2020 FOREVER

the QUEUEUE editions

Cover image taken from detail of *Stonewall Jackson*, 2020

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Image details found on page 38

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Winter

If only things were so black and white. A quick sketch, pre-covid-19, distills the anxieties facing the year to come, a burnt out image in washes of gray. In the foreground, the historical anchor is maintained by cavalier equestrian statuary—a send-off perhaps. Meanwhile, the middle tonality is bastioned by archaic machines of war, with the seat of power vaguely gridding the frame. The shiver feels as much of uncertainty as the tangible cold. Snowfall was a hopeful erasure, a mere optical ploy.

Painting an Active Discourse

2020 will not be hailed for the fundamental shift in our everyday socialization. We as humans remain largely adaptable creatures, to our great evolutionary advantage. Instead, one hopes that 2020 marks a shift in perspective, where the institutional dominance of antiquated values are firmly rejected. 2020 has rendered a critical moment of looking behind the mask—and although the non-medical mask renders a visible time stamp, this overwhelmingly minor inconvenience will be quickly forgotten because it simply has no bearing on our future.

Institutional racism, by contrast, is an injustice that people of color live with everyday in America. It has propagated like a virus. Political clowns notwithstanding, the single most resonant voice of 2020 was the voice of the people—summoned by injustice, challenging elected officials and public institutions, thereby reinstating the continual discourse that shapes our democracy. Our forced social recoil from the virus has created a full stop. Only adaptability—of our ideals, of our institutions—will ensure our collective survival. Because democracy is not a fixed state, 2020 should not be memorialized. Instead its momentum must seize the scope of inequality, and snowball to subsume the perpetual reckoning that is democracy.

Pragmatically, how can the energy of today be transformed into an ongoing discourse? To a painter, this presents something of a paradox—rendering a fixed vision or historical moment as an active force. The collective voice of the people is incredibly difficult to capture in an image—primarily because it is not singular. Images in particular do a bad job at generalizing. They are far too specific. From the given polarity between our ideals to the subtle nuance of personal preference—the interminable consensus of a still image can only be rendered in pursuit. Although the standard terms of artistic process might conveniently map to such a pursuit, the single-minded authorial hand stands in contradiction to consensus-building collectivity. Artists

are individuals. Images are singularities. Consensus requires dialogue. Paintings are generally not constructed by Socratic method.

Art history has witnessed many attempts to suspend the present moment as mere perceptual phenomena—including early optical experiments with color theory and pointillism, to the hopelessly named action painting, ending in the market fetishization of the object. Formally, the four sides of the painterly cuadro delimit a finite boundary, and the static suspension of pigment in oil is decidedly fixed. Beyond that, how can a static art form be active, let alone render discourse?

One might be tempted to invoke religious devotion as a transcendent methodology aiming to dematerialize the image and inspire revelation. Although this carries diminishing weight to an increasingly non-devout populus, we might begin to suspect that the narrow lens of celebrity-obsessed corporate media has similarly cropped plurality to an elite few. To be clear about this, the black athlete is a determined type, and inspires kids to succeed in sports. But where is the mythology of the nerdy black computer scientist turned startup CEO? Sports are participatory if not already performative. But for a visionary medium such as painting, the visions are historically fixed as white mythologies.

If the form of painting also seems old fashioned, its representational limitations cannot be escaped by scrolling through a timeline of digital media. Catching up on one's feed literally buries old images beneath new ones. Is cubism's commentary on time-based media even relevant anymore? Perhaps only conceptual artworks can effectively leave the material page and project through space. Again the status of the documentation remains in question—such archival images project towards a hypothetical viewer in the future, but they cannot capture the fleeting revelations of direct experience. Given the sensitivity of 2020's cultural momentum, how can artworks created today infuse a mode of consensus-building?

This question of direct experience—whether it be divine revelation or conceptual reorientation—leaves metaphor in the past. Paintings cannot continue to operate like great works of literature, romantically clinging to an esoteric symbolism that inevitably will be misinterpreted by the future. There needn't be further academic motion for the contingent inclusion of backassward paintings in public

collections. They should be deaccessioned. Historical context cannot participate in building contemporary consensus. Mythology and metaphor offer little to the epistemological cause. Clearly, history has rendered a poor standard for equality, thus the iconographies perpetuated in painting and literature are flawed. To me, many of them are beyond reproach. Today, mythology and metaphor seem to only serve institutional power.

What to do with this weighty past? Erasure, in simple terms, is complex. Such issues hinge upon a basic question of representation, wrought by an authority who determines that which remains visible and invisible. Herein lies the power to curate discourse—a marginalized power granting participation to anyone with a voice. Perhaps in the digital age, one might say erasure has ceased to exist, and dominant narratives survive by repetition, by mob rule. T he new mythology of the digital age has also successfully dif fused metaphor—instead, permutation now reigns supreme. Specifically, if images are not erased, they will survive by transformation. Is this new standard a blatant obfuscation to speak in coded messages, or the full liberation from the inherent politics of visual culture?

While it may not be a cure-all, the malleability of digital images, I believe, solves the fundamental paradox of painting—its fixedness. Corrections upon our cultural inheritance need to render an experiential contingency in order to remain relevant. Appropriation and détournement perform this contingency as a matter of course. For digital culture, contingency is rendered by call and response, "Whatever you can détourn, I can détourn more." Painting makes an easy target for institutional critique, however, its precious history also is the prima materia for intoning a corrective palimpsest. In its natural environment, the palimpsest is the present-day record of an active, ongoing, perpetual discourse. This is how painting must be seen—not as a fixed vision or suspended moment in time, but an active engagement. T he tools granted by its own history are to be, paradoxically, its very contemporaneity.

