

INVERSION

by

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ABSTRACT

By combining the image of the human figure with different types of visual manipulations, I investigate how intimately the figure and the ground can be intertwined. For the purpose of conceptually exploring the human existence and its surroundings, I manipulate the figure-ground organization. I immerse the human being into an environment using technology (computers, cameras, and software) and demonstrate how the human figure participates with the background or another object. My investigation of a figure-ground inversion in painting brings together traditional painting methods with new digital technology to show the tensions between focus and ground, object and subject, humanity and nature.

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This thesis is dedicated to my family for their love and support and encouragement through my degree.

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CHAPTER I.

INVERSION

Figurative art is a fundamental component of my work, and my aim is to create a new way that we see the figure. We as human beings end up in our surroundings by choice or happenstance. Our surroundings dictate our behavior and influence our senses. I incorporate the model's surroundings within his or her body and generate a different figure. My work and research express a contemporary view of the human figure through the use of the figure-ground inversion. Figurative art has a long tradition in Art History. I am bringing art up to date in a screen-saturated age, where figure and ground collapse by our constant engagement with figures in and on screens. I am engaging with figure-ground relationships and focusing on figural subjects to investigate the contemporary aspect of the concept of the figure in the world today. We are browsing digital media with all these windows open, so I am exploring "a way of seeing" everyday life. In my research, I employ modern technology at the beginning, then switch to classical painting techniques for my figure-ground inversion.

By combining the image of the human figure with different types of visual manipulations, I investigate how intimately the figure and the ground can be intertwined. This figure-ground inversion unifies my view of humankind with the urban cityscape, and landscape as a genre. The second option is a double figure-ground inversion; this idea joins two shapes/people, creatures, or objects with the ground. By combining the

figure with the elements of the ground, the background image becomes part of the foreground image. According to Museum Curator Ellen Lupton and Design Professor Jennifer Phillips, “A stable figure/ground relationship exists when a form or figure stands clearly apart from its background. Most photography functions according to this principle, where an obvious subject is featured within a setting.”¹ By overlapping multiple objects (human and insect), it challenges our desire to make a single focal point. The viewers try to make sense of what they are looking at because the merged anatomy creates a new ambiance of the figure.

In traditional figurative art, the figure and the ground are separate. For example, in the *Mona Lisa*, by Leonardo da Vinci, the female is the figure, and the landscape is the ground (fig.1). The focal point is the woman with the countryside being the background. The viewer’s eye goes to the woman’s face first then to her hands and afterward scans the rest of the painting. In my thesis research, I challenge how the viewer sees the figure and the ground by manipulating their relationship.



figure 1

¹ Ellen Lupton and Jennifer Cole Phillips, *Graphic Design, The New Basics* (New York, Baltimore: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008-2015), 106.

When I unite two images, with the focal point being the figure, then the perception of that person is changed. According to design professionals, Lupton and Phillips,

We separate figures (forms) from the space, color, or patterns that surround them (ground, or background). People are accustomed to seeing the background as passive and unimportant in relation to a dominant subject. Yet visual artists become attuned to the spaces around and between elements, discovering their power to become active forms in their own right.²

I immerse the human being into an environment using technology (computers, cameras, and software) and demonstrate how the human figure participates with the background or another object. By using different types of procedures, both digital and projected, I overlap the background image on and around the body, the result is that the subject appears transparent (fig. 2). When I contain the background image inside the figure without any visual information on the outside, then another perception is created. The two objects become one, and the new form is an integration of natural and man-made shapes with an image of a human being (fig. 3).



figure 2

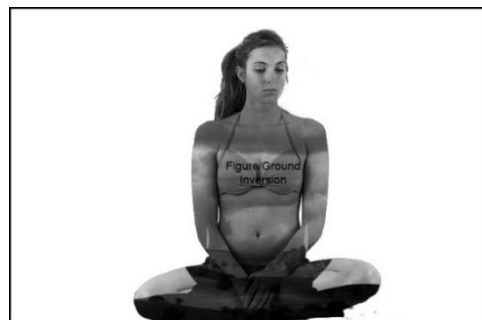


figure 3

² Lupton and Phillips, 99.

For the purpose of conceptually exploring the human existence and its surroundings, I manipulate the figure-ground organization. No matter what kind of ground is chosen to merge with the human subject, the interaction between the two forms is a fascinating investigation of several kinds of visual illusions. The optical illusion of my figure-ground inversions creates another dimension of depth perception. This new dimension of depth perception takes place within the figure. Instead of the figure having typical modeling, the visual information within the form has another layer of shape, texture, and line. The color is affected, often being darker than normal. This additional layer of information gives the human form a new personality and identity. I explore and push the boundaries of the Gestalt principles by challenging the figure-ground relationship. According to design scholar Malcolm Grear, “The form of an object is not more important than the form of the space surrounding it. All things exist in interaction with other things.”³ Gestalt figure-ground organization suggests that there is a distinction between the figure and the background. By reorganizing the parts within the figure the components become one, and the figure becomes united with the background.

Figuring out the figure-ground relationship is the first visual decision the viewer has to make. New objects come into our sight, and our minds need a system with which to make an order of things. We determine which forms are most relevant, and then which forms that are not so significant. Our interpretation of the figure-ground relationship allows us to organize what we see by how each object relates to the other. The objects beg for visual organization, the dominant figure is the focal point, and the other forms

³ Malcolm Grear, *Inside/Outside: From the Basics to the Practice of Design* (New York: AIGA and New and Riders, 2006), 500.

complete the composition and provide context. In my work, I rearrange the visual structure, and the audience sees a new view of the figure.

If I am only designing with the mindset of arranging shapes on the canvas, then I'm missing some important details. The negative space of the painting is just as important as the active elements on the canvas. The space within the figure is another area that is a visual playground. By placing the negative space within the figure, I've changed the information on the original form. The figure-ground relationship is inverted, but complementary. Figure and ground can improve or diminish each other. Unifying the two in association with each other is one more significant characteristic of my work, and set a framework for how my work communicates. Jan Tschizchold, German typographer and a member of the Bauhaus Movement states, "White space is to be regarded as an active element, not a passive background."⁴ I direct the viewers to look at different parts of my work and to decipher what they see as the focal point, depending on the relational proportions of both figure and ground.

Recognizing the figure from the background is a way we identify which object is the focal point. If there is only one focal point, (the sitting female, for instance) and the white space is the background, then I'm following traditional figure-ground relationships (fig. 4). If I manipulate the focal point by overlapping her with another image, then I create complex figure-ground relationships (fig. 5).

⁴ Jan Tschizchold, *Plakate der Avantgarde* (Munich: Verlag des Bildungsverbandes der Deutschen Buchdrucker, 1930), 8.



figure 4



figure 5

The combination of photography and digital manipulation are the tools I use to create my figure-ground inversion. Moreover, the relationship between painting and technology is a predominant motif in my work. Using technology speeds up my preliminary process and allows more time for painting, which is time-consuming. Lindy Candy and Earnest Evans declare:

For one thing, the digital world of today is still very new and continuously evolving. As any experienced practitioner will testify, pottery and painting are complex enough activities, taking many years to master, even for the gifted. In the digital domain today, however, the huge variety of choices and standards, as well as the inherent difficulty of using some kinds of hardware and software, makes it particularly complex.⁵

Digital Photography is the first media/technology utilized to achieve my objective. The second step is to manipulate the shots digitally and come up with a convincing working composition. Finally, I make the composition into a painting. I'm harnessing modern technology as a stepping stone, but using classical painting techniques to accomplish the hand-made piece.

⁵ Lindy Candy and Earnest Evans, *Explorations in Art and Technology* (London: Springer-Verlag, 1999), 22.

As artist and theorist David Hockney states, “From the early fifteenth century many Western artists used optics—by which I mean mirror and lenses (or a combination of the two)--- to create living projections.”⁶ In my work, I want to establish a relationship between visual art and visual technology. Painting uses visual information to communicate to the observer. Technology is often an invention designed to make our lives easier. To appreciate the relationship between the two, we must see how technology has influenced art. “Many art historians,” Hockney asserts, “have argued that certain painters used the camera obscura in their work—Canaletto and Vermeer, in particular—are often cited but to my knowledge, no one has suggested that optics were used as widely or as early as I am arguing here.”⁷ Hockney is himself a painter, and like me he is interested in understanding this relationship between human artistic creation and technological invention. Hockney argues that, between the 13th and 15th century, Hockney argues that painting made an unmistakable leap in realism, and the use of technology had to be the reason because it was surely not a lack of talent.⁸

My use digital and computer software are a means to an end in my work. Digital photography, projection, and image manipulation allow me a way to freeze the figure and choose different lighting scenarios that improve my artwork. Another creative opportunity available is the choice of which image to use for the projection. I can either photograph the image or find one that fits my concept behind the painting. Creating

⁶ David Hockney, *Secret Knowledge Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 40-42.

multiple figure-ground inversions in a quicker time frame gives me the ability to have a huge selection from which to choose.

