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Oil Painting, a Practice of Mind and Body

By
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Abstract

How does painting situate itself as an act of resistance to our visual bombardment of the human body, which is primarily transmitted through digital media? This paper explores the possibility of paint acting as a bridge to allow closer examination of the conflict that emerges between a person’s desire to avoid death, nowadays manifested through digital media obsessions, and the body’s ultimate bondage to death. My research does not propose that art is a means towards transcendence, but rather the opposite; that painting invites the mind to contemplate the body as it exists and confront the disturbing, but ultimate reality of our mortal fate. I also include parallels between digital media’s omnipotence and the Catholic supremacy of the spirit over flesh; this concept directly parallels the duality that digital mediation situates itself in. In both religious (scorning the body/flesh) and digital cases (glorifying an unattainable, Western standard of beauty), the imperfect body that virtually all people carry around is rejected.

Painting, as opposed to simulated image generating practices such as Photoshop, allows an action in which the mind and body act in psychosomatic synchronization that parallels the possibilities and limitations of the world in which we reside. Through this paper, I document my personal growth resulting from this tactile creativity by describing similarities between the content of my former paintings with the sexist and racist content of eighteenth-century Western paintings, and my ultimate victory in breaking the male gaze stereotype as a direct result of painting mixed with critical theory study.
1. Introduction

I am a white, male artist and as such, have a certain responsibility to resist and expose the male gaze. Even if unconsciously, white men indoctrinate the male gaze, while conversely are its privileged owners with the authority to dismantle it. In this paper, I first outline how the mindset behind the male gaze, which dominated Western painting up until the twentieth century, transformed into a digitally-marketed ‘hegemonic masculine’ well into the twenty-first century, all the while borrowing visual motifs, racial compositions, and gender stereotypical figuration initially utilized by Western painters.

The paper goes on to describe the intensity and completeness in which the hegemonic masculine influenced my personal art-making practice. Utilizing Heideggan and Deleuzian thought, I make a case for painting by proposing that the haptic nature of oil paint makes the materiality of the painted image relatable to one’s own flesh and blood and shakes off those parts of the identity that are informed by Platonic spiritual idealism, made manifest through digital media and the entertainment industry.

2. The Hegemonic Masculine

White men, of which I am one, are the primary proponents of hegemonic masculinity. The concept of hegemonic masculinity was formulated a quarter of a century ago by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell to refer to the traits that various cultures ascribe to ‘real men’. It sets apart ‘real men’ from women and all other men, justifying all men to generally be in a position of domination over women. In addition, hegemonic masculinity also emphasizes the superiority of ‘manly’ men over the ‘not-so-manly’ men. It embodies the currently most honored way of being a man, it requires all other men to
position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimizes the global subordination of women to men (Connell and Messerschmidt 832).¹

In his analysis of gender in advertising, Steve Craig argues that women tend to be presented as “rewards” for men who choose the right product. He describes such commercials as “narratives of playful escapades away from home and family” (Craig 88). They operate, he says, at the level of fantasy—presenting idealized portrayals of men and women. When he focused specifically on beer commercials (Fig. 1), Craig found that the men were invariably “virile, slim and white”—and the women always “eager for male companionship” (Craig 89). Like many advertisements, the Most Interesting Man in the World commercial for Dos Equis beer markets the hegemonic masculine, not by displaying a man’s unique abilities and exciting escapades, but by displaying how women react to his unique abilities and exciting escapades.

¹ While hegemonic masculinity’s legitimacy is, in part, grounded in complex cultural and biological realities, the representation of hegemonic masculinity is entirely exploited for marketing purposes, consistently exploiting and broadening male anxiety and self-image such that vulnerability, inconclusiveness and gentleness are construed as weakness, implying a non-masculine, or simply, non-man state.
Fig. 1. Dos Equis beer commercial: *Most Interesting Man in the World*. 2015.