Modern Art during Quarantine

Quarantined, covid-19 left us to contemplate domesticity. Still life seemed to be the most apt metaphor at the time. I began making Giorgio Morandi copies for their simple warmth and measured certainty. These were highly controlled environments—a reflective type of quarantine, where a subtle change in lighting could totally shift the delicate interaction. I imagined Morandi's stoic practice as something of an infectious process, as if the role call of every piece of ceramic dutifully mirrored civilians marching to virus screenings.

Modern Art with Antidote

The proposition that injecting household bleach might kill the virus stood Morandi's quiet scenery totally on its head. No subject—nor fantasy—could be safe from the reach of covid-19. While bleach was indeed momentarily scarce (for its effectiveness in cleaning surfaces), within the still life its classic bottle form is suspended as something of a pharmakon. Yet its function, like the adjacent soft geometries that may or may not represent butter, or cheese, is ambiguous. The small gathering has become something of a violation of the terms of social contact, or are they a family?

Contemporary Art with Post Box Decommissioning

As the simple psychology of still life painting began to reveal monsters in the shadows, it became a sign the world was going to hell. This copy—of a mundane bucket—had been left unfilled. Slowly it began to accumulate meaning by association, drip by drip, in paint. I f irst remembered a bucket in Gustave Courbet's*The Stone Breakers*, which is an anthem for the working class—an old man, kneeling, breaking stones with a crude hammer, with an attendant youth grappling with outsized rocks. The middle ground of a lifetime is clearly laid out—as a lifetime of hard manual labor. Their figures were the first to be drawn upon the bucket's stage.

Secondly, I encountered Courbet's *The Winnowers*, which projected the domestic counter-narrative of laboring women—sifting grain in a kitchen. One of the pair had dozed off, while a young boy is sneaking a look at what's cooking in the oven. T his, in my sketch, is exploding into the boy's face—as the working conditions and marginal compensation for the present day working class is already a recipe for disaster. Soon the bucket was pleading, repentant, with the visage of a forgotten saint, nearly snuffed out like a candle. And then, embattled like Don Quixote's first flight with a sink basin helmet, my bucket sat in the corner unfulfilled, as buckets do. In fact, the bucket I thought I had remembered in *The Stone Breakers* turned out to be a cooking pot.

The quarantine had raised questions about the imminent election—whether we could even vote in public places—along with dire speculation about the US Postal Service's role in processing mail-in ballots. As the funding was threatened to be pulled from this already thankless public service, the painting was reactivated by postal symbols. Did you know the first logo was not the head of an eagle, but rather a cowboy on horseback? Horse-powered speed seemed to be fueling Operation Warp Speed, because in truth, you can't speed up vaccine testing with Star Trek metaphors. Instead, the head of the Postal Service was replaced, and post boxes were uprooted and hauled off as a solution to austerity measures. My cup runneth over.

Foreign Policy

T he next copy took a f lagrantly tasteless work from a local gallery (exhibited virtually during stay-at-home) of stuffed koala bears, and saturated it acid green, the color your face turns when you're about to vomit. The vacuous subject matter couldn't have been further from what people were actually feeling at the time. I filled the void with photorealistic eyes of two headline-worthy world leaders and titled it with regards to their probable collusion. You might read in their respective faces who holds all the leverage.

Preface to Editorials: How Institutional Critique fails when Lawyers get involved

While virtual teddy bears were proffered by gallerists to cozy connoisseurs, protest had taken the streets. The death of George Floyd will continue to haunt us just as the destruction of the Twin Towers has for the past two decades. As an artist, my primary inquiry is a question of visual representation—making the invisible visible—and George Floyd's murder has been fully documented. What more is there for art to say? The broader debate about institutional racism, further fueled by the murders of Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and countless black and brown Americans, affirmed that change in a democracy does not come easy—it must be demanded. Envisioning precisely what change will look like is just one critical step towards formulating explicit demands. But even before a public discourse takes shape, vision can be nurtured by simply staging critique.

I began formulating a digital work of institutional critique at the onset of stay-at-home, but two weeks into constructing the project, the resonant voice of Black Lives Matter shifted my narrative. One month later, I had received a cease and desist letter, unknowingly, in my spam folder. By the time I actually read the letter, with heavy-handed legal action now pending, I was forced to disengage from the work. The four editorials included here were written in support of the larger project.

The above assertions in "Painting an Active Discourse" are directly informed by the politics of 2020. Objects without functional utility, such as art, remain meaningless if they cannot contribute to the broader social discourse. For me, it is imperative that the work participates in a critique of the status quo, if not providing a direct strategy of resistance. Is this perhaps where my digital stay-at-home project failed, because it was less of a vision than an active threat to opaque institutions?

Bringing that active potential into the static history of painting is a step towards correcting its institutional fixedness. If my artworks cannot articulate their own methodology by their immediate construction, my words will. The passive tradition of letting the artworks be meditative denies critical reflection, and falls into the trap of becoming purely decorative. In writing I also hope to preemptively build a defense against those who would arraign democratic discourse.

Stonewall Jackson

This tightly cropped frame suspends a specific tipping point where the voice of the people, in protest since May 25, was acknowledged by the state. Using emergency powers, Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney ordered the removal of the equestrian statue of Stonewall Jackson in the interest of public safety. At approximately 4:40 p.m., the statue was lifted by a crane from its pedestal and laid to rest on a flatbed truck. Support from Virginia governor Ralph Northam was offered via tweet: "A monumental day in Richmond that begins the important process of removing these painful symbols of our past. Thank you, next." The statue had stood since 1919, installed well after the southern reconstruction.

