65 mph

By
Mariah Johnson

Submitted to the BFA School of Art & Design
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York
May 2020

Sponsor: Matt Bollinger
Second Reader: Tim Samara

The work I made this year has allowed me to move past my intense disregard for my own practice, developing a collection of drawings that exist within one narrative. I have been able to create environments that represent emotional spaces and now have my first body of work that feels cohesive. Using cinema and memories as references, I gave myself bounds to work within. The structure of a panorama, a book, and a road trip was also essential in developing my sense of direction. Growing up, I spent a lot of time being shuffled between my parents (one lived in Ohio and the other lived in New York). There wasn't a lot to do other than count cars and people watch but it became a version of stability for me. I'm really attached to I-84 for that reason. As an adult, I still take road trips often. The rural or desolate areas that I see in passing are a source of content. I have a habit of fantasizing to pass the time. During a road trip to South Dakota, I saw a man sitting in a gas station playing the slots. He was so still that I could imagine him hitting the play button for the next 30 years, unmoving and unchanged. After making a small accordian book of the scene, I began a series of landscape/figurative drawings trying to emulate that state of stagnancy. I created most of the pieces in this body of work with graphite, making a hard switch from oil- and water-based painting methods. Drawing allowed me, among other things, to create a practice that could exist outside of the studio. I didn't have to worry about paint spills or solvent fumes. Because I could roll out of bed and immediately start drawing, I was able to expand my work without time constraints and become a more productive artist. In collecting fragments of narrative to an unreliable sequence, one that never quite adds up, I have been able to suspend the fear that kept me from making work.

I chose graphite because of the monochrome and accessibility. Working in monochrome allowed me to focus on the graphic aspects of the work as well as rely on tone to push the emotion of the narrative. In drawings like "Exon" graphite adds grit to rolling hills and delicate clouds.

It is a financially accessible, easily transportable medium that lends itself to depictions of blue collar scenes. The bright white of the paper allows me to work in a way similar to watercolor, building up to the darkest areas of the page. This insinuates a more blinding source of light where I have let the page remain untouched. I have made this work rely heavily on atmosphere—a thunderstorm rolls across the scene, creating a dark, contrasting value in pages like "Exon". The bright whites create a constant drama within the images and I pair dark confident marks with careful linework.. "Exon" is the first landscape I made and I relied very heavily on the sensibilities of Alan Lee while making it. After a few nights of frustrated angry marks, I was able to find a combination of his precious looking lines and a more expressive mark-making process. While these landscapes emulate the light and subject matter of Hudson River School paintings, I compare this romanticism with current realities (the adult video store, telephone poles, and abandoned trash).

Because I imagine the storm in my drawings is many miles long, it acts as a binder, connecting narrative experiences. Heavy and dense in the form of a mountain or tower, the

cumulonimbus cloud can develop into a thunderstorm. Individual cells of that storm moving downstream while other cells are forming upwards can produce a squall line, miles of storm in one long stretch. They are events that fester within one another, avoiding conclusion. Through the duration of the storm, I depict my characters in a very isolated state of mind. They are falling asleep at the wheel, smoking a late night cigarette, or experiencing a small moment of peace in the local convenience store. None of them knows each other or encounters one another. They are just living within a number of square miles along the interstate. Only their emotional state binds them together. They are lost within their own lives while a greater community exists just beyond their perception. These figurative scenes are often graphically lighter than the landscapes I draw and rely more on gestural marks. In "The Shop" a man de-burrs a small metal part, lost in the motion of the work. These jobs are about being able to attentively produce hundreds of the same item. Focus becomes narrower as the job progresses, working on the same parts for days or weeks. Having done this job myself, I recreated my own moments of clarity within this scene (being so close to the buffer I might as well be buffing my own knuckles, coming in and out of greater spacial awareness). This personal world becomes important and encompassing. This contrasts the format I've used for this body of work: the panorama.

