

ABSURD DIVINATIONS

A THESIS

SUBMITTED ON THE SEVENTEENTH DAY OF APRIL 2015

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

OF TULANE UNIVERSITY

FOR THE DEGREE OF

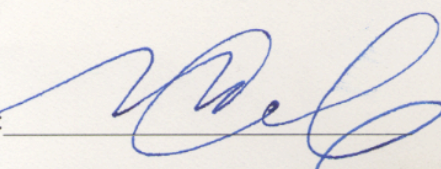
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BY

Benfox-McCord

BENJAMIN FOX-MCCORD

APPROVED: _____


TERESA COLE, MFA, ADVISOR

Aaron Collier

AARON COLLIER, MFA

Adam Mysock

ADAM MYSOCK, MFA

Kevin Jones

KEVIN JONES, MFA

Acknowledgments

This show would not have been possible without the enormous amount of help I received from my friends, family, professors, and colleagues.

I would like to offer thanks to the following individuals:

Teresa Cole, Aaron Collier, Adam Mysock, Kevin Jones, David Robinson, AnnieLaurie Erickson, Dan Alley, Jane Cassidy, Silas Breaux, Patrick Coll, Caleb Henderson, Jeff Stenbom, Patch Somerville, Jeremy Jones, Kevin Brisco, Craig Branum, Mike Pajon, the whole Antenna family, my folks, my sis, and most importantly, my wife Natalie McLaurin

Absurd Divinations is an exploration of my relationship with religious belief, ritual and imagery. Growing up in the Bible Belt as an open atheist, vegetarian, and science fiction fan was an isolating experience at times. Constant debates with my peers strengthened my beliefs while simultaneously opening me up to the idea that all of our realities are self-constructed and have the potential for flexibility. If viewed as a whole, mythology and religious practice has been a fluid endeavor with one structure rising to prominence and absorbing and reinterpreting some elements of previously dominant structure; for example, most Christian holidays parallel pagan festivals that were centered around seasonal changes and the movement of celestial bodies. I have long been fascinated by the often bizarre images that result from artists interpreting religious text. The work in this exhibition focuses on creation and destruction, themes that are ubiquitous in religions both ancient and contemporary.

Two recent trips to India and Nepal have had a tremendous impact on the work in this exhibition. During my time abroad (the first in my life) I was exposed to a much more nuanced view of the dominant religions of the region, and was especially struck by the relatively peaceful coexistence and even theological cross-pollination of Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, Muslim, and Christian populations. Growing up in the South, I mostly encountered religious practitioners who were extremely rigid in their beliefs and many that were committed to a literal interpretation of their religion's ancient texts. Although I have always been an outsider when it comes to religious practice and ritual, being emerged in two cultures so heavily invested in practices that are completely outside my own cultural experience led me to examine my own beliefs and daily rituals. During my second excursion to northern India and Nepal, I was fortunate enough to have two extended conversations with senior Buddhist monks about the

practice of Thangka painting, a traditional Buddhist art form which focuses on a specific deity or Bodhisattva. What I found most inspiring was their description of painting as a doubly generative act: The practitioner is creating a ritual object which will itself be the object of concentrated meditation while the process of creation is itself an act of meditation by the artist. Although I am not creating religious objects, I see a parallel between the Thangka painting and my repetitive drawing practice and the viewer's subsequent interaction with a finished piece.

My work is produced in a variety of ways, but drawing has always been at the core of my practice. The act of drawing, the visual reproduction and abstraction of real-life forms onto a two-dimensional plane, is a distinctly human endeavor and is one of the few ways that we are able to describe our interaction with, and perception of, the world around us with any measure of honesty. The printed image has a formal and conceptual relationship to contemporary life in that printed material saturates the modern world in the form of books, magazines, and advertisements. I employ a combination of drawing, printmaking, and occasional sculptural elements that reference my stylized drawings in an attempt to present the viewer with a window into my experience of the fusion of beauty, grotesqueness, order, and chaos that is life as a sentient being in a world that is far outside the realm of my control.