A Fourth Plinth for Richmond

As American statues continue to fall, the focus should be less about their uncertain fate than the public space they have long inhabited. In Hollywood, film and entertainment icons are memorialized by a sidewalk—very much a functional space, albeit a touristy one. Created in 1958, the Walk of Fame is a ground level attraction, its expansion is horizontal, and foot traffic operates as universal effacement. It's a history that is lived upon. In comparison to east coast city plans, roundabouts seem like rarities in the LA city grid. Instead we have the freeway cloverleaf and the double helix parking garage. Here the vertical space is owned by billboards, broadcast to consumers below—or begrudgingly, against a horizon of red tail lights.

A memorial needn't read much more than a historical marker. The UK has succeeded with blue markers on the face of buildings, acknowledging where important figures were born, lived, or died—before their lodgings inevitably burned during one of many fires. These markers add a rather sidelong decor to alleyways, yet ultimately leaves the impression of a space long since repurposed. Deadpan in the presentation of fact, the markers serve a dual function, acknowledging an intersection of the city's ongoing construction with that of historical events, without valorizing either. City life, as always, moves on.

Simply put, America needs to figure out a way to bury its past and march forwards without high horse overseers gazing down upon us. The problem exemplified by Richmond's Robert E. Lee statue, centered on the grassy lawn of a large roundabout, is that the public space is largely inaccessible to pedestrians, setting the statue at distance. Perhaps this easement was functional for post Civil War horse and buggy commuters. But for car culture, the space performs as a stage—a horizontal billboard, or worse, as a land grab—which might be further read in the history of southern land ownership.

The Lee roundabout forms just one node on the southeast to northwest axis of Monument Avenue, transitioning from the edge of downtown and the ever-expanding VCU campus, extending towards a tree-lined neighborhood of stately homes. Lee seems to have been positioned as protector, preceded by J.E.B. Stuart one block to the east,

with Jefferson Davis (the Confederacy's sole president), and Stonewall Jackson in tow towards the suburbs. Oceanographer Matthew Fontaine Maury and Tennis legend Arthur Ashe seem like unlikely successors to the Lost Cause, who bring up the rear guard as a half-hearted historical correction. If the statues were to be marched in procession, it would be Ashe facing the opposite direction of the white men. However, he is not the only monument in Richmond to be oriented backwards. Contextually, would it come as any surprise that Richmond's own Statue of Liberty, a pint sized version donated by the Boy Scouts in 1950, situated in the quaint out-of-the-way Chimborazo Park, faces almost due west? There, liberty is situated as a footnote to the city.

The problem of Richmond's statuary, citing the problem facing many American cities, remains in the transformation of public space—from a site of conflict to a space of healing. The most salient art reference here is the Fourth Plinth in London's Trafalgar Square, at the doorstep to the National Gallery, a site of rotating sculptural installations and occasional performances. Set against other iconographies of the former empire, it's easy to imagine this Fourth Plinth having been repurposed as a historical correction, appropriated by contemporary voices. Its history might hold informative. In fact, the fate of the Fourth Plinth was debated for 150 years, whereupon a three year rotating exhibition was finally commissioned. After review, the current rotation was instituted 2005. Recently, David Shrigley's elongated thumbs-up gesture in response to Brexit has remained iconic long since deinstallation. At present, Robert E. Lee's statue has stood for 130 years.

To bury, to memorialize, to leave as a void, to overwrite—regardless of the solution, the need for healing remains. This can be facilitated by cities engaging with communities about possible solutions. Recently in Bristol, with quite a bit less of that British subtlety, a sacked slave trader got the old heave-ho into the River Avon, where Google promptly updated the statue's new location. Possibly a win for augmented reality. And yet, I fear the silent actions, such as swiftly removing at-risk statues in the middle of the night, not only prevents discourse in the present, but implies that these backwards histories will continue to stand in some other manner. While nothing could be more satisfying than giving the old guard the heave-ho, the genuine pragmatism of devising an alternative space, resolved through public discourse across party lines, is the only path towards healing.

Confederate Monuments and the Problem of Digital Ruin Value

Ruin value should be meaningless to a digital age, where images live forever. Originally delineated by Albrecht Speer, Hitler's architect, ruin value operates precisely as it says, banking on the inevitable decay of large scale public works as a kind of cultural currency. For a brick and mortar culture, the question of memory was solely one of visibility—best exemplified by monumentality.

To render the question that digital decay poses, we might contrast the forever of the Egyptian pyramids to the forever of trending political memes. Where the pyramids have been transformed by both physical and cultural forces, these deleterious threats are mitigated by the widespread redundant distribution of digital images. Given the copy-paste palimpsest of a meme, you understand that digital images not only have the potential to live forever, but know that their afterlives are redoubled by sarcastic copies manipulating the original meaning.

Ruin value matches this contemporary subversion with a certain fatalism. Ruin value demands no victors to write its history—its only aim is to withstand the test of time. And digital images are great candidates for withstanding time. Adopting from the future tense a perspective towards fallen empires, ruin value subverts new construction to reintegrate decay as a design standard. Paradoxically, decay must also be understood as the raison d'être of creating and circulating digital images. You cannot know the future of a cellphone photo. Assume it is backed up to the cloud.

Old World Materialism

For Nazi Germany, ruin value manifested as XL public works attempting to mirror the architectural iconography of Rome, Greece, or the aforementioned Egyptian monumentality. To see a bleached colonnade perched upon the Acropolis is to summon an image of greatness in textbooks, diminishing societal problems with a sleight of hand. Historically, material form has stood as textbook proof, minimizing the carefully chosen caption. In stone, concrete, and statuary, ruin value was calibrated to work specifically upon the

memory. It is the iconography that haunts, such as that of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, where the Napoleonic Empire overshadows that of the Nazis.

Meanwhile for digital culture, memories are all too vivid. Instantly accessible content, reinforced by hands-off corporate policy such as that of Facebook, cannot be perceived in ruin. Digital content remains persistent in its form, protected against the general decay of all material things by data centers and redundancy across billions of devices.

