

Represented and Abstracted Turmoil

by

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It is nearly inevitable that groups and individuals will face turmoil. At varying intervals of life, the experiences can often be unpredictable and unwarranted. To be prepared for a turbulent and tumultuous experience is to be conscious of its existence within possibility, the individual capable of foreseeing such an event often moves to action/resolution more efficiently and sensibly than the ignorant. The ignorance or avoidance of contemplating such [turmoils] is often conducive for trauma, however, the ignorant prospers in the event there is no event, as the taxing nature of readiness/awareness towards turmoil degrades innocence.

A train runs on rails, precise and predicted, its exact course is determined. In modern day, trains are drawn further away from the possibilities of the unpredicted. Technologies have put them and their operators into a more error and chaos resistant state, as positive train control (a GPS based system that can stop a train and prevent unauthorized train movement, train-to-train collisions, and overspeeding derailments) is among multiple redundancy systems that keep the train on a fixed life experience. As a result of the advances, the term, to “derail” is phasing out from its association with trains and trolleys derailing. Instead, the social (colloquial and figurative) application of the term prevails: “he’s off the rails” or “she’s a train wreck”, often implying an individual(s) that was diverted (abruptly, forcefully, and unwelcomed) from their intended and expected life experiences. The derailment is based within an experience of turmoil, accounting for the unreadiness and incurred trauma of the individual(s).

July 18, 2013, at around 10:30 pm, I found myself accompanying my younger brother and Ralph to the train station down the hill from our apartment. A commotion ran through the neighborhood: there had been a train accident.

Morbid curiosity drew us down to the station. We were underwhelmed, as a freight train carrying municipal solid waste derailed at low speed due to poor track maintenance. There was not much to see. “Alright, this is really lame”, said Ralph, “I really did wanna see some body bags or somethin”, “[electric] currents jumpin and all that crazy shit, that woulda been awesome to see”.

Although being early into my teenage years, my innocence had been poked and prodded to the point that fascination often surpassed the fear of turmoils, a similarity I could observe within Ralph. Suppressing turbulent experiences was taxing, as it didn’t change the fact of their occurrence(s). For instance: learning that the early morning crime scene I witnessed along the route to my preschool had been the dumping grounds of a murdered woman, or my elementary school peers sharing the discoveries they made on the public library computers, which, amongst video games, consisted of videos of gory murders catalogued for the dark web. Unbeknownst to myself, I had an accelerated maturing process, leaving me aware of the extremes humans are capable of inflicting upon one another and their environment.

August 24th, 37 days after the freight train derailment, Ralph was dead. That day I learned the extremes humans are capable of inflicting upon themselves.

December 1st, 99 days after his death, the deadliest train accident (within NYC) in 22 years occurred. Down the same hill I walked with fascination, the ambulances lined the streets as far as the eye could see, helicopters and sirens drowned the air, and news stations raced to

draw national attention to my neighborhood. A commuter train flew from the tracks as the train engineer, drowsy and consumed by “highway hypnosis”, sent the train into the curve well beyond the speed limit. Every train car had left the tracks, passengers were thrown from the train to their death, and the carnage came just short of spilling into the river. I bore witness to the traumas of others that day, as they were forcefully taken (figuratively derailed) from their expected experience.

The level of awareness and understanding someone has towards specific and broad events of turmoil dictates their handling of such occurring personally. From youth to old age, an individual is exposed to consequential experiences and observations that draw them out of innocence and ignorance towards events of turmoil. At varying points (along the progression) of life, and in varying capacities, everyone is exposed to such, it is however critical what means the experience is administered to the recipient. An event of turmoil is relative to an individual who had experience and education towards the matter, desensitized from the associated traumas, they instead incurred familiarity and indifference.

*Train Wreck on T.V.* (2019) mimics the popularized approaches of discussing and depicting events of turmoil by placing a confrontational scene front and center of a television screen. A device that is the most common transmitter of auditory and visual depictions of turmoil to the youth/ignorant, the television is a prime source of adulterated and misrepresented events, both fiction and non-fiction:

On a hot summer day the heat pours in between the bars of the window in orange and yellow with nasty green tint. Counterbalanced by the cool radiant glow of the television, a grainy yet clear image sits on the screen. Superimposed in black and white, an acrylic transfer of George S. Zimbels photography (from his *Boys and Their Guns* series, 1970) stands two young boys playing in the street of their South Bronx neighborhood. The leading boy inspects and cocks a pump action shotgun, the following boy extends his leg to topple the toy train, and a stray dog barks from excitement.