My successes and failures in dealing with a host of new technologies, including 3d printers, CNC routers, and laser cutters, have altered the formal elements of my work heavily over the past two years. I often approach art making as a kind of puzzle solving endeavor, and being allowed access to these new technologies and the knowledge and software necessary to use them has been a strong underlying force for the production of these works. The mandala influenced “star” pieces have been especially informed by these explorations. In Hindu and Buddhist art, the importance of precise reproduction of formal elements and even entire compositions is central to most of the forms. Hearing two senior monks explain the religious

and formal importance of every element of a Thangka painting from the mathematically derived proportions of the figures to the treatment of the landscape, I was immediately struck by the similarity between this tradition of passing down knowledge through a group for the sake of the reproduction of an image and printmaking's origins as a replacement for hand-copied texts, themselves containers of knowledge.

The five star pieces and the central, sculptural piece that occupy the front room of this exhibition work together to transform the gallery into a sacred space for an inexplicable religious practice. This installation was inspired by my experiences in India and Nepal where I was an outside spectator to many rituals for which I had no cultural or religious context. Despite my incomplete understanding, many of these rituals were intense to the point of feeling otherworldly, especially witnessing an entire monastery of Buddhist monks chanting and playing percussive instruments. I attempted to incorporate this experience into the installation through the three-sided sculptural head which emits a low chanting sound from its mouths. This sculptural element is also central to the idea of ritual in that its surface was created by pouring india ink, one of the materials that I use most often in the production of my work, and tea, a central part of my daily routine, over the sculpture until it developed a thick patina. In contrast to the bright, highly detailed surfaces of the printed images in the space, the sculpture reads as a used pseudo-ancient ritual object.

The sculptural head rests on a triangular pedestal at the center of the alter, itself a larger deconstructed triangle made up of three hexagonal platforms covered in prints and six shorter triangular pedestals with inset bowls containing substances related to my personal rituals. These substances include india ink, carbonized vegetables, coconut milk, rice, hot sauce, and beard hair. India ink is representative of my artistic practice which always begins with ink drawings. My beard is one of my defining features. I have included my hair as a reference to my ritual of

shaving on Ash Wednesday, the day after New Orleans' yearly debaucherous climax, and growing a new beard for the following twelve months. The hot sauce is another a nod to my current home and a stand in for all of the substances that I imbibe despite their propensity for upsetting my body's equilibrium. The other three substances are more direct references to the offerings that are common in polytheistic religions. In Nepal, vegetarian practitioners have replaced the blood offered in animal sacrifice with offerings of coconut milk or egg whites. Rice is included for two purposes. First, it is the most ubiquitous starch and is always a part of meals provided by temples in India and Nepal. Secondly, rice was once used as currency and it acts as a stand in for the most common offering at religious sites around the world, money.

The printed imagery throughout *Absurd Divinations* explores both the myths and terrestrial practices of my fictional religion. The large, single-layered star on the right wall depicts part of the creation myth presented in *In the Beginning...* while its counterpart on the left references the Tree of Life, common in mythologies from Celtic to Mayan, it's roots stretching into the underworld. The three smaller stars on the central walls focus on images of the faith's practitioners. They include shamans and wizards performing rituals, temples reaching toward the heavens, and masses crowded together for worship as well as disembodied floating eyes, mythological beasts, and deities. The hilly landscape of my childhood home undulates on the horizon throughout.

From Kitsune and Kapa in Japanese folklore to the Native Americans' Coyote and Raven, most non-Abrahamic religions and folklore from around the world contain stories of “trickster” figures, characters who possess secret knowledge and disrupt society's norms. These figures are neither good nor evil, but their annoying or confusing behavior often leads another to important revelations. I see my role as an artist to be a similar one, which I directly reference in the video piece *Trickster/Thunderbringer (A Brief Explanation of the Work)*. In this video,

shots of a masked drummer are overlaid and reflected to create a multi-headed, multi-armed deity. The audio tracks are also overlapped and manipulated, resulting in rhythms that are nearly recognizable but regularly devolve into chaos. In much of my work, I set up obstacles for viewers either through physical boundaries that keep them from inspecting highly detailed and alluring areas, or through my use of stylized figuration and repetition. These two formal devices of stylization and repetition are most often associated with narrative forms like traditional comics, leading most viewers on a search for a clear narrative which they will not ever find. Instead, they are invited to draw their own conclusions and create their own narrative.