While there is no inherent conflict between material form and immaterial content, we know all too well how the manipulation of digital content has polarized our nation. Might this be considered digital ruin value, to transform a benign image into propaganda? Recent protests survive as images online, generally anonymized by face masks, yet leaving them vulnerable to redistribution.

Digital Ruin Value

I fear a long overdue, yet hasty correction of the material iconography in the South could further fuel conflict in the future. Although we are inundated by digital metaphors, public space cannot be treated like images. There is no delete key. Public space must be healed through transformation.

The question of long standing Confederate monuments as it relates to averting digital ruin value is complex. The historical correction to ban Third Reich paraphernalia seemed like a reasonable solution for a pre-digital age. But I have witnessed first-hand those objects being recirculated not so discreetly at second hand shops. This latent conflict within our own American history is not about consumerism, it is an ideology that needs to corrected. The dissonance in beliefs cannot be reduced to a regulation of a black market, or a schedule of illegal substances. This only shifts the underlying conflicts further underground. Ideology cannot be erased. It must be transformed.

In 2016 in Charlottesville, a stone's throw from Richmond, we have seen the reemergence of such closeted versions of freedom. The issue with the Confederate flag—how it operates as an image, and the complexity of what it culturally represents—is also problematic. Other iconographies are far less discreet. But what do you do with statues?

Richmond's inverted archetypes

The city of Richmond is home to more than just the antiheroes of the Confederate loss. Further south down the James River sits a perfect replica pint sized Statue of Liberty—facing west. I-95 makes no mention of a historical site. It remains a beacon to few boatsmen, situated in a small roadside park. You arrive with Liberty showing you her back.

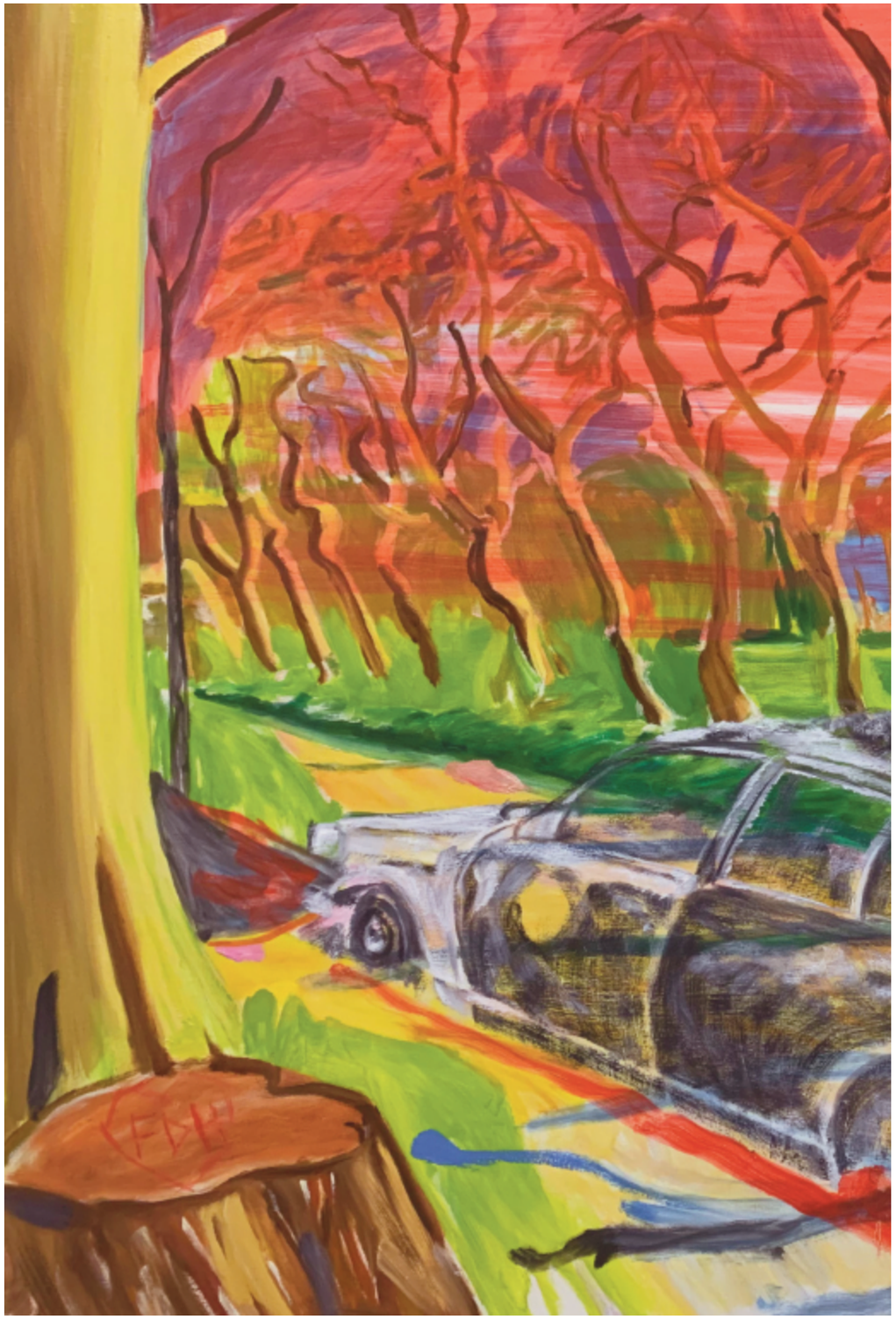
The inversion stings, turning anticipation to sadness, physically manifesting the backwardness I felt growing up in the south. If you were following the natural downriver current towards the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, waving goodbye to Richmond begins with waving goodbye to mini-Liberty.

