The Human Journey As Work In Progress

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THE HUMAN JOURNEY AS
WORK IN PROGRESS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Arts

by
Kymberly Day
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

Sampling gesture, form, and monumentality from Classical figure sculpture, art history becomes an avenue for exploring tropes of the parallels between man and animal. Raw construction and shipping materials comprise these figures, interrupting conventions of display, archive, transport, and institution.

Species are spliced and integrated into the human figure in each of the compositions. Traditionally, the animal is used as metaphor for different human conditions, emotions, and behaviors; our relationships to animals is one that stands the test of time in art. The animal becomes an extension of the figure’s human-ness, while also acting as mere prop for the figure. Nonetheless, the myth and composition is contingent on the relationship between human and creature.

Challenging the conventions of display and viewing, my material choice inherently contrasts the traditional materials like marble, bronze, or plaster associated with standards of fine art. Through application of these building materials, the body becomes a layered symbol for systematic construction, subject to tensions of hierarchies like those of the materials. Their provisionality is tantamount to contrasting the exclusivity present in the art museum and academia in which the forms that inspire my works have traditionally operated.

I place emphasis on the supports of these figures to further contextualize them within traditions of art history, trade, archive, and transport. Plastic sheeting separates and
conceals views of the figures, suggesting that they reside in a state of restoration or storage. I compare this state of non-viewing to a state of limbo, which I use to describe art viewed in multiple degrees of exhibition and completion. Not every part of the figure is intact; the wood pallets, casters, and ramps that comprise their substantial bases directly reference these behind-the-scene spaces. Furthermore, the physical state of transport becomes a metaphor for personal or spiritual journey.

I compare the underlying building materials to a subconscious function of the body that, when exposed, can metaphorically represent a more realistic self than an externally-constructed identity. Through the lens of fine art consumption, the work frames humanity and mortality in a state of incompleteness that signals that to be human is to be a perpetual work-in-progress.
DEDICATION

To my mother, Peggy, and my father, Christopher, for your blind support of everything I do.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Both professors and peers have acted as supportive mentors to me during my time here. My committee has maintained outstanding support and patience for me and my changing ideas, throughout the entire past two years. Thank you, Dave Detrich, for your encouragement of nearly every path before me. Your enthusiasm should be bottled and sold. Thank you, Todd McDonald, for your skepticism and blunt humor. You’ve reinforced my faith in paint. Thank you, Andrea Feeser, for providing your horse as artist’s model. I’ve learned much about myself through speaking with you about art and existence. I feel much indebted to each of you for the time you took for studio visits that served to be therapeutic for me as much as they were educational.

Additionally, my work would never have made it into or out of the gallery, much less even fit through an elevator, without the raw strength and patience of Amanda Musick, who also remedied my use of a camera.
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CHAPTER ONE

TRANSLATING THE CLASSICAL FIGURE

Sampling gesture, form, and monumentality from Classical figure sculpture, art history becomes an avenue for exploring tropes of the parallels between man and animal in my work. My choice of forms from which to sample is informed by the integration of myth hinged on that relationship.

While considering inclusion, the pool from which to sample is considerably limited, as idealism was preferred in Classical times. The final forms represented in my work highlight a range of bodily ideals across age and gender for purposes of inclusion.

My decision to borrow from other works engages the age-old practice of copying, most notably in Greco-Roman replicas. Statuary originally prototyped by Ancient Greece was heavily copied, spliced, and altered to better suit Roman aesthetics. In some cases, portraits of political figures were superimposed onto bodies originally meant to represent characters of mythos (MetMuseum.org).

While emphasis placed on certain features is preserved from the historical precedents, not all areas of each are replicating a exact sculpture. Classical tendencies towards exaggerated gesture, pose, and scale are still preserved in areas where my artistic license has improvised.

Another facet of understanding art history is through the mediated experience of viewing art second-handedly. This is primarily through the filter of technology or print.
The flattening of the figure in two-dimensional resources is the primary mode through which students of art can view artworks of antiquity, since it is not guaranteed that students can access every works’ physical location for purposes of studying. Three-dimensional scans of my precedents have helped aid my understanding of the sculptures’ forms but nonetheless leave out a magnitude of detail. This lack of understanding of the form is problematic, but embraced, particularly in the execution of the Ganymede figure (Fig.1.1).

