine Presence. This association of God with light [is] critical to the understanding of medieval stained glass ... these hovering windows of light altered the very nature of a church interior from substance to the immaterial, mirroring the transmutation of the corporeal to the spiritual, thereby creating a vision for the worshiper and a paradise in which to encounter the Divine.

In the future, I'd love to work on monumentally large paintings that would produce the same effect. Saturated and pure colors on a large scale could create a sensory experience by reflecting my marks onto the viewer's physical body.

Just like stained glass, we exist as sacred assemblages. We too often take for granted the inner-workings of our bodies and potential for adaptation, disregarding our resilience. We are taught to train our bodies in a specific way, often unaware that the attention to this training makes us negligent in listening to our anatomical needs. Surgeons manipulate the human form with finely tuned instruments and constantly advancing technology, yet remain highly rudimentary in their understanding of the body as a typically undisturbed organic space. Each organ, each tendon, each blood vessel

influences our physical interaction with the world. A system of highly ordered processes lies beneath our surfaces. Relatively unaware of our own seamless inner workings, we forget the inherent physical complexity that affects our perspective. We are complex beings that require both seen and unseen mechanisms to function and sustain life.

In my experience, surgery has served to reveal my corporal identity as its associated suffering or pain became evidence of my own flesh and blood. My work explores the notion of this inherent framework within us, searching for aesthetic and theological representations of corporeal identity within community. The surgical disruption of my physical being led me to rely more closely on my relationship with God and therefore question the source of my own creation. What can religion teach us about humanity and what can our physical structure tell us about who we actually are?

I am constantly searching for confirmation that the functioning body is life itself and that our insides reflect divine creation. Faith has provided me with comfort and composure in acceptance of my flawed interior, and I hope that my work can inspire others to have faith in the body as well. I have learned through making artwork that the act of living exists not only in our bodily functioning, but also in our interactions. This duality affirms our bodily organization as miraculous and shows the influence of divine intentionality in our creation.

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CD-ROM Information

1. *TOS*
2010 painting 45 × 84"
oil on canvas
2. *(Untitled) TOS Screenprint*
2010 screenprint 7 × 18"
screenprint and glitter on paper
3. *Don't Get It Twisted*
2011 mixed media assemblage 5 ½ × 5 ½ "
screenprint, glitter, butterfly wings
4. *For Easy Transport*
2010 mixed media assemblage 5 × 5"
canvas, markers, glitter
5. *Real Housewives*
2011 drawing 8 ½ × 11"
graphite on paper
6. *You Can't Handle the Truth*
2011 painting 45 × 84"
oil on canvas
7. *Five Wounds of Christ*
15th Century woodcut 4 × 8"
ink on parchment
8. *Electrocution Painting*
2011 painting 36 × 72"
acrylic on canvas
9. *The Body And Bread*
2011 painting 18 × 24"
oil on board
10. *All That Glitters Is Gold (Triptych)*
2011 painting 48 × 48"
oil on canvas