The panorama emulates the frame of a Western film. Westerns are not true to reality, they are a form of escapism. They are hypothetical values starring the sheer immensity of land, not a

historical record of life in the west. These films often represent a loosely philosophical sentiment about work, community, the grandeur of the loner, or the comfort of home. The insignificance of the individual versus a sweeping landscape is depicted using a panorama and key vantage points. As described in *"Western" Themes and Western Films,* the film, *The Big Country,* uses "predictable shots to push forward even the most predictable of Western films". *(Folsom 198)* "[G]alloping horses in this film are commonly photographed far to one side of the wide screen, galloping across an empty landscape; and the final 'shoot-out' between two hostile parties is brilliantly resolved in another long distance pan shot by reducing the size of the characters to insignificance implying the true measure of their petty quarrel."*(Folsom 198)*. The individual is confronted with the dwarfed nature of their own struggles, facing the grand landscape and endless sky. The sky, like in the Western, *Stagecoach (ATC, 21:20-21:35)*, is a metaphor for the immeasurable. Large clouds roll across the sky backlit by brilliant light while the characters make their way across the scene. It often encompasses most of the frame due to almost unbroken splay of land. Cow-country is long, wide, and flat for miles save for stranded mountain formations (The Black Hills, for example). The lack of moisture in the air and leveled land creates a distortion in one's perception of distance. Driving to Rapid City, in South Dakota, I was able to see small details on cows grazing miles away. For a moment I saw them as miniatures and thought it would take no time to reach them. When I stopped the car at an outlook, I realized how far everything really was. The mountains which had seemed barely twenty minutes away were actually hours in the distance. The drawings emulate that lack of perspective, appearing as mostly midground and foreground.

Spaghetti Westerns are absolute parodies of the real thing. Made by Italian directors with only a loose idea of the themes, Spaghetti Westerns pumped up the violence, long standoffs, and lone ranger mentality to the limit. The long pauses became stagnant and the shoot-outs more bloody. Instead of capitalizing on the contrast between the individual and the immense, Spaghetti Westerns are full of close ups. The conversation between what is big and what is valuable is often lost in these reproductions. The film *Once Upon a Time in the West (YouTube Movies, 03:15–05:21)* uses these cinematic cliches as a way to bend time. *Once Upon a Time in the West* opens on a man letting a fly settle on his face. It crawls around and his eyes follow it for several minutes (until he traps the fly in the end of his gun, playing with it in the barrel). The disregard of the immense and the valuable in favor of close-up shots creates a localized version of the immense. These long shots of stagnant stillness reminds me of my own dissociative experiences. My ADD and memory issues cause me to either forget chunks of time or get lost in one specific moment, ignoring all else. Sometimes I can't remember getting somewhere or what I've just done. I can lose three hours easily by getting lost in a stray thought (not even realizing the time has passed) or be so distracted, I ignore the more pressing realities around me (like the weeks I slept with broken glass in the sheets). The construction of the figurative panels emulate those experiences. In "Get Lucky 1" a man walks through a casino and has limited moments of clarity. He is just barely aware of his own hand in front of him. Scenes like these are modeled after videos I record on my phone. I play through the video until I find compositions that work best for the narrative and string them together. My goal in referencing these films was to reproduce my experience of road trips and american landscape through the lens of my own mental state.

Agnes Varda's film *Daguerreotype* offers a very different way of looking at these moments. The film is a portrait of shopkeepers on the Rue Daguerre in Paris. The camera follows the shopkeepers lives, taking note of their customers, their daily routines, and the stories these people have to tell. One couple running a general store sells perfume, hand bottled at the counter. The shopkeeper's wife stares, keeping her distance from the customers until in one scene, she feels the texture of one customer's coat while standing behind her. The customer doesn't react, but continues on with her purchases. The camera doesn't react either. Instead it focuses on her confused expression, the tension and understanding filling the room (Varda, 45:15–50:21). These moments that make up the couple's day to day life are important. They feel more potent than anything else. In my own work, I look for similar disruptions to routine. A couple months ago, an experience I had inspired a drawing, "Louis". I was driving next to a man and we both stopped at a red light. I watched his head bob and his eyes close. We both sat at the red light and waited together, neither paying attention as we should. I think of him often and worry a little bit. I hope he's sleeping better but imagine he isn't.