That which is lost in translation during the process of hand-copying these forms becomes a statement on provisionality and learning. At this stage in my life, I feel that my primary experience is that of a student of art academia. For this reason, I engage with the process of learning through my decision not to simply replicate these forms using technologically-produced precision. Hand-carving and building references the visceral nature of a studio practice. Full immersion in material and form is the primary way a student learns to master each. My unique interpretation of the forms, my own judgement of space and matter, and hand-eye coordination creates errors in the work relative to the history of copying art, but serves as documentation of my own personal understanding of a mediated experience of the original sculptures. In the timeline of art history, my copies can serve as just one more degree of interpretation.
CHAPTER TWO

ANIMAL AS EXTENSION OF HUMAN-NESS

Species are spliced and integrated into the human figure in each of my compositions. My choice to present figures in combination with animal is nothing new; this dichotomy is already steeped in both myth and reality. Traditionally, the animal is used as metaphor for different human conditions, emotions, and behaviors; our relationship to animals is one that stands the test of time in art and reality. Pets become family members while domesticated beasts help to carry out acts of labor. Wild creatures serve as inspiration for sports teams and company mascots that help to sell products from cereal to batteries to clothing. The high extent to which we project ourselves onto animals fuels the notion that we are simply in pursuit of understanding the human self.

The Roman goddess, Diana, is recognized by her attributes of bow and arrow, as well as an accompanying hound or stag. I chose Diana for the most common presentation of a human-animal relationship: that of pet or trained domestic creature meant to provide the human with service or companionship. In *Diana and Her Dog (Fig. 2.1)*, as adapted from Edward McCartan’s bronze *Diana*, she maintains the dominant role of the two, restraining the dog on an unseen leash. As the goddess of the hunt, Diana represents animal communication more broadly.

The human figure in *Ganymede Meets the Eagle* is courted by that of a large eagle, gazing fondly up at the boy’s face and hand, which dangles an unseen morsel over its open beak. This relationship places the bird of prey in submission, although the myth
tells us that the eagle is simply one of the powerful god, Zeus’s many forms, and who has ultimately kidnapped Ganymede. Zeus’ ability to transform into this creature is another facet of the human-animal relationships prevalent in myth in which the animal is utilized for its admirable characteristics to help personify a deity based on the human image.

Again, this figure, based on the Ganymede by Benvenuto Cellini, utilizes the two-dimensional silhouette to signify the mediated experience of viewing art through a technological filter. Some body parts emerge, but overall, the viewer has a limited understanding of his body. This is the only sculpture in the exhibition that allows the human figure a head, though at the expense of a limited bodily presence. Meanwhile the eagle is full in volume and ultimately possesses more activated physical tension and presence as a result.

Both Diana and Her Dog and Ganymede Meets the Eagle reside at the entrance of the exhibition, acting as greeting sentinels to the viewer. Beyond their confining walls lies the central arrangement comprised of three figures. First, sampled from the central figure of Laocoön and His Sons, my rendition, Laocoön, Seated (Fig. 2.2) only conveys the lower half of Laocoön’s body, displaced from the original sculpture’s other compositional features. The man’s sons and the giant serpent that entangles them all are absent here.

Nearby, the figure, Hippocampus (Fig. 2.3), which combines two animal species to comprise the mythological seahorse, rests atop an isolated platform that contrasts the context of the numerous grandiose fountains where the hippocampus image is often
found, as an attribute to Poseidon, Greek god of horses, earthquakes, and sea. The hippocampus is often represented in multiples as well, as traveling companions to Poseidon.

Accompanying Laocoën, Seated and Hippocampus, the Rearing Horse (Fig.2.4) removes the groom figure who is present in the original composition of Horses Restrained by Grooms by Guillaume Coustou. The equestrian statue remains a constant motif throughout art history, as a symbol for unbridled strength, majesty, and masculinity, and aptly presents both the wild and domesticated ends of the animal spectrum in regard to our relationship to the horse. A horse domesticated or “broken in” is complicit and tame but this stallion’s body language shows it knows no master.