Technology touches all of my art forms, and this process brings an evolution to my work. As my technical ability expands in both computer software and painting, the possibilities for my projects increases. I am fascinated by technological ideas in art; I think digital technology assists me in my connection with the human figure. Using digital tools helps me express my thoughts by giving me the perception of limitless solutions. If I look at digital imagery as a starting point, I realize how it inspires me to think about my process of creating a piece. The technical, digital or computer-based process always challenges me to think differently than my traditional painting training and thus initiates a problem-solving environment. This hybrid traditional/digital process is more exciting to me than traditional methods alone. Marshall McLuhan alleged, that to comprehend the impact of new technology fully, one must examine figure (medium) and ground (context) associations since neither is completely intelligible without the other.⁹ He asserted that we must study media in their historical context, particularly in light of that technology that preceded them. The present or contemporary environment itself made up of the effects of previous technologies, and thus gives rise to new technologies, which, in their turn, further affect society and individuals. Furthermore, all technologies have embedded within them their assumptions about time and space. The message that the medium conveys can only be understood if the medium and the environment in which the medium is used—and which, simultaneously, it effectively creates—are analyzed together.

⁹ Herbert Marshall McLuhan, "Library and Archives Canada," first published in 1967, online at: <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/innis-mcluhan/030003-2020-e.html>.

McLuhan believed that an examination of the figure-ground relationship could offer a critical commentary on culture and society.¹⁰ I consider my paintings a type of generative art; by using digital photography and computer manipulation, the starting point of my process is always changing—in other words, it functions as a dynamic progression.

Using the most current digital technology in tandem with the theories of McLuhan, I invert the figure and the ground to suggest alternative ways that we see the human nude, a highly traditional subject in the history of art. The projection or casting of a secondary object onto the human body in my works generates another dialogue between the medium and the message, the figure and the ground. This alternative way of seeing aims to create new perspectives, and my work seeks to add new dimensions to the human form in art.

¹⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER II.

HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

The historical influences that impact my work involve both traditional and contemporary painters. Each painter I draw from has certain elements that intrigue me. In particular, three artists that influence my artwork are John Singer Sargent, Wayne Thiebaud, and Chuck Close. Remaining in dialogue with art historical influences are important to me because it gives me a context to exist within and sets a standard of excellence for me to meet.

John Singer Sargent is, for me, a painter's painter. His incredible brushwork seems effortless; his brush-loading skills give his work a detailed appearance from a distance, but the strokes are loose when observed from close up. The critic for *Art Amateur* expressed his style as "so reckless and unconventional!", and his manner as "irreverently rapid, off-hand dashing manner of clever brushwork."¹¹ Loading a brush with different shades of value, temperature, and saturation is a difficult task. Following the methods of Sargent, I turn my brushes in various directions when applying paint to the bristles. I double load my brush to give my work another dimension. The advantage of this technique is that I model a form in one stroke, instead of having to make multiple

¹¹ Greta, "Art in Boston," *Art Amateur*, April 18, 1888, 110.

strokes. A contemporary critic of Sargent wrote perceptively of his portrait of Lady Agnew: “His brushwork boldly challenges you by presenting a definite tone for every inch of surface...he never permits some pleasantly warmed juice to veil his view of air, color, and form. He puts all straightforwardly to the touch of right or wrong.”¹² For a painter, the rendering of light tends to give the subject matter an illusionary believability.

The illusion created is that the viewer sees an image of a real person, not just paint smeared on a canvas. Sargent’s intelligent interpretation of gracefully lit portraits and figures reveals his mastery of the illusion of reality, mainly in oil paint. According to Art Historian Richard Ormond,

His acute powers of observation and bravura style enabled him to capture people on canvas with remarkable freshness and force. Above all, it was his mastery in rendering light that gives his portraits their expressive realism. He modeled forms regarding their tonal values, creating the impression that his sitters are inhabiting real spaces shimmering with accidental effects of light.¹³

For me, building on these descriptions of Sargent, the fascination with the human figure is one of the main reasons I paint. Lighting a person indoors requires a knowledge of proper illumination techniques. Studying Sargent’s lighting in his paintings has helped me achieve this. His use of light values is astonishing considering that he couldn’t depend upon photographic and projection to assist him in his paintings.

¹² R. A. M. Stevenson, “General Impressions of the Royal Academy,” *Art Journal* (1893): 242.

¹³ Richard Ormond, *John Singer Sargent* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 36.

Yet, whether painting a portrait or the whole body, Sargent was able to capture the sitter's emotions and psychological presence in addition to his or her physical features. I strive to do the same with my interpretation of the living model by having the individual before me think of a past event or conjure some emotion. Capturing the model's emotion, I argue, helps the viewer grasp the levels of perception I am trying to convey with my work. Ormond further describes Sargent's ability to do this: "Sargent's understanding of the character and psychology of his sitters is evident in the way he chose to represent them, in the poses they adopt, the attitudes they adopt, the attitudes they strike, the way they look and hold themselves."¹⁴ Continuing in discussion with art historical inspirations, I use live models as subjects and have them react to the scene projected on them; as with Sargent, this process creates spontaneity and adds authenticity to my paintings.

While I have carefully studied traditionally trained artist's like Sargent, I have also studied artists of the 20th-century Pop Art movement, especially Wayne Thiebaud. He is a painter who inspires me with his expressive use of color and extraordinary cityscapes. I was first introduced to Thiebaud while working on my BFA at Laguna College of Art and Design in Laguna Beach, California. Thiebaud's influences are particularly strong on the West Coast, and I grew very interested in his color choices and layering techniques using oil paints. Moreover, his color selections are remarkable; every form he paints jumps off the canvas. His shadows are not gray but packed with colored pigment. Thiebaud's paintings seem edible, and his color is rich and alive. In fact, I attended a live portrait demonstration with Thiebaud while at Laguna College of Art and

¹⁴ Ibid., 36.

Design. I was captivated immediately, and my style has felt Thiebaud's impact ever since. He started with a bright red underpainting, which, at the time, seemed crazy. As he painted the portrait of a man smoking a cigar, the piece came together in a surprising way, almost like magic. Thiebaud outlined his shadows and objects with bands of different hues of colors that make them glow. As art historian, Adam Gopnik observed, "At times [Thiebaud's] landscapes seemed so intricately wired and brightly colored that it is like looking down into the innards of a computer chip. The pictures' colors are hallucinatory, as though Ruisdael had painted them on acid."¹⁵

In 2001, I went to the Modern Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, to study Thiebaud's paintings in person. I examined his work carefully and attempted to reverse engineer the layering of his colors. Like Thiebaud; I exaggerated the transition color between the shadow and the background in my objects, based on what I knew first hand from his live demonstration. This technique adds a living glow both to the figure and its shadow, which makes the shape seem to hover off the canvas. "When Thiebaud paints an object or form," writes Cathleen McGuigan, "he famously surrounds it with multiple colors, often stripes or lines, of equal intensity, to create a halo effect—though you might not notice that unless you look closely." She continues, referring to the colors themselves: "They're fighting for position.... That's what makes them vibrate when you put them next to each other."¹⁶

My own experience working lighting for theater productions connects to this understanding of Thiebaud's method. When I worked a spotlight in a stage production in

¹⁵ Adam Gopnik, *Wayne Thiebaud: A Paintings Retrospective* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 62.

¹⁶ Cathleen McGuigan, "Wayne Thiebaud Is Not a Pop Artist," *Smithsonian Magazine* (February 2011), online at: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/wayne-thiebaud-is-not-a-pop-artist-57060/?no-ist>.

1998, for example, I noticed a yellow ring of light that emerged between the artificial light and the cast shadow. According to art historian Steven A. Nash, Thiebaud also “participates in his high school stage crew for theatrical productions,” and his “early theatrical experience leaves a lasting impression perhaps even influencing the strong lighting effects and compositional staging of paintings much later.”¹⁷ I likewise use high contrast editing techniques with image editing software to create drama in my work that mimics Thiebaud's lighting practices.

