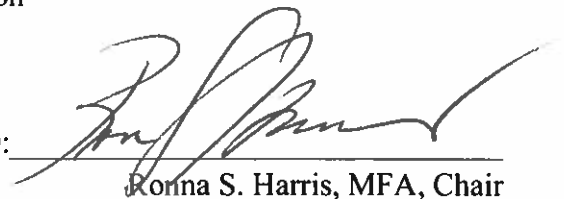


VACANCY  
A THESIS  
SUBMITTED ON THE TWENTY-EIGHTH DAY OF FEBRUARY 2020  
TO THE NEWCOMB ART DEPARTMENT  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS  
OF TULANE UNIVERSITY  
FOR THE DEGREE  
OF  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS


BY

  
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In memory of Phil Brown.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
THESIS.....	1
IMAGES.....	10
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	14
BIOGRAPHY.....	16

While painting *The Actor*, I was faced with the challenge of depicting my unlit living room at night. Due to the low light nature of the setting, I was unable to use a photographic reference. So, in order to convincingly depict the scene, I would sit in the room each night with the lights off, observing the subtle shifts in value occurring in the dark. I would look closely at whatever area I was planning to paint the following day, attempting to memorize what I observed. Before the final day of painting, I woke suddenly in the night, realizing that I hadn't studied the scene. My concerned wife entered our living room about ten minutes later to find me seated on the couch in the dark with the TV on, staring straight ahead as the Panasonic logo floated across the screen.

In my paintings and drawings, I attempt to incorporate visual information that *only* close observation can reveal. In the dark living room, only close observation could expose the subtle shifts in value needed to accurately represent the nocturnal setting. I believe that including precise visual forms gives the pictures a quality of "suchness", a sense that they could not exist any other way. My thesis exhibition, *Vacancy*, presents a style of painting and drawing that seeks to simultaneously employ convincing lifelikeness and imposed design (the organization of formal elements in the picture). I want the viewer to be welcomed into the pictures by the likeness and familiarity of realism, while they are reminded that they are looking at an image by the edifice of design.

There are two aspects of realism that I find particularly appealing: structure and illusion. In terms of structure, realism provides the artist an intricate framework on which to construct an image. In order to approach verisimilitude, the artist must convincingly tie

pictorial elements such as color, space, and form to what is observed in the phenomenal world. The structure which becomes apparent as each of these elements is addressed generates an internal complexity within the picture while also creating illusion. Vija Celmins is an artist I admire for her skillful mark-making and her commitment to close observation. Relating to structure, Celmins says:

I have long been interested in building a form in the painting. It's hard to define the word *form*, but I wanted to make a work that was multidimensional and that went back and forth in space yet remained what it was: a small, concentrated area that was essentially flat...so, in a way, I thought of painting as building a dense and multi-leveled structure.<sup>1</sup>

In Celmins' work, we see her source material acts as a framework on which she builds her marks. She follows the rules of realism so that her pictures possess depth, while at the same time she scrupulously develops her marks to enliven the picture plane. In my art, I attempt to represent the inherent structure of reality while also inventing and imposing additional structures (geometric, patterned) to add visual complexity. For instance, in (*36 Chambers*) the texture on the wall is based on reality, but I manipulated and heightened the pattern so that the wall—which might otherwise appear dull and unimportant—takes on a distinct visual identity, its texture made clearer and more pronounced.

As well as providing an armature on which to build an image, realism can cause a kind of illusion, whereby a two-dimensional image appears lifelike. Illusion poses two fascinating questions concerning emergence, the first of which relates to the creative process and the second to the viewing experience. Regarding the creative process, at what point does mere paint or graphite arranged on a flat surface appear lifelike? I believe the emergence of lifelikeness is a magical transformation. This emergence could be

compared to the mysterious way in which our subjective experience arises from our physical bodies. Regarding the viewing process, at what point does one come under the spell of illusion, accepting a similarity between reality and representation? I would compare the experience of looking at an illusionistic picture to the experience one has reading an engaging story or watching an immersive film; the audience “forgets themselves” and is united with the artwork. I consider this a mystical experience in the same way that a spiritual practice like meditation can cause the practitioner to move beyond their discrete self to feel a union with a larger, more universal whole. Referring to the mystical nature of art, Albert Barnes says, “It is a participation in an experience in which our own individuality is absorbed and carried along like a drop of water in a stream.”<sup>2</sup>