Unlike the story of Ralph and the derailments, this one is made up. Composed of inaccuracies, exaggerations, and falsehoods, it *toys* with truth and reality. My decision to combine the Zimbel photograph with my own photograph of the second derailment was simple: to critique and deconstruct depictions of turmoil. Zimbel’s famous portfolio of celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe and the Kennedys raise questions about his photographic decisions to document children in the streets with toy guns that appear real. The “Hollywood” and media approach of shock and awe imagery is often destructive, as it encourages an exaggerated perception of reality and it denounces and truthful comprehension of/towards turmoil(s). The content/visuals of television and film (particularly observed in adolescence) often carry damning inaccuracies that provide false perceptions of the turmoils of life. Impressionable individuals, without a sensical grasp of reality in relation to entertainment and *news*, may face turmoil with traumatization or the opposite, apathy.

Regarding the youth, there is no “proper” introduction/education/familiarization into turmoils, nor is there an age and speed at which maturing to such understanding is deemed effective. It becomes even more complex as you consider the unpredictable moments at which specific turmoils will occur in a person’s life span, if at all. Television, film, video games, music,

and books are the most common mediators of [informative and influential] turmoil besides the observed and lived experiences. In the contemporary world, artwork sits as an outlier to the other forms, as it has become abstracted from the (direct) imagery of the visual world, instead delving more so into explorations of the conscious/subconscious responses to turmoil.

As the purpose within my art(works) has consistently been to draw awareness/consideration/resolution towards worldly turmoils. I seek relief from the intensely representational paintings, as they carry undoubtable intent towards discussion/thought on turmoil(s). "Relief", personally, comes in my dabbling with the more *popularized* approach: Abstraction.

For instance, the painting *Newsstand*, 2019, although visually within the representation world, its didactic turmoil is deep within the abstract read of the work. From a straightforward interpretation, the painting is a mundane scene of New York City, at most, eerily absent of figures. Poppy colors and iconic imagery give reassurance against turmoil, however, with a keen eye and intellect towards worldly turmoils, the innocence within the artwork fades. Message and narrative are not clearly articulated as the obscurity is benefited from the absence of figures. When imagining and inserting figures to the space, the headrests of the sightseeing bus imply its occupants positioning in the composition. Well elevated, protected, and *sheltered* (in all context of the word) from the events at street level, tourists can look down on the foreign society (and its inhabitants) they are being entertained by. Often, people watching is a pastime of an environment's inhabitants towards fellow inhabitants, however, with the implications of a sightseeing bus, the events at street level become more so a spectacle.

Oriented in the upper left quadrant of the composition, the headrests have a direct sightline down to a prayer rug on the street level. Obscured (to the paintings observer) amongst the debris on the sidewalk, the objects on the street are all created in a CitraSolv transfer process (to the raw canvas), allowing them to sit further back, literally and physically, within the compositional read. With this technique, used in multiple works, the observer is often required to get up close and personal to the canvas to realize what they are viewing and its content (such as the text of the newspaper headlines). The prayer rug, accompanied in its immediate space by the exhaust of the bus and the headlines of a newspaper rack reading "USA Wins", the 'suggested' praying individual is subjected to various receptions within the painting.

As Western society, outside of those educated upon or following and practice of Islam, are often illeducated to the dynamics of the faith, there is an implied scrutiny/exoticizing by the onlookers within the painting (as well as a confrontation to those observing it, myself included). Praying 5 times a day, regardless of surroundings and judgement, a follower of the faith will subject themselves to the grime and fumes of the sidewalk/street, the synonymous/defaulted association of Muslims/Islam to Islamic extremism in the Post-9/11 Era, and the *demoralizing* nature of the headline "USA Wins" when considering US involvement/disruption in foreign affairs/wars of the Middle East and Asia. The dilemma and criticism -repeatedly addressed in this text- is brought to light in my personal involvement to the painting's point: Individuals, from youth/ignorance, are introduced to understandings of turmoil(s) by improper/exaggerated/one-sided means. As such, I am struck by awe, derailed by my observation of a man praying at the curbside of the busy Columbus Circle roundabout. As he

pauses from his labor at a food cart, his actions are not initially seen for what they truly are by my ignorant eyes.

Henry Koerner's 1949 painting, *Under the Overpass*, is a successful example of the approach I seeked to achieve in the above painting (and others like it): A composition, with redacted contextualization (towards a turmoil being addressed), that produces a seemingly mundane and joyous experience for the surface level observation. Koerner's abstracted approach to addressing turmoil is as intensely powerful as depicting the matters head on: A train, *coincidentally*, begins to cross an overpass, below it stands two women, their four children, and two dogs. The two adolescent children play between the pillars of the raised train track, the two small dogs tussle with one another, the infants lay peacefully in their strollers, and the women stand holding the handles. The woman in the bright red jacket holds a handkerchief to her face, the purpose of such action is indiscernible as she faces away from the painting's observer. Above, in the passing train, the engineer and occupants ride with the demeanor of a daily commute, one individual visibly rests against the wall of the car.

Without the knowledge and education to Koerner's life, iconographies used, and/or the worldly events surrounding the painting's creation, the observer would not meet the painting with any alarm towards turmoil.

