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Migration Movement

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MIGRATION MOVEMENT

by

Robert Porte

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

University Honors

and

Art Practices

Eleanor Erskine

Portland State University

2016

Artist Statement

In 1991 I received a grant from the German government to research and create a body of work based on European Baroque art. Through my research I found an aesthetics that emphasised process and discovery rather than production for commerce that is characteristic of our own times. Ideas and innovation, curiosity, science, and scientific methodology, multidisciplinary; are approaches to making art I understood the makers of the late 1600's to exemplify and an approach to my own aesthetic process I aspired to then and continue to do so today.

As an autodidact with a healthy scepticism towards art education I entered the State University system in Portland, Oregon where I hoped to find a platform from which to explore alternative concepts of community, education and art making. My art school experience has led me toward a resistance to *normative* tendencies in art practices as defined by Art History, codified by the Modernists, taught, judged and graded by academia meeting market driven objectives. In this regard my art *education* has been a success.

A preference to *outsider status* has led me to live and work outside my home country for extended periods of time. Indeed movement within my home country as well, retaining a fluid existence, is crucial to my aesthetic practice. *Place* and *time* have always been the context from within I work. Since 2012 my work has been focused on the immediate world around me, hence the working title of this thesis, *The Death and Tragedy Show*.



Roadkill Analogue color photo 12 x 12 in. 2012

Roadkill, being the first image of an informal attempt to document directly the immediate world around me revealed aspects of my own point of view I had not depicted in my work for a long time. A reading of the photograph suggests; red and white bars of “no trespassing”, shadow of photographer? or killer or both or none? Innocence of a dead fawn, perfectly intact. The highway, an important *place* in my process is not the natural migratory route of any animal but humans. This photograph was taken on my move from Montana to Oregon. It signified a personal loss of uninhibited space I was consenting to by moving to Portland, a space I shared with great humbleness and gratefulness with wilderness and its rightful inhabitants. There is at once a tender beauty and sardonic humor in this image, a part of my lexicon I was now beginning to tap into once again.

From *The Death And Tragedy Show* to *Migration / Movement*



Angle of List , C-print or transparency, size variable, 2013

Having grown up on the Pacific Coast sailing in and out of Los Angeles harbor the presence and lure of the large ships there ignited dreams of

travel and exploration. This digital image reductively manipulated to its essence expresses the precarious physicality of movement and the loss of freedom to explore the world on my own terms I have experienced in my adult life. This image resonates ever stronger today as borders tighten and the open seas become a graveyard for migrants and refugees. The container ship as a symbol for international trade and globalisation once the favored cheap vehicle of travelers able to cross all borders are now pawns in contentious international relations.

By 2015 *The Death and Tragedy Show* was broadening in its conceptual scope.



Abandoned Domesticity Portland C-print, 11 x 14 2015

With the wars in the middle east and the inequities of US domestic policy I began to see the world around me to include human life experience of others into my visual lexicon. *Abandoned Domesticity, Portland* represents the initial gesture towards this objective. It also feels to me like a prophecy. Like *Roadkill* a reading of the image speaks of the loss of innocence. The detritus of a life regardless of how temporary tells the story of a complete individual on the move. The trail of an urban migrant. The terms *tragedy* and *death* at this point lost their sardonic humor.

In the fall of 2015 I went to the Art Academy in Stuttgart, Germany for a half year to study. At this time the "refugee crisis" became acute. Inundated with news of death and tragedy that had no room for humor one could scarcely think of anything else let alone make work that was not in some way affected by the current events.



Dead Of Winter Spray paint, ink, oil on zinc panel. 8x8in. 2015

Dead of Winter was the second work done under the rubric of *movement* and *migration*. Inspired ironically by a constantly repeated image in a television series I was uncharacteristically hooked on. Like a disturbing meme I was compelled to paint it and end my viewing of the series. The manner in which it is painted speaks of its origin. Filmic, impressionistic with a feeling of anime'. In the face of such real life death and tragedy as the suffering of the migrant the irony is clear, we continue to fetishize human horror.



