Urban Dystopia

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URBAN DYSTOPIA

By

John McCaughey

An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Honors

in

The Department of Art

The Art Center

Rhode Island College

2010
URBAN DYSTOPIA

An Undergraduate Honors Project Presented

By

John McCaughey

To

The Department of Art

Approved:

Project Advisor

Chair, Department Honors Committee

Department Chair

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Date

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Date

04-28-2010

Date
This Honors Project, titled Urban Dystopia, builds on the theme that I have been pushing for the last couple of years. Growing up in Providence and going through the public school system, I have grown to love urban society. My earlier prints and drawings have depicted city life through my own eyes and I’ve worked with the public transportation system as a component of the work. My recent work focuses on the city and graffiti. I’ve always been attracted to the city and found beauty in such things as vandalism and the deterioration of buildings. I don’t want to sit around and paint pretty pictures of horses and flowers, because this is not my reality. Your art is a reflection of your inner self, the things you love and believe in. For me, my art is inspired by the filthy, overcrowded, poverty stricken streets of America’s cities.

Urban Dystopia looks to take advantage of the common occurrences in urban environments such as graffiti, vandalism, and decay. The project will consist of large scale murals and smaller prints that depict urban decay. My
ideas for this project have been influenced by the work of Shepard Fairey and Banksy. Both artists critique contemporary political and social issues by targeting and thrusting their ideas and messages upon the unsuspecting viewer through use of clever tactics such as satire and subvertising.¹ No area or building is safe from these artistic urban critics, often vandalizing public and private property in the dead of night with their mural, stencil, and graffiti-based art.

The process of constructing and de-constructing an environment is the main idea I’m running with. What I like most about graffiti is not just the beauty and risk involved, but what happens after the vandalism takes place. Maybe a vandalism team comes in to clean it up or paint over it. Maybe it begins to deteriorate through weathering. I’m more excited about how the environment changes once the vandalism begins or how tough economic times alter the look and feel of an urban environment.

With the murals, I’ll be working mainly with house paint, spray paint, and large scale woodcuts. My reason for choosing woodblocks as a medium is due to the scale I can achieve and the convenience of working on pieces from home. The woodcuts will act as a foundation for large information

¹ McCaughey, John. *Banksy and Fairey: Content, Context, and Medium*. 2009. pg. 2
such as words or images. I will go back into the work with spray paint, stencils, and watercolor to give it that urban feeling. Spending a lot of time of the woodcuts would be pointless if I chose not to re-use them. Often in areas of intense vandalism, graffiti is cleaned up, re-worked, and painted over. There is a history to it and by using these blocks over and over again; I can tap into that idea.

The smaller prints will act as a foundation of ideas that will translate into the bigger murals. I’m choosing house paint, newspaper, and masking tape as materials for these prints because they are low-quality and will more than likely deteriorate after some time. This is my way of capturing the essence of these crippled environments.

I’ll be mainly working with my own photographs using them as a reference to build up to something greater. For this project, I really would like to use photographs as the foundation of an exploration.

Towards the end of the project I will write a reflection essay on my experiences, things I liked and disliked about the project, as well as talking about the work that was produced.

Because this is all new to me, I can only estimate the time it will take me to complete a mural. Each block can take anywhere from 2 to 15 hours. If it takes 12 blocks to
finish the mural, I suspect the mural to take around 60 to 100 hours to finish just the blocks. An extra 20+ hours will go into working and re-working these murals. I plan on completing three large scale murals during the spring semester. All the planning will occur during the winter break. Quality is a major factor for all these pieces and quality will butt heads with time. The Quality of the pieces however is more important than the number I can complete.

Evaluation of my progress will work with accordance to my BFA schedule. I look to have a critique of work in progress every week with my advisor Stephen Fisher. I will have the faculty of the art center participate in an Honors Critique. From the critiques, I hope to gain positive feedback as well as useful criticism. They will evaluate quality of my work, decide if I’m creating enough work, discuss the direction the work is heading, and give ideas and tips that will help me create stronger work.
URBAN DYSTOPIA:

REFLECTIVE

ESSAY

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THE PLANNING

The original idea for this project was to recreate an urban environment through installations, mainly with large scale murals, however the project took on a life of its own. A lot of planning went into this project. I had some setbacks earlier on in the fall semester. I picked up some steam towards the end of the fall semester into the winter break.