Fig. 2. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Jupiter and Thetis*, 1811, Oil on canvas, 136x101 inches.
According to MediaSmarts, a Canadian non-profit organization designed to explain digital and media literacy, the common image men project of themselves on social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram echoes the media’s representation of masculinity, where male characters are rewarded for “self-control and the control of others, aggression and violence, financial independence, and physical desirability” ("MediaSmarts"). These characteristics of self-control and the control of others, aggression and violence are pumped into leading male roles, in particular the Western fighter/hero archetype.

In his influential book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said’s analysis reveals how Middle Eastern societies were stereotypically depicted by European experts to delight the Western imagination while reducing the humanity of those whom that imagination fed on. Delighting the Western imagination may no longer rely predominantly on painting, but the formula for exciting the Western imagination (which is essentially the hegemonic masculine hero against the uncivilized, barbaric other) is prevalent to this day. The initial gladiator fight scene from the blockbuster movie, *Gladiator* (2000) (Fig. 2), was in fact taken right out of a nineteenth century oriental Gérôme painting (Fig. 3).²

² Producers showed the director Ridley Scott a copy of Jean-Léon Gérôme's' 1872 painting ‘Pollice Verso’, which depicted a gladiator awaiting the judgment of his fight by a coliseum crowd, who would move their thumbs depending on whether they believed a gladiator should live or die based on his performance. (“Pollice verso” is Latin for “with a turned thumb.”) "That image spoke to me of the Roman Empire in all its glory and wickedness," Scott said of the painting. "I knew right then and there I was hooked." (“Pollice Verso (Gérôme)”).
Fig. 3. Jean-Léon Gérôme. Pollice Verso, 1872, Oil on canvas.

Fig. 4. Gladiator, Scene, 2000.
The American movie industry is a key player feeding the endless stream of violent male heroes into global culture (Katz 261). As the hegemonic masculine persona continues to dominate new media and entertainment, it will increasingly provide male viewers with a certain amount of security by marketing packaged and ready-to-consume clichéd male identities (Kareithi).

3. The Male Gaze, of Which I am the Worst

During my MFA studies at LUCAD, I allowed my critical and intense daily research to take the reigns over sentimentality and my vague, poorly informed sense of social awareness. It was at this time that I read Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. Much to my surprise, I was able to trace many of the problematic qualities of the historical male gaze onto my own artistic practice. Mulvey utilized new vocabulary and concepts introduced by psychoanalysis to drive home her points on scopophilia and the unconscious fear of castration that casts women into an ontology of lack (Mulvey). Her article also coined the term ‘male gaze’, which is slightly outdated now in regards to the diverse and complex arena of twenty-first-century gazing. For this reason, I outline the hegemonic masculine as the contemporary arena for dissecting the reinvented spirit of the male gaze.

While the influence of the hegemonic masculine can be excavated from all my former work, there are three paintings in particular that truly capture how entrenched the twenty-first-century white, male gaze was in my own creative practice. First, there is Dinner on Thursday (2014) (Fig. 5), which I painted during my time as a seminarian at Holy Cross Hellenic College. I described it to my rather insular Greek Orthodox
colleagues as a contemporary platform for *neutrality* and *humanitarianism*, which was met with praise and admiration. A few years prior to enrolling at Holy Cross, I was living in NYC, young, poor, and full of angst. In order to endure, and justify, my harsh realities, I decided to mentally mold heroic figures to look up to, believe in, and excite me. *Pancho* (2012) (Fig. 7) portrays the excitement and prestige of the enduring fighter, projecting my conception of heroism onto the Mexican Revolutionary fighter Pancho Villa, a figure whom I had no cultural ties with nor any sort of vested interest other than that I liked his *look*. Also during my artistic, angst ridden years in NYC, I was equally vexed by my severely lacking romantic life. As a result, my painting *Yellow Dress Yellow Hair* (2012) (Fig. 9) hugs the female body with an alarming pile of anxiety, ghastly paint rendering, and lifeless eyes. The figure is more thing than human, save a glamorous gold dress and voluptuous yellow hair. I was in fact the twenty-first century poster child of the male gaze but I knew it not.