Constructing a cityscape within the anatomy of the human figure, and building on the subjects and styles of both Sargent and Thiebaud, has become a prominent motif in my work. Thiebaud's cityscapes with their spectacular hills, where the roads shoot upwards and descend quite quickly in spots, are a painterly interpretation of reality. Cityscapes have become one of my areas of focus because I am drawn to linear perspective, with the subject matter of automobiles and the dense lively urban landscape. I see a parallel with my own works and that of Thiebaud's cityscapes because they both offer a momentarily glimpse, a snapshot of the familiar modern urban landscapes. When I construct a scene based on linear perspective focusing on a particular point, I render roads and buildings in a way that gives, on a two-dimensional surface, the impression of their height, width, depth, and relationship to each other. For me, this construction of an illusion of reality, a trickery of the eye, that produces the illusion of three-dimensionality of a flat surface, allows me to create new worlds of meaning. I work to produce structures that follow the curves of the present figural body, thereby intertwining the rectangular and

¹⁷ Steven A. Nash, *Wayne Thiebaud: A Paintings Retrospective* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 192.

the urban landscape with the organic curves of the figure. This play between the man-made and nature, the geometric and the organic, is what defines my thesis project. The figure simultaneously emerges as transparent or invisible compared to the architecture, while it also becomes an integral part of the architectural forms.

Finally, my interest in photographic realism draws upon the work of Chuck Close. Close can achieve a nearly unbelievable reality in his style, one that tricks your eyes into thinking it is photographically produced, yet it is all done by his hand. His works look both precise and futuristic at the same time. His primary subject matter is portraits. He doesn't paint traditional nudes or figures in exciting scenes with a narrative. Rather, he paints largescale faces; only faces without bodies, and he does so with the look of a mechanically produced perfection. My work draws upon the tensions Close's paintings raise between the artist's hand and a machine-produced photograph. I also combine the machine-made image with the painstaking process of hand-done painting to achieve an image that is both strikingly real and profoundly conceptual. In light of Close's technical flawlessness, I strive to achieve a similar skill level. Close states,

I realized that to deal with your nature is also to construct a series of limitations which just don't allow you to behave the way you most naturally want to behave. So, I found it incredibly liberating to work for a long time on something even though I'm impatient. It did not seem like such a dichotomy or a denial of who I was. It seemed like I was taking care of who I was.¹⁸

¹⁸ Chuck Close, "Art Story Contributors, Chuck Close," <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-close-chuck.htm>.

I relate to Close's self-examination through my own battle with impulsiveness; I face my own shortcomings through my choice of combining human and architectural forms, figures and grounds. Using photography in my process also links my work with that of Close. According to Christopher Finch,

[Close's] new plan was to make a series of portraits that would be built from three very thin and hence transparent layers of diluted acrylic color— magenta, cyan, and yellow— brought to life by means of the reflectivity of the white support. He was in short planning to reproduce the dye-transfer process by hand, on his already established grand scale, using the sequence of actual dye transfers as his guide. Put another way, his ambitious intention was to make three paintings— each as detailed as any of the black-and-white paintings— directly on top of one another. Instead of being mixed on the palette, the color would be mixed by the viewer's eye. (Chuck says that it never occurred to him at the time that these paintings would take three times as long to make.)¹⁹

Photography has always been a part of my process because of the endless opportunities the media creates. When I convert the image to CMYK in image editing software, seeing the percentages of each pigment helps me mix my paint more efficiently.

Another correlation of my work to that of Chuck Close is the choice of portraits as subject matter. Close's friend, Finch, writes, "Over the past four decades, he has moved away from that concept— at least in its most literal form— demonstrating that

¹⁹ Christopher Finch, *Chuck Close: Life* (London, Munich, New York: Prestel, 2010), 2810-2815.

there are many valid ways to make a portrait if pursued with rigor and integrity.”²⁰ Like Close, I’m painting portraits in the digital age. The process of capturing an image today is rarely the painstaking process of an artist slowly painting a person that slowly sits in front of him/her. It is instead a pixelated approximation of the light particles that bounce off of the person and register on a lens linked to a digital computer reader. I investigate this shift by returning to the painterly process of human rendering just as Close, with slow, careful painting technique, turns a photo captured into a human creation. The meaning of painting portraits is creating pieces that have an earthly quality, unlike a purely digital image. Focusing on hyper-realism challenges me to fool the viewer. This illusion is one fragment of my work, and my investigation into the figure-ground inversion uses photography as a jumping off point, but re-inserts the hand and mind of the artist beyond the machine.

Each one of these artists has measurably influenced my research, style, subject matter, and approach to painting focused on a figure-ground inversion. John Singer Sargent inspires me in my brushwork, my paint application, and my use of implied textures to create an illusion of three-dimensional depth. Such illusions of depth are vital to making the human figure and the cityscape projection work in unison with one another. Wayne Thiebaud’s use of layered color, built up in a non-traditional manner, affects my exploration of color in ways that bring out the emotional and expressive qualities beyond simple found color relationships in nature.

Moreover, much like Chuck Close’s technique, my work is not a straightforward copy of the photograph; my exaggerated color tends to pull and push objects both forward or

²⁰ Finch, 133-134.

backward in space, playing against the viewers' expectations for spatial relationships.

Close's procedure of using photographic technology as a tool, as a means to an end, and as the basis for a philosophical inquiry, persuades me to enhance the older techniques with which I have long been familiar and to harness available new technologies not only to assist me in my process, but to raise new possibilities for the most meaningful compositions.

CHAPTER III.

TECHNIQUE

My technique is heavily oriented toward digital technology in the design, layout, and transfer phase and then switches to a classical method of painting by hand in the final stage. I use technology as a tool for achieving the results I desire, and I find it fascinating since human know-how is always evolving and changing. Learning alternative avenues of the image-making process gives me the ability to produce work rapidly and experimentally with new perspectives. Then, the “science of craft” allows me to be more clear-cut in creating work with levels of depth, giving my pieces perceptual secondary and tertiary layers. The subtle layers of my paintings and drawings offer a metaphor for the conceptual ideas they represent. By inverting the figure-ground relationship, the background—is most often secondary or subservient to the foreground and middle ground figures—becomes a competitor with the figure. If there ever is a technological breakthrough where we can become invisible or “see-through.” Each visual element within the body of the figural model speaks to the potentials of future technological developments because transparency is impossible in our world today.

Phase two of my process uses some equipment to enhance and expedite my drawing process and color decisions, then the final painting I execute by hand. I layer my artwork by hand using thin glazes and calculated brushwork, adding what I hope is a

sensitive and spiritual element to the work. By applying the paint with a brush, textures are visible; colors show through colors and changes can be made quickly. I push and pull the figure's opacity until it is in harmony with the rest of the painting. Each piece is different, so the modeling within the figure changes depending on the ground and the overall composition. In some of my work, I have felt that there is no need for any visual information outside the outline of the model, so the area is a fill of color.

The technology tools I use include digital devices, computer hardware and software, artificial lighting, and mannequins. As my work progresses, the idea of the figure-ground inversion becomes more refined and streamlined. The planning and preparatory stage also involves projection, digital photography, and image-editing software for composition and reference. I project multiple images onto the person, then photograph each scene in different lighting scenarios and compositions. Illuminating different scenes and subject matters upon the models creates a new way of looking at the human figure, then I scan and select the images and manipulate the chosen composition.

My first task at hand is to gather images coinciding with the model. Source material selection starts from an imaginary visual process in my life. Image ideas become source material via photography excursions that I take myself in addition to seeking other found sources. I find models from acquaintances, figure drawing classes, and random events. Model selection is important because the person has to fit my idea and pose according to the image projected on them. I set up my studio and test the projected images on a mannequin to judge image quality and illumination properties. According to the personality, physical appearance, and hobbies of the models, both male and female,

I pair the photographs with the model. Other projected images are randomly selected, based on color and design.

Once the model arrives, I cast the selected images upon the model in different poses against an all-white background. While I coach the figure model through various postures and encourage him or her to interact with the scene, I capture the occurrence with a digital camera. The performer remains entirely still for a series of nine total shots. I shoot multiple shots of each position in various file formats and camera settings because the variation between each shot has subtle differences that will be important when editing. In the infancy of this project, the shots were a failure, because of an outdated camera and projector, but after time, the shots are a success. The newest digital technology permits me to capture the projected scene in many forms and to solve lighting and resolution quality problems.

After the photo shoot, I download the images onto a computer, carefully review the shots in a thumbnail format, and decide which ones are the standouts. I separate the outstanding representations and edit those by use of the layers palette and color management tools. If necessary, the figure is outlined at high magnification and dropped onto the top of the projection source material. The ground outside the figure is reduced in transparency if the ground inside the figure is competing with the form. I control and correct the color and quality by monochromatic solutions if the composition requires it. I edit the background from full color to one color plus black and white to make the model more visible. The image editing software minimizes the timeline of the design and layout by letting me make corrections promptly and precisely.

When I paint, I follow both classical and modern painting techniques. The conventional methods include oil paint, underpainting, glazing, and brush loading. The modern elements are acrylic paint, retarders and varnishes, airbrush, exaggerated color underpainting, and topcoat. I decide on the size of the canvas depending on image quality and composition, as well as whether the painting works best big or small. I stretch the canvas on stretcher bars and gesso the surface with bold brush strokes to add texture.