During the winter break, I started working on plans for large woodblocks that I would use in murals. I wanted to carve graffiti into these blocks and print them to create the effect of a vandalized wall. Getting the graffiti to look just right and carving them took much more time than I thought. I created a word bank of potential words I’d like to use in the mural and I ended up choosing the words *Defy* and *Authority*. Those words were inspired by the work of Banksy and Fairey which I discuss in my proposal.

The problem with the earlier planning was the idea of having a literal representation of a vandalized urban environment. I just wanted to mimic what I saw day to day on the streets, but this idea became problematic in the sense that the project was pointless from a printmaking standpoint. Stephens comment on reusing the blocks by printing them on top of each other, upside down, or vertically allowed me to continue the project using a less literal representation of an urban environment.

THE PROCESS

Carving the words into the blocks took nearly two weeks and my hands were getting tired and scarred. There were a total of 8 (22” x 30”) blocks, carved back and front, and when connected spelled the two words mentioned above.

These blocks were carved specifically for recreating the two words, but my advisor, Stephen Fisher, mentioned there was no point to carving these massive blocks if I wasn’t planning on reusing them. He was right and that was the day that changed the entire project. The direction of the project moved from “how to make these drawings life-sized using the carved blocks” to “how can I use these blocks in an interesting way.”

One thing I found most interesting about graffiti is the process and what happens after the vandalism occurs. Somebody comes along and tags a wall, and then somebody comes in to clean it usually by painting over it. Then later on somebody else comes in and tags over what was already painted over. The history of what was left behind, covered over, and painted on was what I found most interesting. The sense of history combined with the effects of deterioration from the elements became what I wanted to recreate in my murals.

Using spray cans and house paint, I began to depict what I thought an urban environment felt like to me. I used the spray paint to create a structure from which I could paint on. I began using the white house paint to build up and remove information. The process of building up layers of house paint, spray paint, watercolor, and ink from the woodblocks was my way of recreating the feeling of urban decay and deterioration.
Choice of materials became very important in this project. I didn’t want to stray away from the essence of the project, so I wanted to use low-grade materials as oppose to expensive foreign papers and drawing materials. Recreating urban environments using high end materials seemed like a contradiction to the project. Particularly in the small chine colle’ prints I began to create; I used materials such, as but not limited to, house paint, newspaper, and even masking tape on cheap printmaking paper. These materials biodegrade quickly and I felt they fit perfectly into a project dealing with urban decay.

Talking with Professors Richard Whitten and Yizhak Eylashiv, I found there was potential in the small watercolor sketches I created in the fall semester. Speaking with my friend Astrid, I realized I had to continue working on the small scale works. The idea behind the second wave of sketches was more complex than the first. The first watercolors were meant to be studies of urban environments. I made around 10 of them. In the second batch, the idea was the same only I would take the watercolor studies I felt didn’t meet my aesthetic and began to paint over them. After I painted on the rejected watercolors, I kept the ones I liked and pushed the failures even further. Using rice paper and newsprint, I chine colle’ed over the painted watercolors. Failures went through a fourth and final stage of all the previous processes until I made every single one of the 30 watercolor sketches “work”.

I found the campaign to be successful and made 40 new chine colle’s using the same process. I also worked on slightly larger and more developed pieces on larger paper. I was very happy with the over 80 small prints I made and used them along with some photos I’ve taken as source material in two more large scale murals.

THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

I would say the most important thing that came out of this project for me was the ability to step outside my comfort zone. Entering the printmaking concentration, I was very stubborn in my willingness to explore and take risks with my art. Having Stephen Fisher on sabbatical gave me the opportunity to work under new faculty in the printmaking field. Yizhak really opened up my mind and laid the foundation for this honors project. Before Yizhak, I actually thought I didn’t have the ability to work abstractly. Everything I made was representational, not to say that abstraction is better or worse than representational, but the ability to reach across the aisle and to gain confidence in an unfamiliar territory was really helpful. I benefited a lot from this project.