A contrasting relationship to the horse is offered in David and Yearling Horse (Fig.2.5), which I have based formally on Donatello’s David. This rendition does little to reference the myth surrounding David and Goliath, but more so to reference the sculpture by Donatello. Donatello’s choice to present David as an unassuming, lanky youth, as opposed to renditions like that of Michaelangelo, is what led me to take the liberty to add the company of a horse of a similar age or stage in life as David. This is suggested by the proportions of the legs to body and the frailty of the figures, especially in comparison to the stature and stability of the Rearing Horse. David’s youth is echoed and magnified by the young horse’s presence.

Three more figures comprise the last third of the exhibition. Hercules (Fig.2.6) uses the Farnese Hercules as a template. Characterized by a lion skin among other
objects, Hercules rests atop the pelt that is draped over a supporting tree limb.

I chose the inclusion of *Mary Magdalene (Fig. 2.7)* for the more indirect relationship she has with the “wild”, “natural”, or “animalistic” in contrast to the other human figures in the exhibition. Again, sampling from a Donatello, this human figure becomes animal-like in appearance due to life in the wilderness. Her hair has become matted and wooly, clothing her, as an animal skin would clothe and protect the creature it grows on. Yet this is perhaps the most “pure” representation of the human figure present in this grouping, acting true to both human and animalistic tendencies.

Lastly, the cervine figure, *Fallen Stag (Fig. 2.8)*, based on Pierre Hugonnet’s bronze of the same name, is the only one in the exhibition to showcase a single species void of human in the historical precedent. However, the stag’s expression of struggle implies human interference, and it is safe to assume that its fall is by fault of an unseen hunter, if not also embodying the internal struggles of human thought.
CHAPTER THREE

MATERIAL AND CONSTRUCTED-NESS

Raw construction and shipping materials comprise my figures. Contrasting the hierarchical status and longevity of traditional materials like marble, bronze, or plaster usually associated with standards of fine art, it poses a contemporary alternative to the role and tradition in which material has played and is perceived. The materials I use surround me every day, within the walls of buildings, under the carpet on which I walk, and within the structure and padding that make up the furniture I use. These materials are always hidden inside the structures that house us and the furniture that cradles us.

Carpet padding offers pliability that stone lacks, while emulating the patterns found in granite. Plywood constitutes much of the structure of my figures, mimicking the skeletal system literally, or serving as silhouette of the body. Upholstery foam often fills out muscle masses just like the cushions it might usually form in a furniture specimen. Insulation foam ranges in application from structure to surface through its many capabilities. It holds its shape and weight like marble yet carves much more like the flesh that it emulates in this application.

Through application of these building materials, the body becomes a layered symbol for systematic construction, subject to tensions of hierarchies like those of the materials. I compare the role of the artist to that of a laborer, and more specifically, one who constructs products or experiences. Architectural or domestic construction materials are used far more frequently in skilled labor applications than in conventional fine art.
These reference a specific type of labor and range of skill associated with hardware-store-access-level construction endeavors and even Do-It-Yourself territory. This accessibility and allowance of provisionality is tantamount to contrasting the exclusivity present in the art museum and academia in which the forms that inspire my works have traditionally operated. Within art, where labor is historicized, the artist is distinct from the “laborer,” but by engaging materials usually prescribed for the laborer, I create a hybridized product and process. In this context, the label of “constructor” becomes an appropriate hybrid of artist and laborer.

I compare the building materials to a subconscious function of the body that can potentially constitute a more realistic self than an externally constructed identity. Making up the internal functions of buildings and objects, they are usually masked by more finished external surfaces. In this parallel, the bodies of the figures are constructed as are the preliminary stages of a building. Without a skin to conceal them, the figure’s structural integrity is front-and-center, where what is internal is also external. The roughness of the chosen materials defies or resists surface accuracy, and serves to showcase the state of incompletion these figures have. Historically, artworks fall into an incomplete state because they suffer the effects of time and damage, whereas I present this condition as “in-progress”. The range of internal-to-surface materials imply that the forms are still under construction or restoration, and suggests that identity itself is provisional, requiring constant re-examination, patching, or modification.
CHAPTER FOUR
TRANSPORT AND THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

I place emphasis on the supports of the figures to further contextualize them within traditions of art history, trade, archive, and transport. I use plastic sheeting to separate and conceal views of the figures, suggesting that they reside in a state of restoration or storage. I compare this state of non-viewing to a state of limbo. However, I use the metaphor of limbo to openly describe art viewed in multiple degrees of exhibition. An artwork’s vitality is contingent on it being seen by an audience, but in most cases, it will be placed in storage and unseen for some portion of its lifetime.