*Dinner on Thursday* is a recreation of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. Through substituting the twelve apostles with modern day iconic figures, but keeping Jesus as the central figure, the work responds to the biblical command to ‘make disciples of all nations’. The cultural and political multiplicity of the figures depicted in *Dinner on Thursday* suggests the impracticality of such a gathering, alluding to the Western propensity for colonialism. It is crucial to emphasize my intentional preservation of the figure of Jesus as central to the painting’s narrative. This arrangement contradicts my intention of neutrality, as the inclusion of Jesus funnels the painting entirely through the lens of the Catholic notion of neutrality and redemption, thus obstructing the entrance of any variation of faith or philosophical conviction.
Fig. 5. Petros Nagakos, *Dinner on Thursday*, 2014, Oil and gold on panel, 48x96 inches.

Fig. 6. Leonardo Da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, 1495, Mural, 15x29 feet.
In the painting *Pancho*, I present a chromatically romantic portrayal of Pancho Villa and his band of freedom fighters, reminiscent of Jean-Léon Gérôme’s ‘Bashi-Bazouk’ (Fig. 8). While the significance of Pancho Villa’s activities cannot be understated, the problem lies in how comfortably I projected my personal feelings of heroism and machismo onto a person and group whom I actually know very little about and have virtually no cultural or personal ties with. The problematic nature of the representation of the ‘exotic warrior’ begins with the perception it generates and how far removed it actually is from the reality of that culture or situation. Furthermore, representation of cultures other than one’s own can be used for propaganda, imperialism and many other forms of control (Meagher).

Fig. 7. Petros Nagakos, *Pancho*, 2010, Oil on canvas, 24x36 inches.
When unpacking and discussing the contemporary male gaze it is logical to start the conversation on the male/female binary. A woman with power, one who is not dominated and subdued, possesses a power to confront and challenge. In her book *Wet*, Mira Schor uses the mythological creature Medusa to illustrate how the female gaze causes fear in the male audience. The confrontational Medusa becomes a grotesque symbol of demise for man’s authority, for implied in her female sovereignty (there are no
living men on her island) is the ability to “turn men into stone, to that which is not action, that which is representation, to art” (Schor 76). My painting *Yellow Dress Yellow Hair* displays a woman fully erect, fully clothed and out of bed, the positioning of her body posture and arms pleading; her temperament is humble. Despite her non-threatening context she remains disgusting. Schor proposes that painting, with the implied sensuality implicit in its medium, acts as a metaphor for woman, as well as a vehicle for the subjection of women (Schor 7). Shortly after reading *Wet*[^3], I stopped painting women as the main subject in my work.

[^3]: I finished reading *Wet* during the Fall 2016 semester working towards my MFA at LUCAD.
Fig. 9. Petros Nagakos, *Yellow Dress Yellow Hair*, 2011, Oil on canvas, 24x24 inches.

Most depictions of the female body in painting throughout Western history were commissioned and painted by men for the pleasure of other men. Almost all post-Renaissance European sexual art, of which there is plenty, is frontal, so that the spectator-owner may become the sexual protagonist (Burger 56). It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that an interesting challenge to the pleasure of looking was presented in the painting *Olympia* (Fig. 10) by the artist Édouard Manet.