Coming Down Spray paint, graphite, ink on zinc panel, 8 x 8 in. 2015

Likewise, we fetishize symbols of our dreams of freedom, the cowboy, the traveler, the explorer. I have spent the last twenty years or more painting landscape and seascape works approaching the subject from

different perspectives but always absent of humans. The subject and form of nature and its representation in art are experiencing some radical changes and here I attempt to enter that dialogue with a meditation on its fragility.

The wide open spaces become the property of the wealthy for exploitation of resources, natural beauty and the realization of those dreams. Ultimately this scenario fails. Land is destroyed, habitats compromised, migratory routes of wildlife are interrupted and species die. *Coming Down* like the photograph *Angle of List* has the feeling of demise. Under its own weight it seems to sink into itself. The mountains in *Coming Down* like the ship in *Angle of List* feels maned. It is sinking under its own weight aided by the folly of human hands. The mannered way in which it is painted, as in *Dead of Winter*, is meant to be aesthetically pleasing to look at despite its tragic subject matter and yet retain a sense of graphic unpolished rawness.



Karen Ink and silverpoint on polyester paper, 11 x 11 in. 2016

Karen came out of a larger series of drawing works. I was working on top of a self drawn silverpoint graph with colored ink. This came like much of my work out of a stream of consciousness. The backstory of *Karen* is a tragic one. The reasons for her suicide exemplifies the disconnect even the dearest of friends may experience when powerful sources such as drugs stand between you creating an insurmountable borderline of lies and deception. In this personal work I began to look closer at myself as an agent in all of this troubled human condition. No longer a voyeur safe behind his lense or palette. My art school experience has required me to be accountable for what I do in a way I had not been previously. This invaluable lesson led me to documenting my own trajectory.



Entering Saigon 2015 Polaroid

An inveterate *traveler* I have lived for extended periods of time abroad. In 2012 I went to Vietnam and began a photo series that continues today. In 2015 I returned to Vietnam to work on this project that is very different from my work on *Migration/Movement*. In the interim four years I had embraced the idea of documenting myself or rather my whereabouts as an integral component to my aesthetic process. *Entering Saigon 2015* is the first of this endeavour. Critical to incorporating documentation is the medium used. The polaroid camera is the perfect tool for me. It is intimate and small yet slightly cold. Its inherent contradictions as a medium are very compelling. What was once an ubiquitous medium on par with the selfie, the polaroid became a rare thing in the age of technology. It has become even more exotic since I took these last photos as they have stopped making the film for my Polaroid 250-Land Camera.

In Closing

By this point I hope that the significance of the myriad of mediums I work with is apparent as well the importance of the works as autonomous individual pieces. As a gallery artist represented by a painting gallery I began to question the longevity of my art practice in this context. I left that life to find out who I was as a maker and as an autodidact it seemed an incongruous undertaking at the age of 52 to enter art school in pursuit of an art degree. But this platform led me back to myself. While attending the Art Academy in Stuttgart I took an art history class title *Artists On The Move*. This class proved to be a revelation. We researched artists throughout history that for various reasons traveled or migrated from their homeland elsewhere in order to make their work. I found in the likes of the artists we surveyed a kind of community, a validation for my own working methods.

I have heard and read the arguments for a sedentary life of stability and continuity. It would be entirely against my nature to prescribe to such a

lifestyle. I find my "inner peace", if you will, and "stability" in the truth as I see it emanating from the work I create and my commitment to my art making for over 30 years. At 56 I have obtained an undergraduate degree in art practices from a state university. These undertakings, like my art practice itself are very conscious and deliberate choices arrived at intuitively. Like the migrants from Mexico or the refugees from Africa and the middle east I live very close to the ground.



Home 2016, Portland, Oregon Polaroid

Upon my return from Germany I found traditional urban housing to be financially impossible if I wanted to continue school and even art making. *Home 2016, Portland, Oregon* is a documentation of how I am living now as an urban migrant. There is very little between me and the environment. My perspective on a broader swath of humanity, nature and human impact on nature is daily enriched. Tragedy and death are much closer than they were from the safety of theory and institutional walls.