The last installation in this exhibition is titled *In the Beginning...* It is my imaginary account of the beginning of human existence. This piece draws the most direct influence from other artists and traditions. The two large, horned figures in *In the Beginning...* are based on the frightening wrathful deities of the Himalayan Buddhists. Traditionally, these figures are not evil, but rather, have taken these frightening forms to make an impression on those in the world who cannot be shown, or refuse to accept, wisdom through peaceful means. In my own mythology, these twin deities give their own bodies to create the world, one spilling his viscera to make the seas and one breaking apart to birth the land. The city in the clouds, occupied by bird/human hybrids, is loosely based on a fictional Marco Polo's account of the city of Beersheba in Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities*. In Calvino's novel, the inhabitants of Beersheba believe that their city is mirrored both above, in an idealized "heavenly" version, and below, in a frightening, subterranean version. However, they are mistaken in their beliefs, and while the underground city is a marvel of cleanliness and engineering, the city in the sky is in fact, "a planet aflutter with potato peelings, broken umbrellas, old socks, candy wrappings, paved with tram tickets, eggshells, fingernail cuttings, and pared callouses." The fallibility of seemingly certain collective knowledge revealed in this story is central to my own system of

belief, fueled by a heavy dose of skepticism. In this work, I also make direct reference to Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* with the egg from which my self-referential proto-humans have emerged. While it seems clear that he thought of himself and his works as devout, I would argue that Bosch's loose and totally bizarre interpretations of Biblical text led to the genesis of his own world and its inexplicable inhabitants, placing himself in the role of "Creator". I have the same aim in mind.

In my chaotic, contemporary life, art making is a welcomed meditative and potentially transcendent endeavor. Through making, I attempt to make sense of the world around me and become creator and possibly destroyer of new worlds of my own. It is often implied that a lack of faith in a higher power or creator results in a bleak or even immoral view of existence, but such skepticism can also be a positive force. By accepting our role as creators, destroyers, and tricksters, we can use our seemingly unique human capacity for abstract thought to not only make sense of and modify our physical world, but to build and occupy worlds of our own that are confined only by the limits of our imaginations.

"[Today] we live in a society in which spurious realities are manufactured by the media, by governments, by big corporations, by religious groups, political groups... So I ask, in my writing, What is real? Because unceasingly we are bombarded with pseudo-realities manufactured by very sophisticated people using very sophisticated electronic mechanisms. I do not distrust their motives; I distrust their power. They have a lot of it. And it is an astonishing power: that of creating whole universes, universes of the mind. I ought to know. I do the same thing."

-Philip K. Dick

Bibliography

Calvino, Italo. *Invisible Cities*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974.

Dick, Philip K., and Lawrence Sutin. *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick: Selected Literary and Philosophical Writings*. New York: Pantheon, 1995.