The Shock of *Olympia* when exhibited was not the figure’s nudity, but her implied humanity. When first hung in the Salon of Paris in 1865, *Olympia* was met with
laughter, criticism, and contempt. So visceral was the response that guards had to be stationed next to it to protect it. The only accepted subject matter of painting in France was historical, mythical, or biblical themes, but Manet chose to paint a woman of his time, a courtesan at that, as he really saw her. The form is painted quickly, clearly visible rough brushstrokes construct a flattened plane of a glowing foreground comprising Olympia’s white body and the background, which is darkness. Middle- and upper-class gentlemen of the time frequented courtesans and prostitutes, but certainly did not wish to be confronted with one at the gallery. *Olympia* portrays a real woman, flawed and tabooed, staring directly at the viewer with unapologetic confidence, a gaze which the nineteenth-century French gentleman was not ready for. Paradoxically, since the entire scene in *Olympia* is constructed, this painting asserts the legitimate ‘reality’ of painting *as a picture*. Thus, *Olympia* accomplished two seemingly incongruent tasks that are still relevant to the painted image today; its construct affirms the reality of the painted image (it can take a fabrication and present it as real) and second, in spite of its construct it affirms the painted figure as an actual mirror to reality. The resultant painting presents a platform in which the exclusivity between fiction and reality becomes less apparent.

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4 ‘Olympia’ was made in the artist’s studio, derivative from a Titian painting, and the actual woman who posed, Victorine Meurent, was a well-known model.
4. Paint

In 1979, French philosopher Régis Debray coined the term ‘mediology’, inviting technology into cultural transmission analysis. He points out that the perceived notion surrounding an image has departed from the depiction of a physical objects towards the spectacle of virtual simulation (DeBray 453). Advances in digital media have pressed the virtue of speed over complexity, resulting in valuing the appearance of a thing, or its image, over the complexity of the actual thing itself. A clear example of this phenomena can be found in the dating app Tinder, in which the entire probability of two people setting up a date to meet is funneled through a split second decision based entirely on one’s profile picture.
Taste of Greece (2016) (Fig. 11) goes beyond a conventionally flattering profile picture, nestled against an ominous, though exotic Greek island backdrop. Referencing Tinder’s Polaroid inspired motif, I present my self-portrait as an at-ease silhouette contrasted with an uneasy, grotesque handling of facial features. Here I explore the possibility of mimicking a digitally polished subject, but with the veneer of enviable appeal pulled back. I believe that the grotesque and absurd warrant enough attention to resist the split second observations now reserved for art, or as Debray would say, “we scan over paintings and photos like a news headline or a subway ad; we view film like an advertisement; and our little screen like a footpath when we walk” (DeBray 455).

Fig. 11. Petros Nagakos, Taste of Greece, 2016, Oil on panel, 24x30 inches.
Painting, in all its messiness, smell, toxicity and indeed in its very laborious nature, differentiates itself from the ascendance of new technology at its inception. It is here I like to situate painting as a haptic phenomenon that not only distinguishes itself from new media, but in a very Deleuzian sense resists new media. Gilles Deleuze describes digital media as founded on communication, signifiers and codes, and more so relies on a very capitalistic model of upgrades and constant purchases to sustain itself. He argues that art is not communication and that only through the act of counter-information can art and man resist death (Lotringer and Cohen 106). The word haptic, similar to tactile, includes vision as part of the perception of touch, so that a viewer understands an image by observing its materiality along with the content within. It is within the haptic perception of an oil painting that our own materiality and existence is relatable and the simulated, albeit very real grip of digital media, resisted.

It is possible to resist digital media through painting because paint acts as an affirmation of the world in which we live; the painted image shares a space with our earthly bodies. It is generated through materiality, oil and dust, and suffers many of the same physical limitations as the body, such as, susceptibility to the elements, deterioration, and a physical relationship to the laws of physics. Digital media, by

5 J.J. Gibson pioneered the research into haptic perception while experimenting with pilots’ perceptions during the Second World War.
contrast, is present everywhere, fills all screens and is limited only by the manufacturer’s capability to expand, upgrade, and market itself.