I make or use gallery-wrapped canvases, because the stretcher bars are sturdier, making the work protrude from the wall. I then transfer the painting compositions to the canvas with a charcoal pencil, Sharpie marker, or India ink pen. To keep the colored basecoat layer from covering up the drawing, I render the composition with black India ink pen. The ink lines are slightly visible depending on how transparent the paint is; this technique saves me from sketching the outlines twice and creates bold contours. Beginning with flat color or gray canvas establishes the mid-tone and unifies the painting. I work in acrylic because of the quick drying characteristics and excellent color quality. I control the drying time by the choice of acrylic mediums that either speed up or slow down workability. The heavy body acrylics give me the ability to work thick, and the fluid acrylics give me the capacity to work thin, and even spray the media through the airbrush. My drawings are on board or heavyweight gray Canson paper, and I use white and black charcoal and sometimes include washes of black acrylic to render them.

Once the underpainting and drawing are complete, I start with the darks and establish the value of the piece. My color palette has two of each primary along with an assortment of browns and some additional pre-mixed colors to enhance the image. I often blend my secondary colors, instead of buying them, and the paintings become

unified. If there is a sky, I coat this space first, and later on, the completed areas will cover the accidental drips below. To create depth, I paint the sky in layers of slightly analogous blues; this method allows the underpainting to peep through. The procedure creates a sense of depth and beauty: color visible through other color. Toward the horizon line of the composition, I apply the paint more thickly, following the traditional rule of “thin in the darks and thick in the lights.” If the sky appears within the figure, I paint the color through the figure’s outline and apply the hue slightly darker in the shadow parts of the form. I create a new alternative skin tone; my shading within the figure is different from traditional techniques since the flesh tone mixture has a layer of the projected image.

The manner in which I render the objects begins loosely and becomes more precise, contingent upon the detail desired. The shapes contained by the figure grow blurred and distorted, wrapping around the framework of the head and body. I portray the eyes with exceptional detail because I see them as an interface to the spirit of the model. According to Christian beliefs, “The eye is the lamp of the body. You draw light into your body through your eyes, and light shines out to the world through your eyes. So if your eye is well and shows you what is true, then your whole body will be filled with light.”²¹ This theological premise captures how I see the eyes of my figures. If I want the individual to be more important than the ground, then I apply a lighter ground tone in the outside spaces.

²¹ Book of Matthew, *Holy Bible, New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 1448.

The model-performer's physique casts a shadow on the wall when photographed. Painting the cast shadow of the model's body adds a modern element to my work and reveals that the figure is in front and not part of the original scene. The shadow tells the viewer that the model has a projected image on his or her body. The color of the silhouette is dark-blue-brown, so I alter and enhance the shadow. I use different types of brushwork depending on the texture desired. If the piece includes a sky, I apply the paint, using horizontal, crosshatching, and curved strokes. My brush direction follows the form, which adds volume to the objects, for example in vegetation I use vertical strokes. I paint the objects in the same order that they appear in the scene: back to front. I render forms in the distance first, and closer objects last, the colors are layered until the object seems to be three-dimensional. Towards the end of the painting process, I switch to oil. Oil allows me to blur and blend the sections that need more modeling. If the edge quality is too hard, I soften it with bands of graduated color. Finishing the painting, I clearcoat the painting for protection and increased color saturation.

The use of these techniques is critical for me in achieving a figure-ground inversion painting. Using digital photography to solve lighting and the image-capturing process is vital to the success of this thesis investigation. Projecting an image on the model generates a slight wrapping distortion that makes the view more interesting. Computer software programs, such as Photoshop and Lightroom, allows me to experiment with different opacities between the ratio of figure and ground and size them more efficiently. Rendering convincing textures and surfaces are necessary to pull off the illusion that the secondary image is part of the human physique in the final painting.

CHAPTER IV.

SANTA APHRODITE

In *Santa Aphrodite* (fig. 6), I combine a Neo-Gothic building and the female figure. I derive the title from “Santa” meaning “Saint” as in *Santa Fe*, and “Aphrodite” meaning “Goddess of Love” in the Ancient Greek Pantheon. I captured this balance through the youthful and curvaceous female nude portrayed for the body. Combining architecture with the curves of the female body is an experiment merging the figure with form and function. The building I chose is, in my opinion, the greatest building in Amarillo, *The Santa Fe*, build by E. A. Harrison in 1930. Arched and square windows, modern lines, and cathedral towers are fascinating for me when they intertwine with the feminine frame. In order to match up the perspective of the building and the figure, I chose three-point perspective from a worm’s eye view taken from the ground level of structure and figure. I added Gothic towers to her jaw-line and windows to her neck. This view enhances the monumentality of the figure-ground inversion. By using identical lighting techniques on both the female and building, the work becomes unified. In the design phase, I elected to use image editing software as a stand-alone design tool on the first piece of the series.

I desaturated the pictures and made them black and white. I sliced a photo of the Santa Fe building into vertical and horizontal strips and cut the corners off and warped them around the breasts; then I wrapped the rounded corners around the breast forms. I wrapped the pieces around the bends of her anatomy and cloned them to make her figure seamless. I used transparent layers to adjust the opacity desired between both the

building's details and the shading features of her physique, while the straight lines of the historic building become curved. After the vertical design is complete, I grid off a gray board in light graphite and drew the composition. The grisaille technique establishes mid-tones and cuts down on the process timeline along with adding depth.

I implemented multiple medias on this particular piece--white and black charcoal, bone black and titanium white acrylic washes, along with some airbrush. The choice of black and white is an excellent introduction to my figure-ground inversion investigation. I rendered the windows in charcoal pencil and translucent gray washes, then added highlights with titanium white acrylic and charcoal pencil. To produce an upward movement, I added the Neo-Gothic towers and arched windows to the head. For a subtle suggestion of a sky, I masked off and cut out the structure with frisket film and airbrushed the sky in a gradient from dark to light. The subtle nuances that the airbrush provides create a perfect fade. To model the feminine form flawlessly, I airbrushed highlights of transparent white. This piece is my introductory study of a figure-ground inversion, and it reveals how I can create an optical illusion through fusing architecture and the female physique.

I made *Santa Aphrodite* to juxtapose structural perspective and the organic female form. The straight lines of the building merge with the soft curves of the female anatomy, and the building becomes alive. I overlap man-made construction with a human shape and, in so doing, that the human-made and the natural worlds are not so discretely different.



Santa Aphrodite

Acrylic and Charcoal on Board

33" x 43"

figure 6

CHAPTER V.

GODDESS OF THE FAIRY CHIMNEY

In this work, I continued the theme of Amarillo-area landmarks as my subject matter with which to blend the human form, but this time, it was a natural landmark instead of a building. I chose to project shots of Palo Duro Canyon onto the model's body. I selected a female named, Lauren, who I drew many times before in figure drawing class. She is a dancer and has a very classical anatomical figure—making her body appear more like a Greek statue than a real woman. For this photo shoot, she wore a white bodysuit because I thought the projection showed up better on white than on flesh tone. During the shoot, I told Lauren to pose in various positions, sometimes interacting with the geological rock formations.