In the pursuit of realism, I employ photography as a reference. Until beginning my studies at Tulane, I would essentially transfer the visual information of photographs onto my paintings. Looking back and forth between the photo and the painting, I would ask myself “is this *this*?”. Now, instead of attempting to reproduce visual information *exactly* as it appears in the photo, I use the photo as an aid, instead of a 1:1 reference. Instead of simply asking “does the painting look like the photograph?”, I ask “what does the painting look like?”, “does it have an internal logic?”, and “is the surface dynamic?”. Previously, the subject matter of my reference photos was stumbled upon. For example, I would be out on a day hike, encounter a striking vista, take a quick photo, and later copy the visual information from photo to canvas. Now the idea for the picture comes first, followed by the assemblage of reference material—which usually involves several

reference photographs—and then I begin the process of designing the composition.

Invention plays a large role. For instance, I designed the painting *Polivka & Son* using a photographic reference, but no aspect of the photo was left unmanipulated. Objects were shifted to fall on specific alignments, colors were modified for the purpose of unification, and perspective was removed to give the image a straight on, “scanned in” look. The subject matter for the painting was based on the interior of a home in Sitka, AK owned by a commercial fisherman I worked for during the summer of 2009. The house was designed by the fisherman’s father, who was an architect who worked in the style of Frank Lloyd Wright. The house was like a mid-century time capsule. In a similar way, I wanted my painting to serve as a shrine to the mid-century aesthetic. The relic placed within this shrine is a kitschy, dated picture featuring ducks and a sunset. I have true affection for the subject matter in this painting, and—although the subject matter is a little tacky—I painted everything with a level of care that I hope convinces my audience that I am not being sardonic.

As I moved away from a straightforward copying of photographs, I also began to consider more closely the surface of the paintings and drawings. I wanted the entire surfaces of the pictures to be rich with information and devoid of arbitrary elements. I began using a transfer method in which I draw the forms that appear in the image on paper and then using an X-Acto blade to cut apart these drawings into stencils. I use these stencils to transfer the drawn forms onto the surface of the painting. Visual information is processed from two-dimensions (the drawing) to three-dimensions (the stencil) and then back to two-dimensions on the surface of the painting. This method allows for a level of



precision that would not be possible if I drew directly onto the painting. After I have traced the drawn forms onto the painting, I block them in with opaque color, creating distinct, sharply-outlined shapes. I then paint in glazes (transparent or semi-transparent mixtures of paint) over the shapes to describe color, texture, value and volume. These glazes provide a visual counterpoint to the crispness and weight of the underlying shapes. I try to make as many decisions as possible before the paintbrush touches the panel, so that when I begin painting, I can clear my mind and bring my full attention to the surface of the painting, to the action of mark-making and to the particulars of each mark. I want this process of focused mark-making to give the painting a visual intensity, a sense that the picture could not exist any other way. I want the experience of looking at my art to mimic the focused experience I had creating it.

Alex Colville was a Canadian painter whose use of invention and design has challenged the way I make pictures. In Colville's paintings, I am impressed with a sense that every element is *precisely* arranged; nothing seems arbitrary. Colville based his compositions on geometric principles. He said, "Geometry seems to be a way into the process. If I were a poet I would write sonnets. I would not do what you speak of as 'free verse.' I work within existing forms."<sup>3</sup> Even though the viewer may not be consciously aware that the geometric foundation is there, they will still be unconsciously aware of its presence. The picture will have an intrinsic order. Influenced by Colville, I began incorporating geometric structure into my images. In *Self-Portrait*, several elements present in the photo were excluded (such as my body), while other elements were repositioned at quarters, thirds, and halves of the images' height and width. The potted

plant's leaves were arranged so that the apex of one leaf falls on the exact center of the image while the other leaves' apexes fall on various alignments. However, I did not want these arrangements and alignments to be immediately apparent; I attempted to embed the geometrical structure within the image.