The mind/body division latent in our obsession with digital media is, from a neurotic point of view, nothing new. Ignoring the harsh fate of the body in favor of pursuing an ephemeral, omnipotent transcendent heaven, seems more of an entrenched human propensity that unleashes itself through the most accessible ethereal platform rather than a result of indoctrination, be it religious, digital or other. It is important to make this distinction to help understand where to be critical when navigating our body’s relationship to the materiality of our world. Philosopher Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht recognizes in our culture this intense desire for simply being present, noting:

Contemporary communication technologies have doubtlessly come close to fulfilling the dream of omnipresence, which is the dream of making lived experience independent of the locations that our bodies occupy in space ... the more we approach the fulfillment of our dreams of omnipresence and the more definite the subsequent loss of our bodies and of the spatial dimension in our existence seems to be, the greater the possibility becomes of reigniting the desire that attracts us to the things of the world (Gumbrecht 139).

Gumbrecht is essentially rejecting a hermeneutical approach to interpreting digital phenomena, beckoning meaning to come from engagement with the body and the sensorial dimension of the world in which we reside. Because our bodies are born into and bound by materiality, our desire to find meaning through the physical will always match the intensity in which we are sucked into the ephemeral.
5. Fleshing out Spiritual/Material Hegemony

The Western epistemological structure that establishes the split between mind and body, fortified by Judeo-Christian religion, relies on metaphysical ‘truth’ maintained from Platonic idealism. In his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Martin Heidegger challenges this ideal by proclaiming that meaning can only be sought and found through the physical world. ‘Earth’, or being ‘grounded’ as he calls it, enables works of art to exist in space and help mediate our sensorial experience (Heidegger 41).

In spite of the aforementioned points, I find myself unable to reject the ephemeral indoctrination embedded in my identity from my conservative Christian upbringing. According to Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, when a spiritual person withdraws from the absolutism of religious dogma and questions and critiques his or hers perspective, the result is not an abandonment of faith, but a one-way ticket to hell.⁶ St. Luke, patron of the arts, became a symbol of death for me in the painting *Myself as Saint Luke* (2016) (Fig. 12). The Byzantine expression of mournful joy is replaced with pure mourning as the looming threat of my mind and body becoming equals abolishes my belief in and hope for eternal joy after death. The icon of the Virgin Mother with Christ loses its redemptive status, a mere supernatural illustration emerging out of the abyss. The church in the background, a noble manifestation of Jesus’ economy, is partially covered up, resulting in

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⁶ When diagnosing a neurotic woman, Jung attributed her pathology to “having the fear of God baked into her”; by turning her back on her Jewish roots and living a materialist life, she severed her connection with her spiritual ancestry (Jung 138-140).
a fragmented space that alludes to a broken trust. Again, I like to stress that according to Jung the questioning of faith in favor of the body for the devout Christian does not indicate atheism or agnosticism, but harbors self-condemnation.

Fig. 12. Petros Nagakos, Myself as St. Luke, 2016, Oil on panel, 48x60 inches.
During my Fall 2016 semester at LUCAD I finally understood that all the narratives informing my work were constructs; constructs I misconstrued for essentialism. All my creative works to date were typical white-male efforts to subjugate the other. Wishing to individualize my hegemonic masculine propensity instead of reject it, I retreated to the least problematic subject matter to exploit; myself. In *Tribute to Salle* (2017) (Fig. 14) I replace the female figure from David Salle’s early 1980s’ work (Fig. 15) and introduce myself as both subject and object. Painting the figure, as opposed to displaying photos as Salle did, allows my body to participate in the creative act and diffuses the hierarchy of the spiritual idealism. Betraying my own sense of privacy coupled with the assertive act of exhibitionism and confident brush work, the objectifying stigma the male gaze casts on others is replaced with self-referential curiosity.
As mentioned above, identity has been subsumed in and through digital media.

How I see and feel about my body can no longer be separated from how I see my body in the realm of digital mediation. In *Bazaar Icons* (2016) (Fig. 16) I insert myself in place of
the well-known Kim Kardashian (Fig. 17), referencing one of her infamous Instagram pictures. I present my body as naked and in stark contrast to the surrounding celebrity figures. While I am certainly within the picture frame, I also maintain that I am not a part of the circle of affluent people within the picture.