However, Richmond's Lady Liberty poses one solution for the long since mourned over monuments. Place them out in a field, perhaps a civil war battleground. Leave no markers. One summer, I saw the statues in Monument Square undergoing a minor facelift—powerwashing. As if to add insult to injury, the white suited laborers all appeared to be black. Same old story. I for one would love to see nature reclaiming these statues, bird shit and all, yet this would only contribute to ruin value.

City planning

The problem of memory runs deeper than re-siting the public works. From the ashes of the Civil War, Richmond redesigned roads to accommodate their new heritage. The procession of statues on Monument Way makes no secret of this. Centered in roundabouts on main thoroughfares—with non-pedestrian easements for Robert E. Lee's archaic billboard in the round, or similarly at Jefferson Davis's dramatically mute stone stage—these figures stand guard to stately homes safely nestled behind old trees.

To remove statues in the middle of the night, as one city did, only brings the second trauma. The loss is experienced as a void. Like the immediate mourning of the Twin Towers, memory fills in the blank. Richmond would do well to march forward, by not encouraging a second mourning.



Contemporary Art with Police Car (overleaf p. 18 - 19)

As images of vandalized police cars were broadly circulated during BLM protests, I began to recognize a certain familiarity between them. Of the many images sourced, I began grouping them as specific sites, despite the changing cast of protestors. Cross-referencing with news stories, I located this charred-out effigy at the 8000 block of Beverly Boulevard, three blocks west of CBS's Television City in Los Angeles. The car, which had once been a veritable recording device, became mere statuary to the triumphant poses captured by mobile phones.

Though this singular site is perpetuated by many images, it could very well be a car in Kenosha or Atlanta, just as the background could be one of many tree-lined country roads. This is the primary critique—both a symbol and a random landscape can independently trigger familiarity, but until such formal devices come into direct contact, their worlds stand apart. Under the reign of deterministic digital fact, the local specificity of this police car was entirely lost to the audience, despite being very easy to reconstitute. Thus it would seem that romanticism still drives the lust for images, not a connection to place.

New Monumentality

Gray Slope

Inundated with uncertainty, even the small degree of normalcy granted by the great outdoors became heavily weighted. T his foggy early morning descent from the top of a cliff obliterated any sense of ground or horizon. The grappling foliage clings to an eastern scroll painting inheritance, yet the present foreground is less certain. Neither can the still frame render the valley to which the grisaille wash runs. Oceans rise and markets fall. Volatile systems flirt with speculators at the brink of collapse, yet the romantic holds no ground when nature reclaims its due.

Passivity

I specifically chose this image in response to George Floyd's murder because of its representation of the passive third party, which also speaks to the position of the viewer. Formally, I chose to crop the face of the police officer to anonymize any facial expression and focus on body language. The scourge of police violence extends well beyond the three officers charged with aiding and abetting murder. By forcing the viewer to reconstruct the emotions not visible in a face, I hope they might project themselves into his shoes, and grapple with the unnerving silence. Seeing his hands buried deep in his pockets is central both to the image and the ongoing discourse—needing to acknowledge our collective passivity and institutional bias.

I began the work with a quick, watered down, acrylic underpainting. The forgiving fluidity allows me to block shapes and modulate depth with a general tonality. Often, as is the lesson of the old masters, I will choose a more vibrant or even complimentary color scheme for underpainting, which can shift successive layers. Though I had first envisioned this as a sharply black and white image, the yellow concrete pavement began spatialize a heightened contrast to the cop in blue. Moving downwards to the shadows, yellow shifts to pools of red. Ultimately I chose to leave this acrylic background bleeding through to mark the violence occurring immediately off-stage.

However, it wasn't until I had already been staring at the image for several hours when the body language began to whisper. The officer's right foot is tilted slightly inward. For me, this turned the whole image on its head. Rather than a slouchy, hands-in-the-pockets, side-eyed, "I don't want to be here" type of passivity, the turned-in right foot reveals a rigid, nervously shifting uncertainty. "What should I do?" Frozen, or perhaps rocking left to right like a pendulum, counting the seconds, is the only thing he can muster. We both watch in horror.

Perhaps we read these subtle cues in body language subconsciously—but to capture this moment in an image, much less our collective memory—is exceedingly rare. This nuance I hope to champion as the tortoise strategy of painting. Making sense of these fleeting moments through deliberate reconstruction, rather than instant replay, enables a different mode of reflection, and hopefully dredges the bigger picture beyond the frame. Painting is a living history. It does not ascribe a fixed position. The question posed by the officer in *Passivity* is a similar question posed to painting as a discipline—"What will we do about these images?" For me, the answer is straightforward. Art history is a palimpsest to rework.

Contemporary Art with Cop in Riot Gear

The palimpsestic accumulation of meaning posed by the above caption (to *Passivity*, p. 22) is directly represented by my titling convention—anonymizing and overwriting—as in *Contemporary Art with Cop in Riot Gear*, *Contemporary Art with Police Car*, *Contemporary Art with Rayshard Brooks*, and *Contemporary Art with Self Portrait*. Refusing to name the copies deprives them of their power—where in truth, the notoriety of original authors is overwritten by the urgency of what the images mean to us today. Digital culture mobilizes this perspective with ease—authorlessly. Meanwhile authorship in fine art remains entrenched with value. Let the convention "contemporary art" signify the past-tense, and the general poetic of titles be stamped out by facts. Images may remain unchangingly ambiguous, but the simple recontextualization of a title will transform meaning.

Contemporary Art with Rayshard Brooks

The question of contemporary figuration is simple: why are black men and women disproportionately represented, in news and media, in a negative light? This modern-day distortion offers clues to help read historical images. Reflexively, I can't see a neoclassical nude, with all its latent mythologizing, as anything but a historical whitewash. To put it bluntly, these oppositional perspectives are one in the same, and must be represented as such—upon a singular surface. This simple act of making visible holds an exponential potential to raise awareness, and thereby, discourse. Meanwhile, the perpetuation of accepted stylistic frameworks bear the risk of being short-lived and quickly forgotten for one very simple reason—contextual irrelevance. Style is not an emergent phenomenon, but the calcification of norms.