Illustration Information

Absurd Divinations

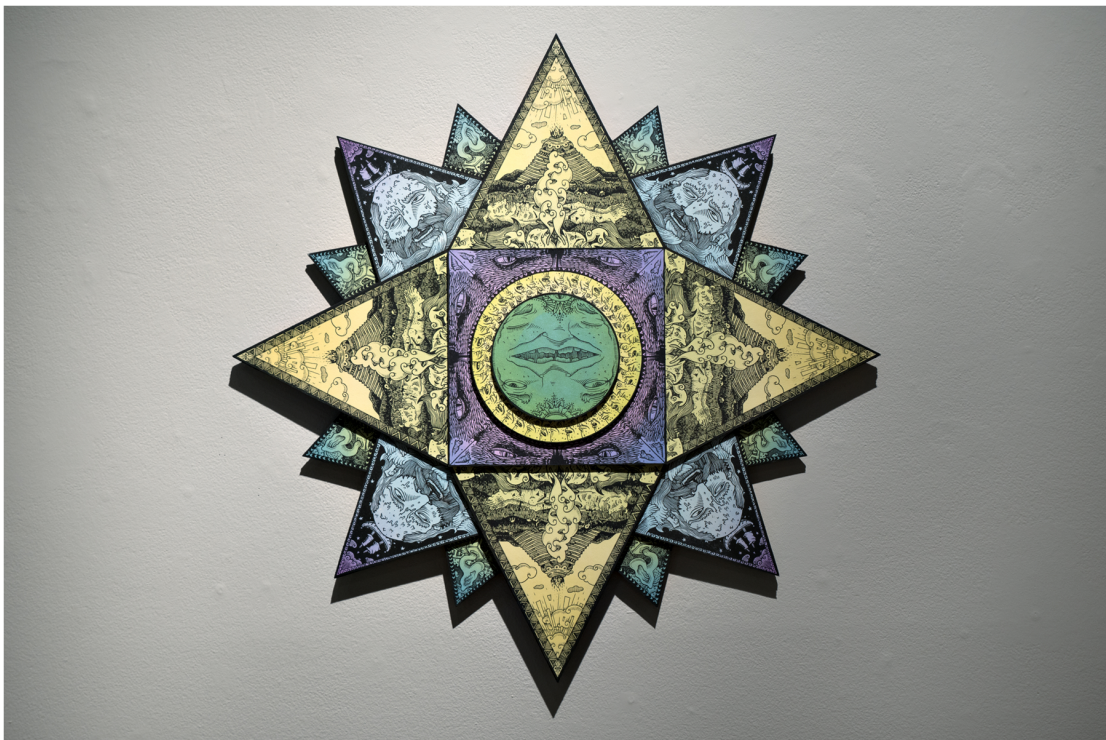
mixed media installation

In the Beginning...

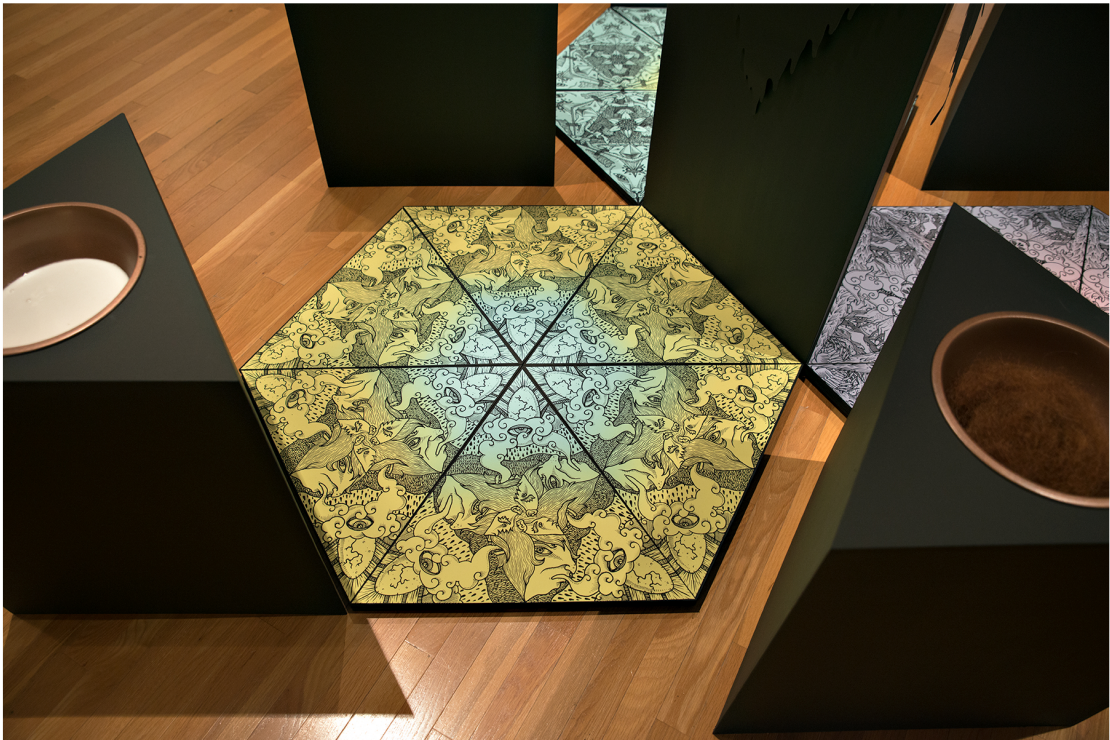
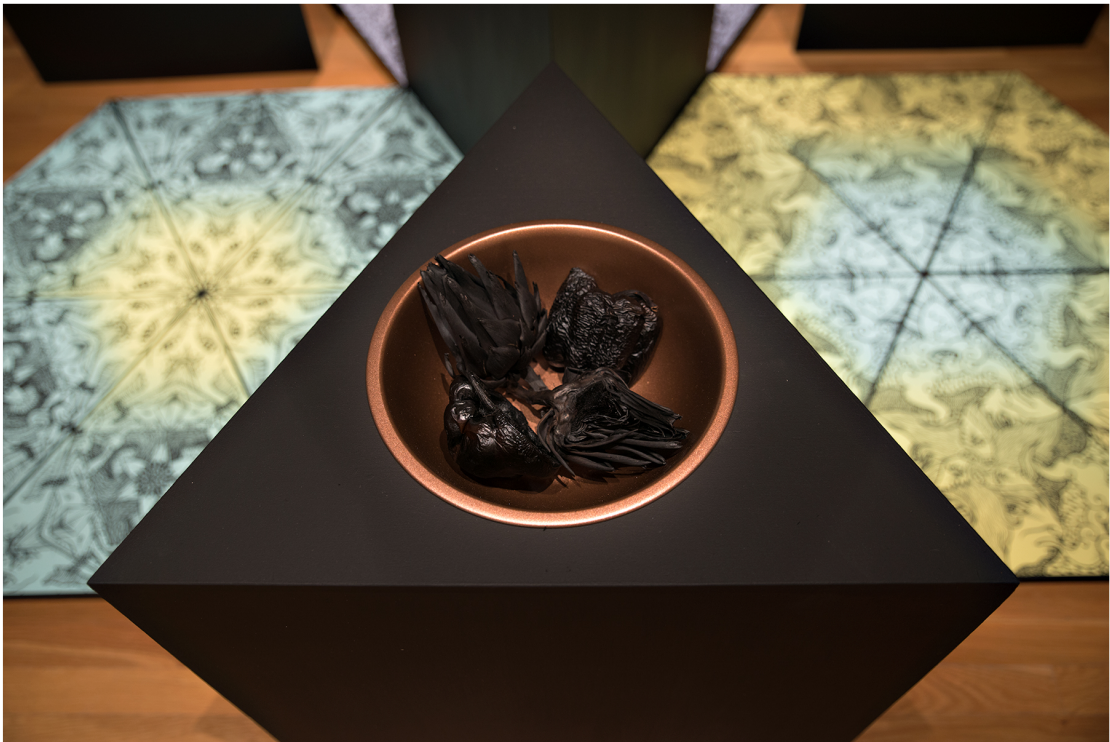
mixed media installation