Fig. 16. Petros Nagakos, *Bazaar Icons*, 2016, Oil on paper, 24x24 inches.
Bazaar Icons challenges the work and claim of such artists as celebrated Russian artist Alexander Melamid, who also incorporates celebrities such as prominent rap artist Kayne West into his work. However, where Melamid uses paint to celebrate the status of the representational image, I use paint to represent the voids and inconsistencies that celebrity publicity often leave out. For example, Melamid’s Kayne West (2005) (Fig. 18) strikes us with a dynamically posed rapper, his style and confidence painted with diligent virtuosity. Whatever deeper insights Melamid may have carried during this painting, other than perhaps admiration for West, are left out. In Bazaar Icons it is precisely the conflicting thoughts and feelings stirred when absorbing the celebrity spectacle that I wish to explore and reveal. While it is of course perfectly acceptable, even admirable, to paint for the sake of sales and notoriety, what my work undoes is Melamid’s rhetoric. In relation to his paintings, Melamid believes art “can unite people” (Kino) (which he proclaimed amidst exotic cascades from country to country, painting oligarchs,
celebrities, and Catholic clergy members). Similar to the epidemic of digital media, death is not resisted in Melamid’s oeuvre, rather it is ignored.

![Image](image.png)

Fig. 18. Alexander Melamid, *Kanye West*, 2005, Oil on canvas, 88x56 inches.

In the painting *I Am Gladiator* (2017) (Fig. 19) I present myself as alone, naked and absurd. Departing from representing the celebrity, I use celebrity publicity as an armature for representing my own body. Clinging onto the dominating and confident pose of Russel Crowe, gleaned from a poster for the movie *Gladiator*, I situate myself in the suburban setting I was raised, basking in the active Western imagination of the male
hero. By isolating the figure within the context of the picture, the haptic quality of the paint becomes an integral component to the work, inviting a private moment between the picture and the viewer, so that the sensuality of the paint and the absurdity of the figure work together to create an image that does not shut the door on our impending doom, but props it open. The image presents a person that is poised, and yet, not glorified, a body lost but not scorned.

Fig. 19. Petros Nagakos, I am Gladiator, 2017, Oil on paper, 24x18 inches.
6. Conclusion

Incorporating myself into my work speaks to a shift in gaze from visual pleasure to visual curiosity, self-exposure and nuanced portrayals of vulnerability. I approach my body with audacity and exploitation, qualities once reserved for the other. In response to the big question of why paint in a digital age, it is increasingly clear to me that I trust painting as a unique experience not found in any other media. Furthermore, the act of painting and its materiality have the potential to resist digital mediation, offering in limitless form an archaic object married with an image that is present, and sometimes even ahead of its time.

The main conflict identified in my work, male identity and the influence of the hegemonic masculine, is not intended to resolve issues such as male anxiety and aggression. I am, after all, still drawn to action films full of hegemonic masculine heroes, damsels in distress and funny looking enemies that need killing. The, perhaps only, difference since starting my MFA at LUCAD is that I have become aware of the film narrative playing into a larger construct of masculine identity. This one degree of separation encourages me to cast a reflective and critical eye towards masculine stereotypes and reject their exclusive claim on how a man ought to be.

The antagonistic relationship between the mind and body explains in part why simulated presentations of male identity are so influential, but also theoretically identifies why man’s fear of the other, fear of woman, fear of the body, are all consequences of a broken mind/body relationship. I am highly skeptical that art, especially in its current form as mistress to capitalism, will resolve any of the aforementioned conflicts on a large
enough scale to change the momentum of the modern world regarding masculine identity. However, art intended to communicate and engender critical, progressive inquiry is not my aim. My painting is a physical encounter that wrestles with personal reflections towards the problematic nature of masculine identity against the growing backdrop of digital mediation. Henceforth it is not hope for change but an honest representation from someone that is to blame that will ultimately resist the status quo.
Works Cited