If the intentional project of making visible might be extended to all stylistic modes, including abstraction, context could be read directly, and meaning would be constructed through participation and discourse. As it well should be. Even for a consumption-based culture, meaning is shaped by a complex ecosystem, and cannot elide the dominant sociopolitical conditions of its time.

I take as my tabula rasa artworks which present little awareness of their worldly surroundings, and attempt to breathe life into empty backgrounds. I hope to deploy consequent images that mark historical facts and correct the negligence of institutionalized brands. Meaning will always be derived through contextualization, thus the question posed to artists is less about how the work maps to a dominant trend, than how it participates in the continuous tradition of the medium. Painting always has—always will be—the project of making visible. In this manner, no painting is ever complete.

Contemporary Art with Self Portrait

Dejection, disaffect, powerlessness, sadness, heartache—words fail to render the sense of loss in these eyes. T he original self portrait of the artist, painted on a glass mirror, fails to render anything other than academic solipsism. Onto this I've transposed, volte-face, the attendant need to identify with the other—a need that extends far beyond an opaque portrait. For all these reasons it can only be a self portrait.

Emergency Services and the Role of Agile Government

Agility is a business management term dictating that a product cannot be developed in isolation. In a world of interconnectivity and domino-stacked influence, the slow and steady path to market is simply infeasible. Businesses no longer wager against their competition using waterfall methodologies—beginning with R&D, subsequently shifting towards testing, promotion, and launch—today these stages have all been parallelized. From the consumer side, we would expect no less. Demand drives exponential growth up the cliff of Moore's law and planned obsolesce, especially where our technological appetite remains unsatiated.

In American democracy, the slow and steady process of voting, representation, debate, legislation, and lawmaking—as a 16th century institution—is hardly agile by contemporary convention. In light of coronavirus distancing measures, video conferencing has become routine, but bureaucracy remains stubborn. Paperwork is still paperwork, digital or analog. Calculations may be streamlined by business management software, yet these types of automation may only serve to make an affirmative routine seem even more esoteric.

The critique of police brutality rendered by Black Lives Matter protests may be seen in part through this lens of agility. In an age of instantaneous communication, we still need first responders— fireman to put out fires, paramedics to be rushed to accidents, and police to protect our natural rights. Might it be possible that our pressing need for agility in government policy has instead been sutured by emergency services—specifically in an overextension of police force?

Rapid Prototyping Justice

The police have become the rapid prototyping version of justice—representing judge, jury, and in the worst cases, executioner. Despite the broad scrutiny of the use of excessive force, this conflict seems like an escalation of that which government has already failed to address—income and job disparities, access to resources, healthcare, and education. Institutionalized racism has remained an emergency

that the pace of bureaucracy simply fails to serve. So instead of listening to people's needs in a public forum, the emergent protest movement has been met in the streets by first responders.

Having painted the scenario in business terms, one might also question the valence of agility in leadership. Do we want a morally fixed position, or a flexible one?

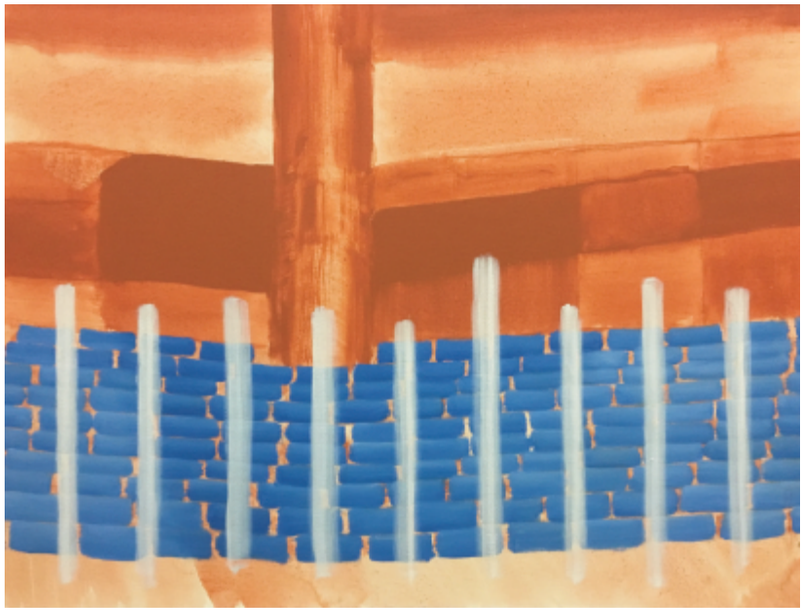
Unified Agility

Agility is perhaps best deployed by the people, not the state. What is fundamental to the agility of a collective voice is not its speed, which might be derivative of competitive athletics, but rather its sense of unity and teamwork. We need speed in our firemen, paramedics, and police—but we also need a unified reproach. To contain a raging wildfire requires collective effort. Surgeons depend on nurses, technicians, staff, etc. Police need to know that their partners will support their best judgment—or intervene when boundaries are crossed.

But the protests are not without a glimpse of change. Immunity has been revoked. Department heads have resigned and are in the process of being restructured. The spitting images of stubbornness—public statues—are beginning to be removed. For all the institutional rigidity perpetuating the status quo, the relative ease with which local governments have instituted change is encouraging. The question is whether they will remain responsive once the protests subside.

Black Tears

The corporate support of Black Lives Matter might feel more authentic if such institutions weren't dominated by white men. T heir tears are merely illustrative, symbolic, a standard press release. Perhaps in their hollowness, restitution is defined.