Trixter, Thunderbringer (A Brief Explanation of the Work)

video



Absurd Divinations (details)
mixed-media installation



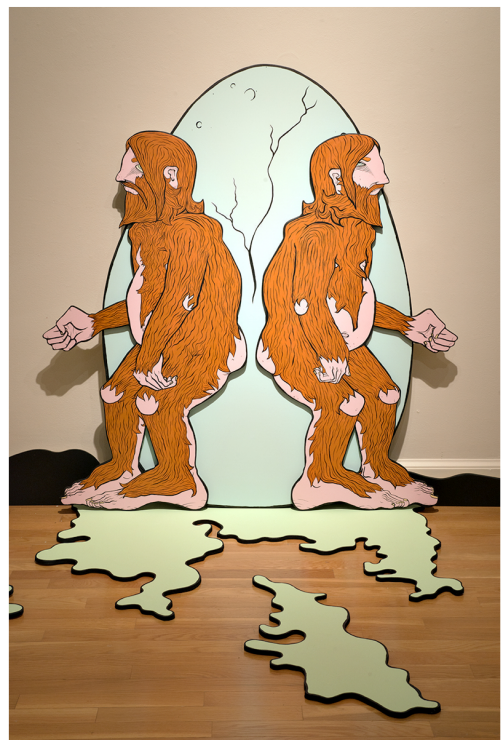
Absurd Divinations (details)
mixed-media installation



Absurd Divinations (details)
lithography on paper, wood



Absurd Divinations (details)
relief prints from lazer cut wood on paper, wood



In the Beginning...
ink and paint on wood



Trickster, Thunderbringer (A Brief Explanation of the Work)

video stills

Biography

Ben Fox-McCord is a printmaker, illustrator, and future sasquatch who grew up in the hills of east Tennessee. He currently resides in New Orleans with his wife Natalie and dog Boosie. He is an active member of the non-profit art collective Press Street/Antenna Gallery.
www.benfoxmccord.com