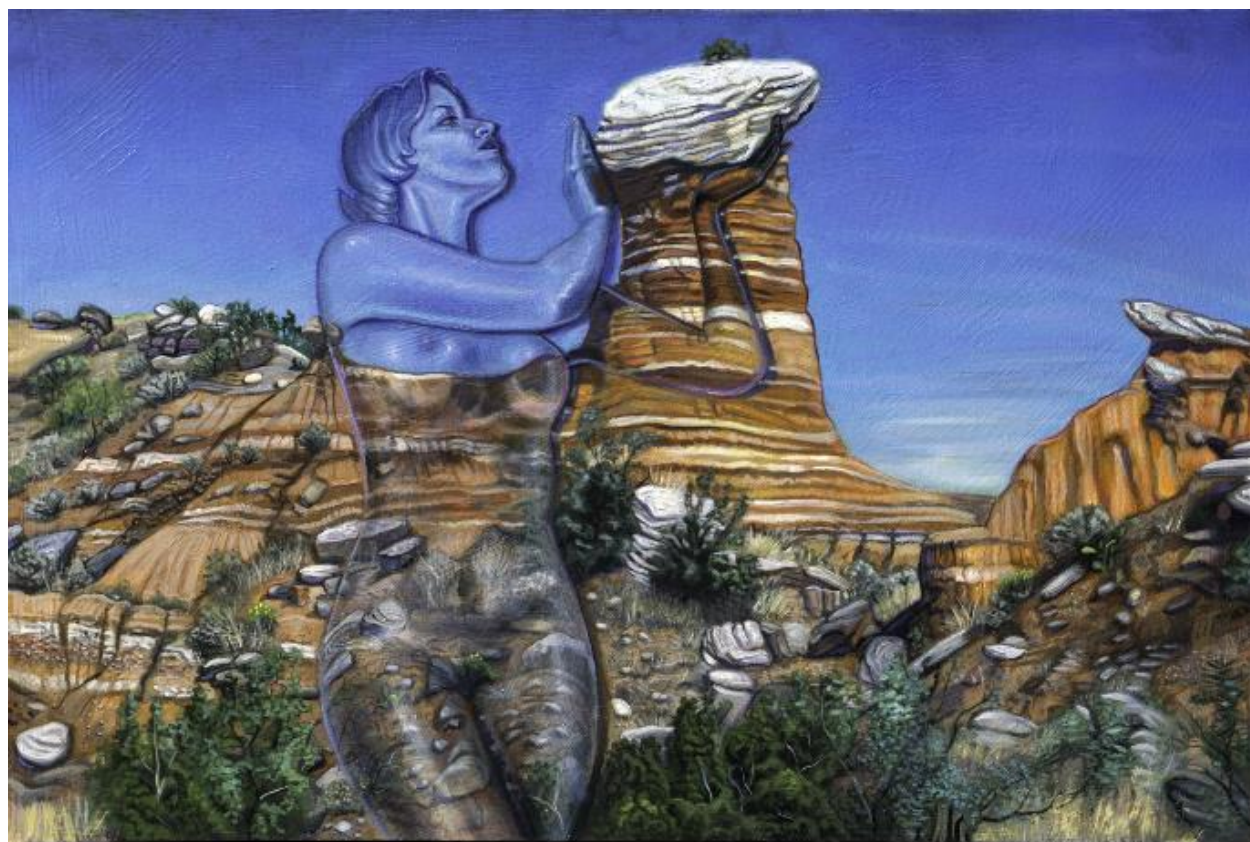
After viewing the photos, I'm not pleased with the outcome of the shots, because I use an old projector and camera, and the shots are grainy. I decided to go ahead and try making a painting from the shoot. There is one decent vertical shot that forms a narrative of Lauren interacting with a hoodoo in Palo Duro Canyon. A hoodoo is a rock formation that protrudes upward and is very unusual looking. To obtain unrecognizable shots of Palo Duro Canyon, I mountain biked about 5 miles back in the canyon and shot all along the ride. I came upon one scene that was exquisite, where the layers of Spanish skirts were in the bright spectrum of red, orange, yellow and everything in between. I decide to use this shot in the painting.

I gathered all the pictures of this mysterious hoodoo and arranged a shoot with Lauren. I shined a slightly vertical shot of the fairy chimney onto Lauren's physique. The hoodoo's name is apparently unknown. It's a huge white rock perfectly balanced on a striated tower. I coached Lauren to reach up and gently hold the white stone. After I edit the shot, the ground within the figure's body is blurry, but the content is fantastic and mysterious. By referring to the reference shot of the hoodoo, I added the information needed for the painting to make her body look transparent.

I painted loosely at first, then adding detail in the canyon and rocks. The painting has several geological elements, like trees, and rock formations which require these details. The features on Lauren are hardly visible, so I made up most of the lighting. The ground inside the figure is blurry also, so I use the original image as source material. The bodysuit idea was ultimately a failure because the face and hands are a different color than the rest of the body, so I adjusted the flesh tone accordingly. I worked on the piece for several months. The lessons learned from this project are important; I discovered that I needed to update the camera and projector to solve the issue of low resolution and blurriness.

I came up with the title, *Goddess of the Fairy Chimney* (fig. 7), because Lauren looks like she is taking care of this particular hoodoo in Palo Duro Canyon. She represents a kind of mother earth figure of nurturing beauty, and her integration with the landscape demonstrates how the female physique can be read as a landscape too. This figure-ground inversion of Lauren with the canyon points to humanity's responsibility to care for and preserve the planet. Moreover, in contrast with Saint Aphrodite, the human and natural elements have been reversed; rather than a natural element of a woman's

body being merged with a human-made building, this work has the human body merging with a naturally occurring landform. This reversal serves to complicate our notions, once again, of the distinct categories of human and natural. In my work they overlap and intersect in ways that I see getting to the reality of their close and intertwined relationships where their unique components become impossible to separate from one another.



Goddess of the Fairy Chimney

figure 7

Oil over Acrylic

24" x 36"

CHAPTER V1.

MAIDENLY CAVERN

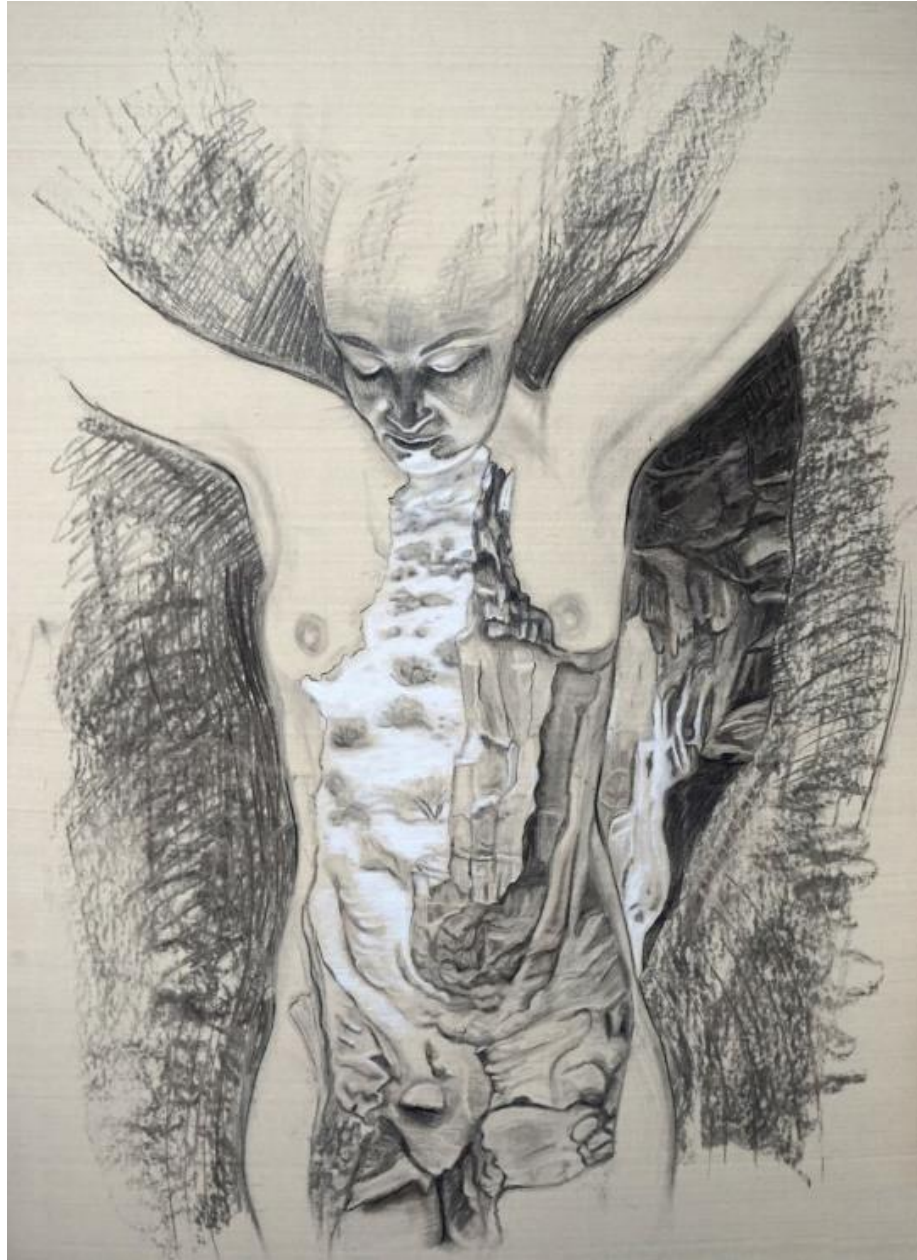
To explore more options of inverting the figure with grounds that draw from local Amarillo-area attractions both human-made and natural, I produced Maidenly Cavern (fig 8). In this work, I project shots of a popular Palo Duro Canyon cave onto a female torso. I chose to forego the white bodysuit in my process here and went with the nude body itself. To get source material from the interior of the cave, I hiked up to the cave's top hole, climbed down and shot the cave from the inside out. I used a new higher resolution camera, and the shots show significant improvements.