Another artist who has influenced my use of invention is Catherine Murphy. Murphy paints from observation but carefully stages the scenes she paints. In one instance, she had a dress custom-made for the purpose of using it as subject matter in a painting. She then used blocks to prop up the bed it was draped across so that the scene would be at a height from which she could comfortably paint for the next couple of years. In another instance, she stopped up a bathroom sink in her house in order to paint the sink filled with water. She decided the image needed some spicing up, so she cut hair off a wig and sprinkled it over the surface of the water. No one in the household was allowed into the bathroom before the painting was completed. Murphy spent two years painting the picture, during which time another bathroom was constructed in the house for general use by the family. Murphy says, "I'm not interested in technique at all; I'm not even interested in making detail. I'm interested in clarity...I want it to be really in focus. I want to be responsible for every square inch of the painting."<sup>4</sup> Based on the two preceding anecdotes, we see that Murphy's control extends beyond what's visible in the painting to include the conception of the picture.

Influenced by Colville and Murphy, I set out to make a painting that was elaborately staged. The idea for *The Actor* came to me as I was watching cartoons at night while

high. The glow of a TV in a dark room is a powerful visual phenomenon; however, it's easily overlooked because one's attention is on the world within the screen. My thought was to create a painting which gave equal prominence to both the illuminated screen and the dark room, creating an image where the viewer could fully appreciate the beauty of a glowing TV in the dark. The illusion is not carried out by illustrating rays of light emanating from the screens, but through shifts in value and the depiction of reflected light.

*The Actor* is a stoner painting. Bleary-eyed Pinocchio blowing smoke rings signifies a psychedelic experience while also referencing a favorite stoner pastime: watching cartoons. The three-tiered structure of the painting was inspired by contemporary theories of the multiverse and Rainer Fassbender's *World on a Wire*, a 1973 sci-fi German television miniseries in which versions of reality exist within and without our own reality. The multiverse theory proposes that there may be an infinity of universes, many containing similar content to the universe in which we live. Thousands of versions of *The Actor* may exist in the multiverse. The idea that other realities exist close by, possibly overlapping our own, is represented in the painting using the Droste effect, a technique in which a picture recursively appears within itself. In this case there are three tiered screens: the inner screen featuring Pinocchio, the middle screen featuring an illuminated room, and the outer screen featuring a dark room. The outer screen is three times larger than the middle screen and the middle screen is three times larger than the inner screen. The screens represent a world within a world within a world. The composition was created using one-point perspective, the vanishing point being the exact center of the

painting. I was inspired by Antonio Lopez Garcia and Thomas Eakins, whose pictures feature mind-bogglingly precise perspective. Eakins once told his drawing students to “follow the mind of the cabinet maker.”<sup>5</sup> While working out the perspective in *The Actor*, I attempted to think with the dry exactitude of a cabinet maker so that the illusion and framework of perspective could be fully integrated into the picture.

The title, *The Actor*, is taken from a quote by the 8<sup>th</sup> Century Indian philosopher Shankara: “The desire for personal separateness is deep-rooted and powerful, for it exists from beginningless time. It creates the notion, ‘I am the actor, I am he who experiences.’”<sup>6</sup> I wanted the title to bring up questions concerning consciousness and identity in relation to the multiple layers of reality presented in the painting. We often consider ourselves autonomous and distinct, but our individual selves may be roles played by God.

About a year ago, I began making drawings from observation at home at the dining table. *Lid*, *Muddler*, and *Plug* are drawings of machine-made objects from around my apartment which I selected to draw based on their geometry. In these drawings, I chose angles of vision which subtly obscure the object. Not wanting the audience to immediately understand what they’re looking at, I desired that ambiguity invite close observation. *Peniston* is a drawing of the interior of my apartment in which I composited several reference sources to present an impossible angle of vision. My apartment has hardwood flooring, but I wanted the stark geometry of the black and white tiles to reinforce the picture plane while the perspective present in the top of the picture

establishes the viewer's angle of vision above the floor, hovering where a ceiling fan would normally be located. *Left Eye, Right Eye* is a drawing of a book seen from two subtly different angles. In this drawing, my goal was capturing the phenomenon of binocular disparity. I placed the book in front of me on the table and then drew what each eye saw from my fixed perspective. By calling attention to the mechanics of vision, the viewer experiences a kind of self-awareness—an awareness of looking while looking.

I believe the act of looking is spiritually significant. No purely material explanation can account for the unique, subjective experience of sight. My eyes and brain are material, but the experience I have when looking—*what it is like* to see what I see—*that* is spiritual. In my pictures, I attempt to merge natural lifelikeness with imposed structure in order to present images that are substantial and singular, that suggest an underlying spiritual reality. I want my pictures to facilitate a mystical experience.