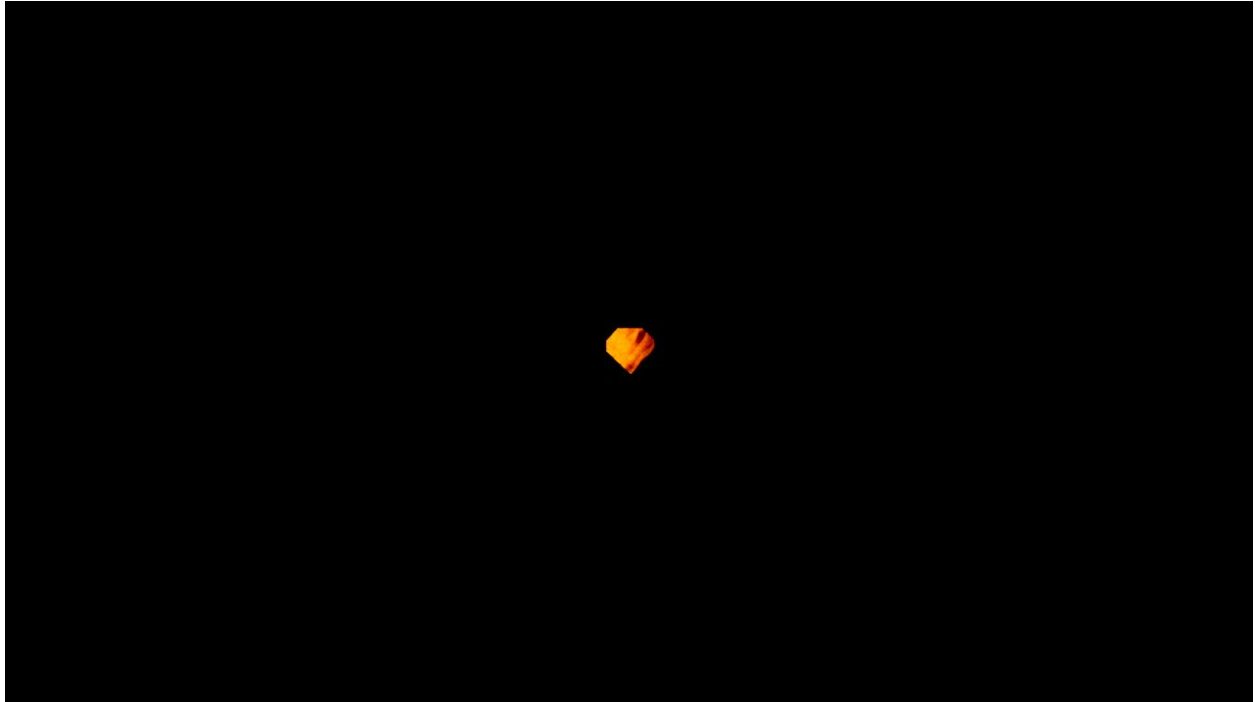
My penultimate image is an analog photo of an area I visit often near the coast of northern Oregon. I am exploring it visually as a possible contender for the *Migration/Movement* work that is turning into an exploration of borders for my graduate degree proposal titled *All Borders Are Temporary*.



Clear-cut Border, Oregon, analog on FB paper, 11x14, 2016

Burning Diamond (screenshot)

see additional file for actual media.



Burning Diamond DV, 30 min. to be played on a loop,2016

This is a digital remake of an analogue video I had done in the early 1990's. It is a filmed image of the largest American flag in the U.S. sculpted into a thumbnail sized diamond shape (with sound). I chose to include this DV in my thesis for the same reasons I chose to make the original some 25 years ago. It is an acknowledgement that american imperialism is unquestionably at the root of many of the issues all of humanity is facing and I am wrestling artistically with. Trying to make beauty out of the chaos and from within that chaos the best I know how.