The shots from the inside of the cave looking out are interesting, and I decided to project them onto a model named Amberley. To have a clear projection image, I set up my studio space with care this time. I patched the backdrop wall and painted it with a fresh coat of white. I used a new projector that illuminates a clearer image on the wall and covered the table with a white drop cloth. I instructed Amberley to strike different poses, both standing and sitting. Amberley is a burlesque dancer, so her improvisational skills help tremendously. I lined up the cave projection, so it looks like a hole is in Amberley's body that creeps up onto her chin, and I take a series of photos. Her arms are outstretched as if she's inviting the rocks of the cavern to enter. The inside of the

subterranean cavity is black, so the only lighted area is the canyon floor looking out along with the entrance.

One frame stands out from the rest and looks best in black and white because of the void of color. I wanted to have a beautiful charcoal drawing in my show, so I found a cream colored matte board and lightly sketched the composition. I rendered the drawing and let the background conclude with unrestricted mark making. I made free strokes, and try not to over-sketch specific areas and use bold and thin lines to represent the form with fat pieces of charcoal. I applied white chalk to accent the light surface of the sandy canyon and tips of the bushes. This drawing is a deviation from my painting because of the expressive lines. Capturing the whole scene of a picture on a model with a better machine paid off.

I named the piece, *Maidenly Cavern* because the inside of the cave seemed like the internal organs of Amberlee's body. The figure-ground inversion of her torso looks like a cut-away of a cadaver that has a geological rock formation inside. The loose drawing technique works well with the figure-ground transfer because charcoal is part of nature and has the same rawness as the cave.



Maidenly Cavern

figure 8

Charcoal on Board

49" x 36"

CHAPTER VII.

EMBODIMENT OF THE FISK

Embodiment of the Fisk (fig. 9) continues my figure-ground research in the context of an urban landscape on female model's body. Instead of the ground fitting perfectly within the form, like *Santa Aphrodite*, the background is on the inside and outside of her feminine shape in the beginning, though the composition changes later on in the painting. To further the potential of fusing the figure and the ground, I cast images of downtown Amarillo onto the body. I asked a woman by the name of Michelle, whom I had met at an art show at Sunset Center, to model for me. I went to the downtown area of Amarillo and shot images from all different angles. One building that I capture is the Fisk Building. In 1926, Charles Fisk commissioned architect Guy A. Carlander to design the original Fisk Medical and Professional Building located at 724 South Polk Street in Amarillo, Texas. The eleven-story historic building is now the Marriot Courtyard Hotel. The design has a Gothic Revival façade with cast gargoyle decorations and towers and a visually modern core. Opened in 1928, Amarillo Bank and Trust Company occupied the structure's ground floor; it cost almost one million dollars to build.²²

²² Information was taken from the Texas State Historical Marker at the Fisk Building, 724 Polk Street, Amarillo, Texas, 1927.

Next, back in my studio, I took multiple frames of different lighting scenarios with depictions of Polk Street in Amarillo illuminated on the model. I selected images from a previous shoot taken months earlier. I captured one frame with the projection in total darkness, then one with the light directed on Michelle. The additional shots help me see more visual information and allow me to push and pull the modeling on her body with the street scene. For example, if at first, the shading on her leg isn't visible, then with a light source turned on, the shape is evident. Michelle posed in all types of positions—sitting, standing and lying down. My coaching skills for model positioning now seemed more effortless. The performance in the studio between myself as the artist and the model as my collaborator emerges in dialogue in a way that enhances my work. I downloaded and viewed the images on my computer, and the results are even better after this shoot.

The finest shot of Michelle is her staring at the camera, sitting with arms and legs crossed, with Polk Street and the Fisk Building projected on her. A massive cast silhouette is on the wall behind her; there is an absence of her fingers in the shadow, so I add them. I started the painting by transferring the image vertically to the canvas. I used India ink pen and went over all the lines that I don't want to lose. I covered the canvas with sap green because I think the hue will best play off the surface color the best. Following the source material, I painted *Embodiment of the Fisk* with acrylic via thin layers including the background. I embellished the colors and focused in on the focal point of Michelle's face. Her facial position is at a point where the top of the buildings cut right through below her eyes like she is wearing a mask. For me, this adds important meaning, showing more of that human struggle to make sense of our identity within a complex world that tends to mask us beneath its expectations. Below Michelle's neck, I

portray rows of windows that create a geometric pattern, juxtaposing the curves of her arms and legs.

After critiquing the *Embodiment of the Fisk*, I decided to lose the space outside her body and paint over it with light pink. It was difficult covering all those hours of work, but sometimes I have to sacrifice part for the painting for a better composition. By challenging the figure-ground relationship, my research demonstrates that the inclusion of an urban landscape inside of the body of a figure, and with the removal of the image around the area of the model, fuses the figure itself into a new form. Michelle's body creates a narrative of a vision of Polk Street and the Fisk Building that connects her physically, visually, and emotionally to a regional cityscape. I title the piece *Embodiment of the Fisk* because Michelle is a re-invigoration of the historic building. Her body brings the brick building back to life, just as the building adds visual pattern and interest to the surface of her body.



Embodiment of the Fisk

figure 9

Acrylic on Canvas

20" x 30"

CHAPTER VIII.

STRAIGHT THROUGH THE HEART

With this work (fig. 10), I envisioned a rural highway on a male body. I wanted gender balance for my thesis work having both male and female models. So I asked Jimmy, one of the figure drawing models at WTAMU, to pose. I remember a photograph in my collection shows the perspective of an isolated road in Oklahoma. The shot has vehicles in the distance, a blue sky, and miles of open pastureland. Each side of the road has a row of telephone poles which add a linear perspective-based composition to the image. The photography session followed the same protocol as the previous ones. I had Jimmy use his drama and theater skills to react physically and emotionally to the picture projected on him. The highway scene rises upwards on his body, and he looks up with arms outstretched; I knew right away that this image was the one for my painting. The image required little editing before being ready for transfer.

The composition is horizontal and fits a 24" x 36" canvas entirely. This horizontality contrasts with the vertical composition of *Embodiment of the Fisk*, for instance, that shows the body in tandem with a skyscraper building. Here, through the broad expanses of the western landscape demanded horizontal perspective. I sketched the outlines of the forms in India ink and decided to cover the drawing with a blue-green wash. Billy's flesh tone takes on the colors of the landscape because of his light skin, so

the scene creates an illusion that he is transparent. I painted the sky with big and bold brush strokes in two layers and took advantage of the black outlined underdrawing. I gave extra attention and detail to the face and hands. Implementing the concept of atmospheric perspective, I painted the foreground and telephone poles more tightly defined up close and blurrier toward the horizon line. The angle of the road comes in from the left of the canvas, and the white line of the road's shoulder runs right through Billy's chest. The right-hand lane leads the viewer into the first focal point of the piece (the car) and then onto the second (Billy's face). On the highway, I practiced a toothbrush texture technique, with larger speckles in the front and small ones further off, creating the illusion of depth and atmospheric perspective.

The progress of the painting's execution is quickened because there is not a lot of detail on the ground inside and outside the form. By exploring different scenarios of my the figure-ground research, I realized that some of the pieces need a second ground, and others don't. If a painting is too busy and the figure gets lost, then additional visual information is not necessary. After a critique of the work, I decided that leaving the area outside Billy's physique in full color works wells. Another layer of perception in *Straight through the Heart*. Here I challenge the stereotypes that a womens body is necessarily more connected to nature, showing that the male figure equally as merged with the natural world. I made this painting because *Straight through the Heart* symbolizes the path Billy's on in his personal life and his search for a higher power.



Straight through the Heart

figure 5

Acrylic on Canvas

36" x 48"

CHAPTER IX.

CONTEMPLATIVE PERSPECTIVE

AND DAMA DEL PUENTE

Researching more potentials of the figure-ground exchange that is the focus on my thesis project, I took a trip to the Rio Grande Gorge in New Mexico. I had visited the bridge in the past and wanted to use it in this shoot. I spent three days in Taos and Santa Fe capturing image references. However, when I was there, the sky was overcast, and I'm disappointed. When I arrived at the bridge, I parked and got out of the vehicle and hike down, jump a fence, climb down some rocks, and take pictures. When I was there, the angle of the bridge's complex construction unfolded from a worm's eye view coming in from the east depicting a beautiful scene that blended and a human-made bridge, so I took a series of photos.

For this painting, I decided to use another model for the bridge projected images whom I had met in figure drawing class named Alina. She is tall and slender, so her body mirrors the very forms of the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge itself, when cast upon her body. The shoot was successful, and I made a series of excellent photographs. I had Alina leave her glasses on for some of the frames because they looked good paralleled with the beams and piers of the bridge within the portrait-ground inversion. The compound angles

of shafts across the portrait of her face add a mechanical component to Alina, and I decided to make two compositions.