Arena Voting

The empty seats seen at a campaign rally in Tulsa speak to the ideological captivity of fervent supporters. The classical arena stands as a inversion of panopticon-style surveillance—where all members of the audience would see exactly the same thing. Instead, our immersion in digital media renders invisible partitions, such that your neighbor, witness to equivocal events, might arrive at totally different conclusions. I envisioned the vertical lines pushing the space towards abstraction—also in an inversion of stars and stripes—becoming the iconography of isolation.

The Gladiatorial Showdown of Arena Voting

While the use of arenas for voting stations is a much welcome preparation for the 2020 elections, it also feels like an ominous one, underscoring the nature of bipartisan competition. Nothing gets folks riled up more than a mano-a-mano duel til the end, as it once did during gladiatorial games in ancient Rome. Modern sport leagues have remained gladiatorial in the plug-and-play interchangeability of position players—which is a distant mirror of democratic ideals—that anyone might step up to participate in leading consensus into policy.

On the level playing field, injury renders a chain of succession, revealing a competitiveness not only between teams, but within the hierarchy of starting positions. For every athlete taking stage, there is an immediate understudy on the bench, plus those distributed through feeder leagues. Similarly we might historicize the rise of civil servants through local, regional, and national stages—or alternately the media/entertainment industry. For better or worse, the hot-swapping connectivity—political connectivity—leads the succession of public office. Yet the political mind is not an inborn trait like speed or strength, nor is it quite as interchangeable as the revolving door of the GOP would have us believe. When did politics become so gladiatorial?

This convergence with the entertainment industry is where the appropriation of indoor arenas feels ominous to me. Not only does the court stage a showdown—it transforms the individual vote into a choice of red or blue, with not much purple in between. Who goes to a Lakers-Clippers game in a Sacramento Kings jersey? Not me, too expensive, even for nosebleeds. There can be no tie, only tiebreakers.

Sporting events are a way of life for many Americans—those who can afford to attend. This privilege to attend major arena events also includes the cost of transportation to and from the city. Granted, the infrastructure bringing thousands into major metropolitan arenas should be able to sustain capacity, but it does not necessarily sustain convenience. Centrally located architectural landmarks do well to serve local camaraderie, but arena accessibility solutions do not address anyone but the paying customer. Voting should not have a cost.

Then there's the sideshow. "Need a ticket?" What about the unofficial merchandise, the pub culture, the diehards in bodypaint and wigs? The simple right of voting needn't be rendered in the context of spectacle. Naturally, I'd be stoked to enter the Staples center, march on stage, and cast my vote. But for a streaming subscriber, it seems overly theatrical to my point and click intuition.

As the Fourth of July holiday will pass (for me) in quarantine, I somehow ended up discussing state fairs and other summertime celebrations with my partner. The local fair, as I understand it, began as the place to sell off your farm grown products, pigs and pies alike. Irrevocably this became dramatized as who could grow the biggest pig—or pumpkin. Add a few innocent games for the kids and…why not have the carnival come to town!

As if the news media isn't already side show enough for the main political events, I question the sustainability of arena voting. Does it affirm social distancing in the uncertainty of fraudulent voting? Perhaps. But in light of reassessing funding for underserved communities, the arena isn't exactly accommodating if folks have to make a cross-town pilgrimage. It might be welcomed as a short term solution, but I worry the staging has broader complications. Seeing the voting demographic performing in gladiatorial combat might seem a bit hyperbolic, but when will the barnstorming globetrotters come to town and undermine the narrative of us versus them with a show of virtuosity?

Election Night

Burying Discourse

What is a palimpsest? The Greek etymology refers to the practice of literally scraping malleable surfaces, such as wax writing tablets, for subsequent reuse. This implies a certain amount of erasure inflicted upon the ground—incomplete erasure. In the ancient world, material scarcity resulted in palimpsestic writing—predominantly of accounting. But you needn't look any further than an urban environment to read the superpositioned layers of information upon a single surface. In a contemporary palimpsest, layering typically results in a type of incomplete erasure, where accumulation is read through the gaps. One generally assumes that such urban accumulation is the result of multiple authors.

Situated between the ancient form and the contemporary, a classical variant of overwriting, visible as an underpainting, is referred to as a pentiment rather than a palimpsest. (I prefer the anglicized version of the Italian *pentimenti*.) Often these layers are revealed by x-ray photography or during restoration, but occasionally are brought to the surface by aging paint, as with the example of a water vole in John Everett Millais' *Ophelia*. The pentiment in painting is likewise often the product of material scarcity, recycling unsuccessful works in favor of the tabula rasa. Indeed, the pentiment may not be limited to a single hand. This betrays the reality of cultural preference, where erasing or overwriting secondary narratives might preserve the cultural value of a historical work.

Between the conscious modifications of the original artist and curatorial preference that can influence conservation, we derive a simple historical fact. No paintings are ever finished, they are merely inherited. Such remains the case today with digital images. An ill-intentioned pentiment, with designs to transform meaning, might be called by yet another name—appropriation. Though tied to the timeless copy, appropriation emerged in full force as a 20th century political tool, which you might recognize by a third name—stay with me here—détournement. Wouldn't it be easier if we just simplified the vocabulary and called it for what it is—layering—or accumulation?

Such is the artist's desire to create that each epoch has seemingly constructed a new mythology, and a word, for each permutation of the

layering principle. (In the shadows, one also sees Marcel Duchamp lurking, with his mustachioed postcard of the Mona Lisa, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, at once fulfilling all forms of the copy, appropriation, and détournement—topped by his own stylish convention—the readymade.) But returning to the natural law that no painting is ever finished, by virtue of inheritance, I will shift from the Situationist provocation to Per Kirkeby. Without much fanfare, Kirkeby nurtured the accumulation of layers as a straightforward geologic process, accelerating the hand of nature.