Thus, limbo describes the location in which my figures find themselves locked. Not every part of the figure is intact; the key item they share is the substantial base or pedestal that grounds each one. The wood pallets and casters directly reference storage, transport, archive, and commodity; they are dependent on a handler even though they are equipped to travel.

An artwork’s vitality is contingent on it being seen by an audience, but in most cases, it will be placed in storage and unseen for some portion of its lifetime. My installation involves a heavy degree of staging of the idea of storage, to suggest that limbo itself is a constructed space. All parts of the exhibition are constructed. The plastic sheeting and even the silhouette of the gallery ladder left visible to the viewer, indicates that they are in the midst of a work in progress. The wood pallets, casters, and ramps that comprise the substantial sculpture bases directly reference these behind-the-scene spaces.
The state of incompletion and dispossession of the figures suggests that the idea of the autonomous self or identity is inherently incomplete or flawed. Surface identity is complex and layered, for which I equate it to the convolution between internally and externally constructed identity.

I analyze the human tendency to construct identity within my interactions day to day. This is a personal quest that seeks to simply gain understanding of myself through interaction and isolation, while the purpose of the individual in general is investigated through the lens of conventions of fine art consumption.

Both Diana and Her Dog and Ganymede Meets the Eagle are situated on casters, with potential for immediate travel. Farther into the exhibition, transport is indisputably most strongly referenced in the display of Laocoon, Seated, via ramp and crate, which the figure has not even left. In the spectrum of storage to restoration to exhibition, it is unclear whether the figure is intended to leave its crate or has just entered, and to remain for how long. Both the starting point and destination of the half-figure is still ambiguous.

The makeshift platform on which Hippocampus sits evokes forms of loading docks, train tracks, and even those of roller coasters. The ramps in each of these pieces acts as a visual movement to emphasize the figure’s implied movement through space. In this case, it is implied that the hippocampus has just traveled up this ramp to its static resting place here.

While the Rearing Horse appears the most indicative of the dichotomy between wild and domesticated and the power behind it out of sheer size and mass, the horse is
tied to its substantial pallet, grounded by a physical support. Ultimately it is stripped of its freedom, like a caged animal, or like I assign it, in limbo. Next to *David and Yearling Horse*, who has reached a platform at the top of a ramp, the *Rearing Horse* feels like a future projection of the youthful horse before it. A time of self discovery, coming-of-age rituals, and sometimes disillusionment, adolescence itself becomes the state of limbo for David and the yearling.

The last three figures represent a phase of reflection in the personal journey. In *Hercules*, the man’s body rests on this prop comfortably, though visually exposes many layers of material like open flesh wounds. This is the body of a warrior off duty. He is in a state of reflection, and while not possessing a head, he faces away from us. It can even be suggested that he is healing from his wounds, as he rests amidst a spread of plastic sheeting as though under active restoration.

The myth behind Mary Magdalene is hinged on reflection, where the division of the figure in my rendition creates a visual connection between her physicality and spirituality. Grounded by a physical body, represented by the steel cage-like frame, the figure still ascends beyond it, as suggested by the temporal structure of plastic that hides her upper body. Visually, the light-reflecting and deflecting qualities of the sheet plastic serve to create movement upwards that implies the extent of her reach into a spiritual dimension while her lower body stays grounded.

Lastly, *Fallen Stag* differs from the others prominently in movement and energy.
The animal expresses the most energy of the grouping: that of upheaval and confusion, poise and balance, ultimately, an expression of struggle. The stag becomes the symbol for internal crusade. The ambiguity in its directional movement and emotion assigns this gesture as a benediction to the viewer.
Chapter Five
Reflection: Personal & Collective Identities

Amidst metaphors for personal journey and periods of stasis along that route, I note that through the lens of fine art consumption, this metaphor can describe the broader initiatives of a collective identity traversing trials of self reflection. Initially, I began to analyze the constructed nature of identity because of its prevalence in social media. Discrepancies between internet personas and those of the same individuals in more visceral interactions points to a convolution of identity that serves to force self reflection on the individual more than was apparent before these platforms were made accessible. Some would argue that an alternative outlet for expression like social media can expose an individual’s truer natures, providing a mediated experience of communication that omits nuances of interaction. One can express one’s self in any variety of ways that may normally not be deemed appropriate in other common societal interactions. This opportunity to represent the self alternatively would appear to hold a mirror to the current state of Western collective identities.