I choose to render a head drawing with charcoal pencils on gray Canson paper. *Contemplative Perspective* (fig. 11) uses the gray of the paper to my advantage; I lightly sketched her expression and background structure on the mid-toned, slightly textured surface. I worked the darks first and then move onto the dark grays; the material choice establishes the middle shades. I improvised and rendered Alina's eyes more realistically because the bridge hides the details of her eyelids and lashes. At last, I applied the lights in white charcoal. The modeling of the vertical and angled bars outside the portrait are rendered with subtle, lighter tones to make Alina's face stand out. This piece is successful and works as an example of a figure-ground inversion executed as a portrait.

My research suggests that diluting the value of the actual ground makes the focal point stand out more. I named the piece, *Contemplative Perspective* because Alina exposes herself as a geometric construction. The robotic impression of her body in this work strikes me as an excellent narrative of the interconnections between the mechanical and the natural, of the bridge as object juxtaposed with her face as the form of a human being.

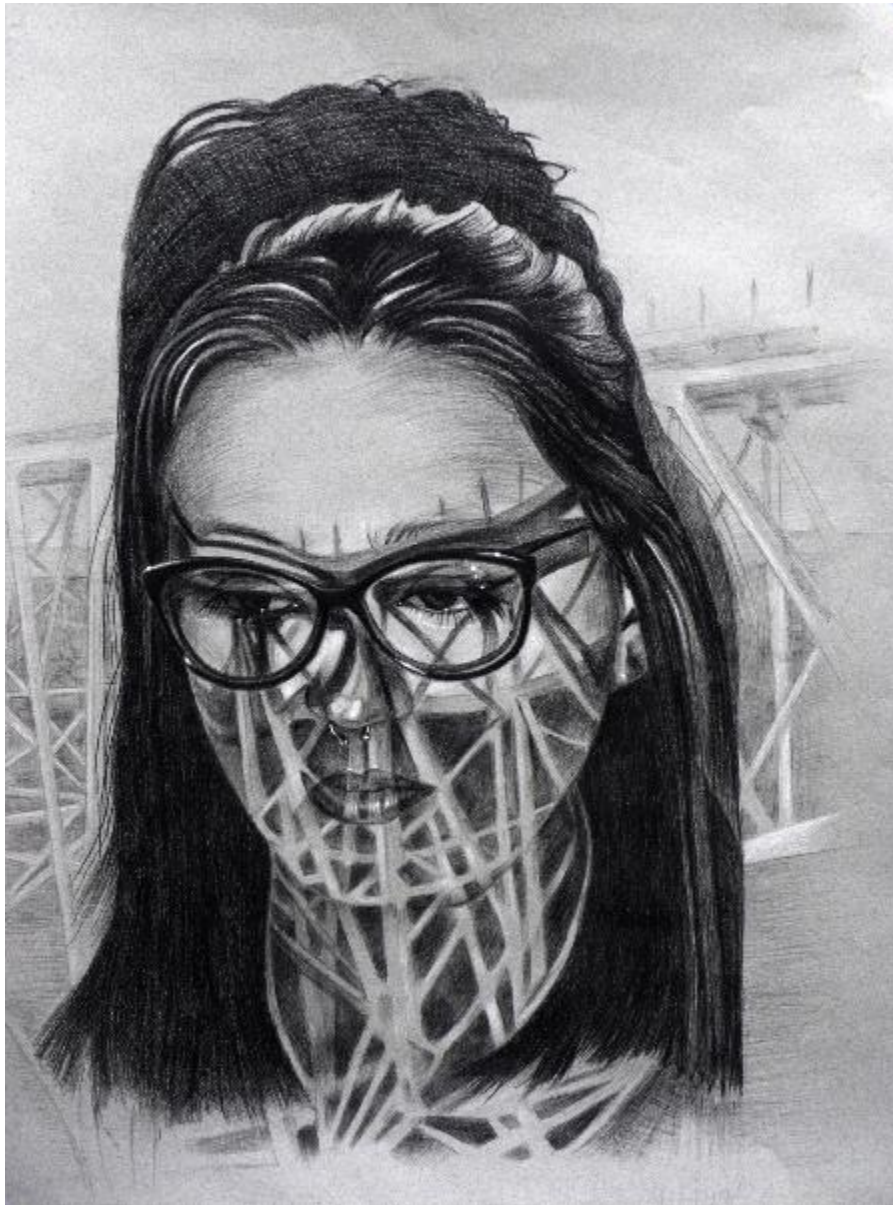
The second composition from this experience at the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge is a large square painting also of Alina called *Dama del Puente* (fig. 12). The outstanding shot came from her interacting with the sightseers on the bridge. The beams and piers of the bridge are covering her just below her nose. Coming in from the left, the angles and curves of the structure go diagonally across the canvas, moving the focal point directly into Alina and forming a balanced, complex composition. The horizon line cuts across

her cheek; Alina is sitting on the edge of the table with one leg dangling, and the other pulled up to her chest. The illusion in the painting I sought is of her sitting on the side of the cliff with the gorge behind her, and the scale of the image requires a large composition.

I stretched the linen canvas on six-by-six feet stretchers. I then drew the scene with a charcoal pencil and covered the canvas with a burnt umber wash of acrylic; the burnt umber wash establishes beautiful earth tones and unifies the painting. I applied bold color in the sky first with layers of ultramarine and cobalt blue and left the top loose, revealing my brushstrokes. I rendered Alina with a combination of skin tones by a mixture of the landscape along with the construction of the bridge on top of her body. I spent a concentrated amount of time on her face and hand, to capture the essence of her body blending with the conduit. I rendered the bridge with layer after layer of light violet, painting the foreground brighter then fading it to a cooler color. By cooling down all the colors in the distance, I completed the mountains and the background with a light blue-gray pigment and continued downward to the canyon walls, Rio Grande River, and far off objects using techniques of atmospheric perspective. There are hundreds of stones and scrubs that take me weeks to finish. I concluded the painting with the boulders and bushes of the foreground and fade them into the corners of the design. The vegetation and geological elements add texture, while nuances of light bounce off the ground. I worked on the painting for a total of four months.

The figure-ground transposition is successful in this work and demonstrates how architectural and natural shapes can marry with one another. In *Dama del Puente*, I wrapped Alina's body with steel beams to make her look mechanically juxtaposed to the

human touch of my painting and of her flesh, which coincides with the attention she shows the site seekers. The narrative suggests a giant Alina sitting on the edge of the cliff taking care of the bridge and its tiny human visitors.



Contemplative Perspective

figure 11

Charcoal on Canson Paper

25" x 32"



Dama del Puente

Figure 12

Acrylic over Oil

72" x 72"

CHAPTER X.

RE-CREATION

In *Re-Creation* (fig. 13), I explored my theme of figure-ground transposition through a different design technique. Instead of the ground contained within the body, the field here is more dominant, and the figure becomes part of the ground. I incorporated suggestions of a female physique into a landscape through color similarities and comparable shapes. I elected to use image editing software as a stand-alone design tool and thereby manipulated stock photography jpegs with color and texture techniques. By matching the curves and hands of a nude with the bends of grassy hills, the nude's body is infused with the countryside. I desaturated her skin and covered it with a transparent film of green. The value of the form is observable by adjusting the opacity of the layer above it.

I decided that a small panoramic composition works best for the painting and apply red acrylic over India ink pen for the underpainting. I painted the sky using cerulean blue fading the color from dark to light with titanium white and lemon yellow down to the horizon line. I layered the dark greens of the hills with lots of glazes, leaving little hints of the red underpainting. The complementary colors look best when the green is on top of the red. I painted the light greens more thickly and blended them into the hills and treetops. The belly and hands are covered in related brighter hues to match the scene.

With a rapid timeline, the brush strokes are quick and follow the form. The fingers and knuckles make interesting focal points because their shapes are different and more dramatic.

The illusion created in this figure-ground inversion looks like a standard landscape, but then by adding a female hand covering her breast, the perception is changed. The combination of a feminine shape and tree-covered rolling hills suggests a harmonious link between earth and humanity. *Re-creation (figure 8)* formulates a new figure-ground inversion which explains the title, as it also references the notion of procreation and reproduction on the part of nature and humanity.



Re-Creation

figure 13

Acrylic on Canvas

18" x 30"

CHAPTER XI.

POWERHOUSE WARRIOR

Powerhouse Warrior (fig. 14) investigates the figure-ground reversal in an alternative scheme. Instead of the ground contained within the body, the background is executed at twenty percent opacity and is monochromatic. I decided to cast an image related to this model in a more narrative context. The idea combines engine chrome with his head, chest, and arms. I choose my classmate, Shawn as a model who lives in a motorcycle culture. Shawn is ex-military and police, so his warrior nature is perfect for this painting. I gathered subject matter that relates to his personality and lifestyle, including biker imagery, and then I generated compositions with them on his physique.

The selected design is a motorcycle engine, chrome pipes, and frame unified with Shawn's torso. I cut out his outline and reduced the transparency to twenty percent in a photo-altering computer program. The goal for the background reduction was to make Shawn's figure more dominant, and his face is better suited for the focal point. I used one of the non-projected studio shots to retrieve more detail and features of his facial expression.