I think what was most unfortunate was the psychological impact the transition had on me when going from representational to abstract. The transition (even though I view it as important and necessary) was difficult and often stumped me. I would sometimes get carried away with the looseness of my marks and strokes and totally destroy the composition. I often doubted my abilities to work abstractly. I take a lot of pride in my work and I hate making mistakes or putting up bad art on the wall for critique day. I try my best to make compelling compositions that are rich with the basic principles of design, such as line and space. I admit to becoming frustrated and quitting for the day to head home. Overall, pushing myself I feel paid off.
THE RESULT

The planning, process, and experiences have been mentioned, however my thoughts on the actual work still remain. I’m really happy with the work I’ve made over the past year, particularly the late push in the spring. Despite the change in style, I feel the essence of the honors project held up. I really wanted to work with urban environments and to capture what I felt was beautiful in the city. The focus on urban decay is evident.

My earlier lithographic prints were representational, but served a purpose for the latter work. These prints depicted scenes of urban landscapes, vandalism in particular. Spending time scouring the cities of Boston, Providence, and NYC, I took some really great photos of graffiti and run down areas. Thinking more and more about graffiti led to the push towards urban decay. Essentially, decay is abstract and I really wanted to dive into that line of thinking.

Line became the focus after the representational period of the project. I made a series of drypoints on Sintra plates. I feel these linear prints were very successful, because they became very spatial when printing the plates over each other over and over again. They really capture the crowded atmosphere of Times Square. Working with Sintra allowed me to print plates on top of each other which opened a whole new bag of ideas. I was excited by the thoughts of painting on the plates. Removing and adding new information combined with ideas of decay and deterioration was something worth pursuing. I knew I was onto something.

Not all the chine colle’ watercolors I feel were successful. In fact, I counted only 15 out of the 80 that I actually liked or felt achieved their purpose.

The Murals were successful in my eyes as well. I was trying to achieve the idea of decay, painting over and removing information and that is all evident in the murals. In the end, I’m happy with the work that came out of this project.
John McCaughey Jr.
Artist’s Statement

I’ve always been interested in the human figure and how objects work spatially. My work is about the clash between artistic rendering and the effects of graphic flattening. Influenced by the work of Robert Longo of the 1980’s, I began to compose portraits of myself in unusual positions. I gained a taste for the complicated. I was obsessed with complex forms. In most of my drawings and prints, I find complex forms such as ladders, fans, patterned shirts, drapery: a network of objects that create a sense of space.

I love to play with contrast. I am fascinated how large flat black areas of the image clash with the highly rendered patterns of fabric. Working with Lithography allows me to create those interesting relationships of tension, because of its natural matte black-like quality. My work consists of not only Lithographs, but woodcuts and drawings as well.

Inspired by my life-long obsession with Asian art, I choose to orient my paper in an elongated storyboard format. (Let’s just say custom matting and framing will always be an expense for me.) The orientation of my pieces plays a huge role in defining my work. My work is about styles clashing together and taking an image that should be vertical and making it horizontal is just another way of pursuing that conflict.

My earlier work shows a battle between my ego and its extreme nature that I’m not proud of. You will find that my face is often hidden. The conflict of being egotistical and staying in the shadows reflects my life. My artwork taps into an underground lifestyle that I wanted to be apart of, although never was. Growing up in Providence, I was exposed to the realities of life on the edge of poverty.

My current body of work concentrates on the public transportation system. I decided to take my ideas in another direction, and move away from self-portraiture. The content of my imagery has changed, but my interests still remain. I’m still interested in the urban lifestyle and simultaneously investigating the relationship of the geometric shapes of cars, trains, and busses with the typical everyday people who ride them.

I find an enjoyment in rendering images. It is my passion to break down what I see into shapes and to spend the necessary hours on one complicated spot without losing a sense of how the image and the subject matter relates.