Today, globalization efforts are not only a factor in how current empires come to define themselves; the art world’s ability to evolve is hinged on similar appropriation and transformation. My work participates in the established trend of borrowing from a collective identity. Not to overlook power structures hinged on identifying factors such as race, gender, and sexuality, my interrogation of identity is one that solely prompts the
viewer to self reflect on the path to analyzing constructions of reality. Reality and history inevitably become constructed where identities are constructed, and the discrepancy between individual and collective identity becomes a precarious state of limbo.
CHAPTER SIX

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS

Contemporary artists whose work operates similarly to mine include Oliver Laric, David Altmedj, and Damian Hirst. Laric similarly uses the Classical figure as an entry point to his work. Utilizing three-dimensional digital scans of museum originals to create replica forms, his figures have technological accuracy to the originals unlike my initiative to recreate the forms by hand. In some cases, he also exhibits the incomplete figure, but unlike my approach to the state of incompleteness acting as a mirror for self-reflection, he is engaging solely with the practice of copying. The distinguishing factor between his practice and Greco-Roman copies, for example, is the contemporary material division within each figure. Plastics of varying colors and transparencies comprise the statues, offering an alternative relationship between the myth, form, and viewer. Some areas offer visibility into the internal cavities of the figure, revealing structural and material integrity much like my works do as well. The artist further investigates construction of culture and identity in much the same vein as I do.

David Altmedj uses the figure as an entry point as well, and blurs lines between the interior and exterior surfaces and materials in similar ways to mine. He crams much more detail into the figure, interweaving human, object, and animal. His material repertoire seems unrestricted in contrast to my limited palette of construction materials. The sheer quantity of materials embedded into the figure fuels the notion of constructed identity, but also suggests that there is simply a grandiose amount of information
inherently present in an individual identity, ripe for investigation or discovery.

Damien Hirst’s latest exhibition, *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable* shown in the Palazzo Grassi and the Punta della Dogana in Venice, Italy, employs translation of the Classical figure, engages the function of the institution, and in the tradition of copying artworks to stage mimicries of anachronisms. A strong fictitious narrative fuels the premise for combining the alleged sources. While drawing from myth in a more fantastical approach than my works, the exhibition received harsh criticism for lackadaisical kitschiness. A distinct feature of this body of work beyond those shown in the exhibition is the inclusion of three editions of each sculpture, all cast copies of each other, but differing in material and surface treatment (Freeman).
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

I assign accessible construction materials to the form of the human body in an effort to suggest that it, as well as the mind, is heavily constructed. This is steeped in the belief that we as humans are malleable in our ways of thinking, and while susceptible to external influences, have vast capability to directly shape ourselves as a species.

While developing the work, I had long overlooked my own history of observing my father work in a construction field and handle these materials for the purpose of building homes. I watched him orchestrate the construction of the last three homes that our family has inhabited. He toured me through their building sites at every stage of construction, from rebar foundations to wall insulation, to pouring a driveway. Now I see these observations have clearly had a subliminal influence on my material choice.

As a child, I enjoyed letting my imagination run wild in the manmade landscape of the job site, but as I aged, I began to examine the purpose of each material application and each stage of construction. As a result, my work compares the preliminary structures of buildings to the works-in-progress that lie beneath the skin and beyond confines of constructed identity. In this way, the lens of fine art frames humanity itself as an unfinished opus in which constant development or reevaluation is quintessential to being human.
FIGURES

Fig. 1.1 Ganymede Meets the Eagle

Fig. 2.1 Diana and Her Dog
Fig. 2.2 Laocoön, Seated

Fig. 2.3 Hippocampus
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Laocoön and His Sons. c.42-20 B.C. Marble. Vatican Museums, Vatican.