A horizontal canvas works best for the composition, and I use gray acrylic over India ink pen for the underpainting. I layered cool and warm flesh colors on his head and switched to violets and blues for the modeling of the pipes covering his arms. Bold and

cool blueish gray brush strokes coat the rest of the motorcycle's mechanical components outside the silhouette of his body, and dark shadows anchor his torso to the canvas. The exaggerated contrast and reflections of the chrome make his body jump off the surface. I detailed Shawn's facial features and beard which captured the mood of his personality. By painting the space outside him lighter and diluting the value of the actual ground, Shawn's torso jumps off the canvas.

Combining a shiny human-machine mechanism with the figure instead of natural shapes adds a mechanical element to this figure-ground inversion and creates a narrative that blends the living personality of Shawn with broader themes of masculinity. *Powerhouse Warrior's* figure-ground reversal tells the story about a man and his machine; instead of Shawn riding the motorcycle or standing beside it, the bike is part of him.



Powerhouse Warrior

figure 14

Acrylic on Canvas

24" x 30"

CHAPTER XII.

SLICE OF BEING

With this work, I decided to go a different route and made a life-size sculpture called *Slice of Being* (fig. 15). Creating a piece in a three-dimensional media is challenging for me because I've only been working this way for a short time. I constructed a female head and torso out of clay then make a mold out of plaster. I create a positive out of the mold and project a slide show onto the female figure sculpture during my M.F.A. show.

I started by building an armature with PVC pipe and mounted it to a piece of wood. The PVC pipe represents the skeleton and helps stabilize the form. I carved foam and build the skull and facial muscles. I build up the neck, shoulders and chest cavity with wood, foam, and Ducktape. I constructed the breasts, stomach and back forming the muscles of the female body and cover the foam with more Ducktape for solidity. I rolled out slabs of clay and sculpted the head and torso, slowly building up the surface, then detail the face, ears, and hair.

The second phase of the project is to make a mold out of plaster. I cut strips of galvanized metal and divide her figure into eight pieces posteriorly and anteriorly, pressing them into the clay. Dividing the work into sections allows the shell to come apart more quickly without breaking. I mixed up batches of plaster and slowly coat the

head and torso and build the material up to the height of the flashing. The process takes thirteen hours. I submerged the artwork in a trashcan full of water until the fragmentation process is complete, then dumped the form and the water out. I pulled the strips out and separate the portions, and the form comes out perfect. It is cleaned and ready for more clay.

I wanted a hollow sculpture, because when viewed from the inside *Slice of Being* will be visible. I pressed the clay into the mold and piece the figure together. The mud kept collapsing in on itself, so I decided to use a more structurally sound material. I pushed a new epoxy substance into the negative and let it dry, then peel the face and body pieces out of the mold. I put the pieces back together with more material and grind away the seams. I sanded and carved all the detail back into the face and mounted the head back onto the neck with metal pins and more epoxy material. I elected to get rid of the back of the figure and balance the artwork, so it stands up by itself.

Slice of Being is the head, and torso, a hollow, beautiful flowing feminine shape. I left the piece the color of the material, which is off-white because the purity of the material will enhance the projection. I presented the sculpture on a white pedestal up against the wall and project a series of images from sessions with the live models. I named the piece *Slice of Being* because the sculpture is not dense and the balanced torso looks like it is sliced open. I created the piece to demonstrate how the process of the figure-ground inversion works in a three-dimensional space.



Slice of Being

figure 10

Synthetic Clay and Digital

28" x 12" x 17"

CHAPTER XIII.

PSYCHE DOMINATION

Psyche Domination (fig. 16) is a double figure-ground inversion. There is a connection between the female figure and the projected image, so my idea was to have a binary figure-ground inversion. The double figure-ground flip means I intertwined the two figures with each other; one is human, and the other is an insect. I chose a woman by the name of Alexandria, who is a student at West Texas A&M University. I envisioned a butterfly as the insect and tell Alexandria to pose in various positions and engage with the images on her body. The anthropomorphic implication of a butterfly being an object of beauty fits nicely with the female form.

I projected different butterflies on Alex. As I adjusted The Old World Swallowtail butterfly around on her body, the insects head appears in her mouth. I snapped a series of photos and reviewed them. The anthropoid on Alexandria's lips with its wings spread over her body is an interesting composition. She wore a bikini during the session, and I edited the top out of the chosen image using image editing software. I made her breasts look as if the Swallowtail wings are covering them like lingerie.

I executed this detailed design on a 48" x 60" canvas and started with a Pyrrole Red underpainting over India ink pen. Her nose and mouth are unrecognizable, so I drew in the details and started painting on her face. I can't make out Alexandra's facial detail

in the “projection only” shot, but the “light on” shot helps with distinguishing features. When her face is complete except for the eyes, the red from the underpainting adds a mysterious look to her, so I modeled them in that color. I filled in the wings and rest of the butterfly with glazes of yellow and black and paint space outside the butterfly with various shades of green using a vignette technique on the corners.

Psyche Domination is one of my favorites in my M.F.A. show because the big bold areas of color and value create harmonious simplicity. The double figure-ground inversion works well for the reason that the second overlapping figure establishes a narrative, which is that Alexandria is being controlled and hypnotized by the image of the butterfly.



Psyche Domination

figure 11

Oil over Acrylic

48" x 60"

CHAPTER XIV.

CONCLUSION

My investigation of a figure-ground inversion in painting brings together traditional painting methods with new digital technology to show the tensions between focus and ground, object and subject, humanity and nature. My paintings all focus on a figural form, but one appears transparent, as it simultaneously registers as foreground object and background space. For example in *Psyche Domination* (fig. 16) her skin has a hard time competing with colors of the cast image, so if I cross the female figure with a beautiful insect, her skin becomes the color of the insect. Painting from a digitally manipulated image is hard because the colors overlap and are difficult to mix. I have to layer the paintings in the order shapes appear within the scene. It's easier to paint the figure first in some pieces and then glaze over the desired color instead of applying the color directly.

When the projected image becomes integrated with the figural character, whose form comes from my studio sessions with living models whom I work with, interview and learn about as humans, the figure and ground become one both visually and symbolically. My models are asked to perform posed based on the image projected onto their bodies. This collaboration between myself as the artist and my models as performers adds layers of meaning to my works. The casting of a secondary object onto the human

body generates a unified image in which two things become one. In my investigation of the double figure-ground inversion, two images conjoin within the composition. When I combine the model with a second shape, the new image has a brand new focal point. Throughout my exploration, the models appear to be a cross between reality and fantasy. The finished piece is perplexing and makes the viewer question what he or she is seeing. By exploring altered compositions of my figure-ground research, some of the artwork needs a second ground, and other pieces do not. In some of the work, leaving the background blank makes more unified and balanced.

Throughout this research, I wanted my process and technique to dominate the content. The order in which the stages are carried out is crucial to the success of the work. The narrative created by the figure-ground inversion is a result of what kind of image I project on the human physique, and what actions and poses my models perform in light of the projections. The uniting of these two factors reveals a new way that the human form, the “person” is perceived. When I layer the human being with different objects using digital transparency technology, the outcome creates additional narratives. This visual description is different than if the figure was in front of the object. The projection of the background image on and around the body creates a new form, and this wrapping gives the individual an entirely new uniqueness. For example, in *Powerhouse Warrior* (fig. 9), the two entities become one, and the new form is an integration of an amalgamated anatomy. The man is part machine, or the machine is a part of the man. This effect also depends on where I place the source image on the face. Our connection as viewers and humans with the face of the figure is what gives the work more of a relatable and empathetic human touch.

In conclusion, my investigation of the figure-ground inversion clarifies that unifying two levels of painting—the foreground figures and the background setting—has helped me build a groundbreaking avenue for the direction of my work. My examination creates a cohesive body of work that makes a statement about how we perceive ourselves as human beings. With figurative imagery being a fundamental element of my paintings and drawings, my research provides a new way to see the human physique and psyche. My work portrays humans as part of new environments, fantasies, and realities. The models end up behaving in ways that inspired my paintings, allowing their humanity to be incorporated into my works. I allow them to express how they react to certain situations, and then I respond to that action. My combination of projected images and figures of living models challenges the meaning of traditional figure painting. Surroundings dictate a person's behavior and influence the senses. Instead of the models just visiting the places directly, my paintings create the illusion of them being an intricate part of the scene through the use of digital projection in the studio. Rather than their bodies existing within the scene or place, their bodies become one with the setting I choose. The content of my thesis is the human figure crossed with different images and the beauty and mystery the two create. I merge the two because the results offer interesting interpretations of how humans and their environment can work together.

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