Before proceeding to distinguish Kirkeby's work from Guy Debord's cohort and the latter Situationist project (itself having subsumed Letterism), the overextended nature metaphor serves to locate a common branch—Asger Jorn's deployment of détournement. I'd argue that although Debord sought direct political action, it is Kirkeby's geological thinking that holds a stronger valence today. Prior to Jorn, Debord and Gil J Wolman had already distinguished between minor and deceptive détournements in 1956. Yet their vision operates under the precept of familiarity to pop culture, encouraging the immediate critique of power. A slightly updated version from late-70's San Francisco-based Billboard Liberation Front (who regularly détourned billboards, as you might guess), would likewise claim subversion's primacy to exposing truth. Yet today, in a digital context, subversion and détournement would be lumped together with charges of fake news. Where the subversive retort to an initial subversion quickly escapes reality. Comparatively, Kirkeby's perspective on truth is transhistorical. His paintings submit to the willful destruction of source imagery, passively demonstrating nature's reclamation—and simultaneously recalibrating the infamous Jackson Pollock claim, "I am nature."

But already I have gotten ahead of myself. Asger Jorn first presented his détourned paintings in 1959. At the time he was living in France, cavorting with and later still funding Situationist agenda even after departing from the group. The publication accompanying his show at Galerie Rive Gauche began with a poem and a short essay, whose primary objective can be summarized in the first sentence. "ALL WORKS of art are objects and should be treated as such, but these objects are not ends in themselves: They are tools with which to influence spectators." Further on he concludes, "The future is made through relinquishing or sacrificing the past. He who possesses the past of a phenomenon also possesses the sources of its becoming." The text

also held a mild critique of Pollock's self-serving action painting.

I suspect this would have been a lightbulb moment for Per Kirkeby, whose geological training may have interpreted relinquishment as sedimentation. Kirkeby's early mimetic experiments with Jorn's idea of détourning found paintings (readymades) led way to abstractions that thoroughly buried source material. In this, Kirkeby achieved what any child run rampant with crayons, what any teen hoped to conquer with graffiti, what any rational adult on the boot-end of a power structure felt was natural, necessary, or critically reflective. Nature. Empowered by geological time, Kirkeby rendered history as sedimentation in pigment—not as an image—but as process. Where Debord's call to cut-and-paste recontextualization relied on familiar media, Kirkeby's gesture mirrored the great equalizer that is nature herself.

Alas, exploring the fracture between nature and democracy would require a deeper of analysis of Kirkeby's oeuvre, beyond limitations of space here. Yet the human scale is rendered by thematic elements. His fallen tree trunk for example, echoes bodily form in silence—the transformation from vertical to horizontal—a speech act rendered in absentia. As for sedimentation, the geological similarities with the palimpsest are obvious, but the relative opacity of Kirkeby's painted surfaces renders a non-negotiable fixity. Nature, like pigment, is unforgiving in its accretion. My brief suggestions here are to merely distinguish the historical translations—between casual accumulation and intentional process. T he manner by which Kirkeby directed his work, compared to Debord, may have appeared to lack a specific political motive. However, tracing the same root, it would be impossible for Kirkeby's work to read apolitically. Détournement, like nature, is rendered by the push and pull of competing forces. Ultimately, the power Kirkeby flirted with—nature—détourns culture.

In the end, we are left to consider this fragile balance between nature and culture. Given the bifurcation presented by Jorn, even the second layer of paint conceptually situates the work in a state of becoming. Neither fixed nor perpetually fractured by appropriation, neither politically active nor defensively Socratic—instead painting triggers its primary discourse through a visceral response to the visible. The riposte and parry of formal vocabulary—given the overlapping traditions of the palimpsest, pentiment, readymade, and détournement—confirms our need for a framework not to dictate, but rather support our yearnings, as they grow, shift, and are finally buried by time.

List of Works

Page	Title, medium, size
2	*Winter*, acrylic on canvas, 40 cm x 60 cm
6	*Modern Art during Quarantine*, oil on canvas, 30 cm x 35 cm
7	*Modern Art with Antidote*, oil on canvas, 35 cm x 46 cm
9	*Post Box Decommissioning*, oil and marker on canvas, 122 cm x 122 cm
10	*Foreign Policy,* oil on canvas, 60 cm x 72 cm
12	*Stonewall Jackson*, acrylic on canvas, 61 cm x 101 cm
18	*Contemporary Art with Police Car*, oil on canvas, 92 cm x 122 cm
20	*New monumentality*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 46 cm x 61 cm
21	*Gray Slope*, oil on canvas, 112 cm x 86 cm
23	*Passivity*, oil on canvas, 153 cm x 122 cm
25	*Contemporary Art with Cop in Riot Gear*, oil on canvas, 150 cm x 100 cm
27	*Contemporary Art with Rayshard Brooks*, oil on canvas, 104 cm x 114 cm
28	*Contemporary Art with Self Portrait*, oil and mirror on canvas, 60 x 60 cm
31	*Black Tears*, oil on canvas, 80 cm x 68 cm
32	*Arena Voting*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 56 cm x 74 cm
34	*Election Night*, acrylic on canvas, 36 cm x 66 cm

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About the Artist

Born in Virginia Beach, Matthew J. Robertson holds master's degrees from CalArts (Aesthetics & Politics) and the Royal College of Art (Sculpture). Currently based in California, his work aims to demystify the technological condition, by redeploying traditions of both classical and conceptual art. Recent paintings institute painstaking facsimiles as his tabula rasa—the palimpsestic ground from which discourse emerges. Other texts include *Appropriation 101: The Story of Joachim Beuckelaer, bots following @realDonaldTrump* and *"the four most-used passwords are love, sex, secret and GOD"*.

Proof