"The New Art of Making Books" describes a book as a time space structure. I experience each space at different moments, the sequence of which is controlled by the structure (Carrión 53). In the structure of the book, I am able to further orchestrate the viewer's interaction with my work. With an accordian fold, a series of moments within one event can unfold all at once. The time structure can also be "beginning", "middle", and "end" by turning the pages individually. I rarely plan compositions of the scenes I draw. I play through my reference videos and react to whatever grabs my interest first. By binding my drawings together, I also create an accordion fold time structure. Beginning, middle, and end is inherent in the presentation, allowing me to be a little more lax about what I inform the viewer of. There is no specified time inherent in the images other than that suggested by the light (day) and that evoked by the plantlife (spring or summer). I found it extremely difficult to make work once I had figured out what would happen next. My plans would get too big and I was acutely aware of my own inability to live up to them. My initial attempt at elaborate narrative led to a state of overworking. I made piles of nothing, hating work before I even made it. Using a state of mindfulness to let events unfold is the most productive solution I have found thus far.

Using the thematic devices within Western dramas, road trips and structural confines, I was able to create a format for myself. This format allowed me to discover my own practice while developing a cohesive body of work. Before I started this series of drawings, I painted mostly in gouache. The acidic tones I used created a feeling of a comic with the color saturation turned up. The opacity of gouache pushed me to be more confident in my choices. I had previously made paintings with a very light hand, building up tone in probably the slowest way possible. Going to drawing allowed me to develop a greater understanding of time utility and helped me learn what I'm looking for in a medium. I am now able to go forward in my practice with a deeper sense of what subject matter that appeals to me. At the beginning of this year I had no idea what a body of my work might look like. I have always been too fickle or angry at myself to find out. Describing the landscapes of mental spaces has developed most proficiently in the first medium I ever used, graphite. In an otherwise stunted practice, graphite has been my greatest tool. My sense of mark, tone, and iterative practice has become second nature. It has grown larger than my own disappointment. This is the first body of work that I feel I can share without regret or apology. In collecting fragments of narrative in an unreliable sequence, I have been able to suspend the fear that kept me from making work.

Exon, 2020, 2.5 ft x 7” graphite on watercolor paper

Shop 1, 2020, 2.5 ft x 7” graphite on watercolor paper

“Get Lucky 1”, 2020, 2.5 ft x 7” graphite on watercolor paper

“Thistle”, 2020, 2.5 ft x 7” graphite on paper

“Louis”, 2020, 2.5 ft x 7” Graphite on paper

Citations

Folsom, James K. "'Western' Themes and Western Films." *Western American Literature*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1967, pp. 195–203. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43017231. Accessed 14 May 2020.

Carrión, Ulises. "Publishing Manifestos." *The New Art of Making Books*, Amsterdam University Press, 2019, pp. 50–54.

"The Big Country - DVD Netflix." *Dvd.netflix.com - DVD Netflix*, United Artists Films, 1 Jan. 1970, dvd.netflix.com/Movie/The-Big-Country/60004236.

ATC. "Stagecoach - Movies 1939 - John Ford - Action Western Movies." *YouTube*, uploaded by ATC, 30 Dec. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0w_d3aiUnU.

YouTube Movies. "Once Upon A Time In The West." *YouTube*, uploaded by YoutubeMOvies, 13 July 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6gZVDOoQVQ.

Varda, Agnes. "Amazon.Com: Daguerreotypes: Agnes Varda, Agnes Varda: Movies & TV." *Amazon*, uploaded by Amazon, 14 Sept. 1976, www.amazon.com/Daguerreotypes-Agnes-Varda/dp/B0055SLAM4.