## IMAGES



*The Actor*, 2020, oil on panel, 30 x 40 inches



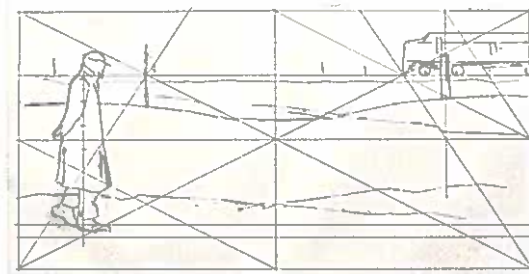
Vija Celmins, *Untitled (Ocean)*, 1990-1995, oil on linen, 15.25 x 18.75 inches



*(36 Chambers)* (detail), 2019, oil on panel, 16 x 16 inches



*Polivka & Son*, 2019, oil on panel, 18 x 14 inches



Alex Colville, *Sketch for Ocean Limited*, c. 1961, graphite & ink on paper, 6 x 9.5 inches

Alex Colville, *Ocean Limited*, 1962, oil & synthetic resin on masonite, 27 x 47 inches



*Self-Portrait*, 2019, oil on panel, 18 x 24 inches

*Self-Portrait* (with superimposed gridlines), 2019, oil on panel, 18 x 24 inches



Catherine Murphy, *Polka Dotted Dress*, 2009, oil on canvas, 52 x 52 inches

Catherine Murphy, *Bathroom Sink*, 1994, oil on canvas, 51.5 x 44 inches

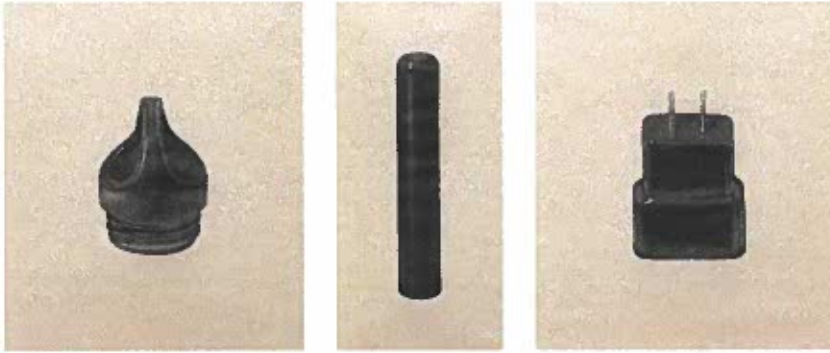


Antonio Lopez Garcia, *The Staircase*, 1967, pencil and wax on paper on board, 14.875 x 19.5 inches



Thomas Eakins, *Perspective Drawing for "The Pair-Oared Shell"*, 1872, graphite, ink and watercolor on paper, 31.8125 x 47.5625 inches





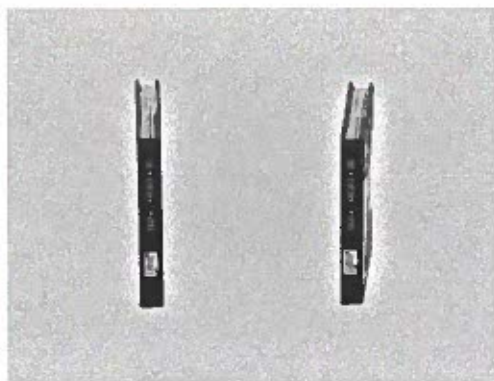
*Lid*, 2019, graphite on paper, 5.25 x 4.5 inches

*Muddler*, 2019, graphite on paper, 8 x 4 inches

*Plug*, 2019, graphite on paper, 5.75 x 5 inches



*Peniston*, 2019, colored pencil on paper, 5.25 x 4 inches



*Left Eye, Right Eye*, 2019, graphite on paper, 9.25 x 9.5 inches

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"The lieutenant sat down upon his bed and began to take off his boots. It was the hour of prayer. Black beetles exploded against the walls like crackers. More than a dozen crawled over the tiles with injured wings. It infuriated him to think that there were still people in the state who believed in a loving and merciful God. There are mystics who are said to have experienced God directly. He was a mystic, too, and what he experienced was vacancy."

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## BIOGRAPHY

Jarrold Jackson is an artist from the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State. In 2008, he received his BFA in painting and drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he was awarded the Chairman's Scholarship. He is anticipating receiving an MFA degree from Tulane University in 2020.