In actuality, Koerner, fleeing Vienna in 1938 following Hitler's annexation of Austria, avoided the Holocaust. Upon his return in 1946, he was met with the harsh news that his entire family had been trained to concentration camps to meet their demise.

Koerner takes the most extreme of his lived experience/events of his time and pours it into a scene that sits stable and controlled on the rails worldly turmoil. Regardless of the effectiveness Koerner reached in his personal conclusion of the painting, the painting is purposeful beyond simply pleasing, fantastical, and escapist art. When understood, one can infer the painting works to minimize the psychological strain of the turmoil it is addressing.

As the woman in red is presumed to be Koerner's mother, any further read of the painting is left to the observer, his worldly and personal experience being the glue that constructs the [educated] observer's inference(s). Koerner, being known for instilling various paradoxical, iconographic, and symbolic elements within his paintings, is a master of the abstracted turmoil.

Drawing to a close, the paintings of my senior year are fully consumed by abstracted and obscure turmoil. Ironic use of *popular* artistic strategies nearly suffocate any notion of turmoil existing within the works.

The rapid underpainting marks in *Dog Ravine*, 2020 draw focus and clarity away from the representational content addressed in the work. As the content addressed in the work does minimal to inform the observer itself, the observer is not allowed any certainty on what the representational is, especially considering the looseness of the centralised object/event taking place on the staircase. Fragments of information are provided to construct the abstracted turmoil: To the observer, the dog breaks the fourth wall with a facial expression that carries clarity towards the obscure events occurring behind his back. Linked by chain, the dog and the event are inseparable, begging the question: what is being depicted?

Aurora Vargas is being taken against her will from her family's home, just as 1,800 other Mexican-American families were in 1959. The community at Chavez Ravine, located in Los Angeles California, was uprooted with minimal to no compensation as the land was being unjustly and discriminately repurposed for the building of Dodger Stadium.

As time passes, the dark moment of Los Angeles history fades. In present time, ignorance is bliss to those that attend joyous events at the stadium, as such, observers of the painting are defaulted to the ignorant conclusion. An educated observer will meet the *iconic* reference material with familiarity, while an inquisitive observer is welcomed to the access of knowledge. With the clues: '59 on the news reporters equipment and the title, any combination of 'dog ravine' and '1959' in google will enlighten those that seek to be informed.

The paintings push further into the popularized, as *Santa Monica Sign, 2020* exemplifies color, scale, material items, and looseness.

Captured in a photograph: A homeless man sleeps under the glow of a neon sign welcoming visitors to the affluent city. Constructing a model to mimic the photographed scene, I utilize matchbox cars, alcohol bottles, monopoly money, a gold chain, a twenty dollar bill, a rosary, and a cassette tape to fill the immediate space surrounding the man's positioning. Working the time of day (of the photo) to my benefit, I set the model in a pitch black room and orient LED lights of various colors to illuminate the scene to determine and merge the lighting, shadowing, and color palette of the existing photo and created model. I seamlessly edit the elements together in Photoshop so I have a strong reference when the painting begins.

The result, a painting that draws attention away from its most important element (the homeless man) at all costs. Highlighting the habitual response to paintings that appear/strive to be *simply* visually pleasing by denouncing any possibility for further complexities. The painting further serves as a double entendre, highlighting the blind eye taken towards the homelessness issue in Santa Monica and the wider Los Angeles area. The homeless man, centralized in the composition, carries little importance as the material items are lit in a colorful light, assuming more consideration and visual importance.

*Drive in Theatre, 2021* begins to hammer the final nail into the coffin of representational narrations, allegories, and discussion into turmoil.

Just below the newspaper reading "ART", two police officers look down at a horizontal splatter of red paint, one that *might* suggest a pool of blood. Just out of view of the observer, there is no certainty of turmoil (on the driver's side of the car), barely even a suggestion of such observation. As the cars and figures are loosely painted, the splatter of paint also sits relative to the mark making of the composition as a whole. Nothing in particular stands out to suggest relevance and importance of that particular quadrant of the painting. Ultimately, the painting is solely an abstract depiction of a drive in theatre.

Reaching my hand into both the abstract and representational depictions of turmoil, the effectiveness of each approach in seeking change/acknowledgement/reform/or response to topics such as war, unrest, social and political conflicts, is obscure. Each approach, having their time and place with respects to who the audience is, should be heavily considered by the artist. I have come to an understanding that neither representations nor abstractions carry more

effectiveness over the other in regards to addressing turmoil. It is however the artist's considerations and the translation of such into artwork that constitute effectiveness. Contemporary artwork on turmoil struggles to grasp the observers' deep consideration and investment. An investment separate from the monetary and status gains associated with the artist/artwork, but an investment into the cause and objective of the artwork as it pertains to the turmoil being addressed.