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SHANNON COUNTY WARRANTS

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Acknowledgements

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Shannon County Warrants

An MFA Thesis Submitted to the Graduate College of Missouri State University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Master of Fine Arts, Visual Studies

May 2017

Abstract: Finding amusement in the realm of the grotesque can alleviate some of the uncomfortable and inevitable parts of our nature. In my work, by creating images closely related to cartoons or other benign media (i.e. puppets, old country songs and toys,), I am able to illuminate the dark aspects of the redneck culture in a blithe and lighthearted manner inviting the viewer to contemplate and challenge regional stereotypes.

Keywords: redneck, anti-aesthetic, grotesque, carnivalesque, regionalism

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.
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Introduction

Over the past three years, I have been creating books, videos, sculptures, toys and illustrations that express the distorted and personal views I have toward the region of my upbringing. It’s a perspective that shifts frequently and is often confused or misinterpreted. Within the pages to follow, I will attempt to make sense of some of my thoughts and explain the creative process inspiring my thesis work.

“On January 11th, at 9:28 p.m. Loretta Wright came into the Winona Police Department and filled out the following statement: Threw phone 3 broke it. I woke Devin up to give him a candy bar and a glass of tea. I was talking to my mom. He told me to shut my mouth or he was gonna beat my head off. He came in the kitchen and was gonna hit me. I grabbed a knife, because he frequently abuses me physically, mentally and emotionally. I said I was going to call the cops so he went to front room and got my phone, threw it and broke it. I just got the phone Saturday. He uses meth and when he comes down, he is abusive to my elderly mom. On January 11th, at 9:35 p.m., Anita L. Rather came into the Winona Police Department and filled out the following voluntary statement: Devin has been getting very violent with Loretta’s Mother. He grabbed her phone and threw it to the floor. He broke it. We just got that phone. He run in there like he was going to hurt her. I yelled at him don’t hurt her! Devin say he was Satan...”

Shannon County is located down in the eastern part of Missouri. Comprised primarily of timber tracts, livestock fields and scenic riverways, it’s an area that is mostly passed over by travellers on their way to some place more important. The above excerpt came from last week’s warrants segment of the local newspaper. Similar articles of violence, drug abuse and loutish behavior pop up every other week or so; each one uncouth as the last, recorded in the vernacular and dialect of this remote region. Yes, it’s sad and violent, but there is something else there. The author writes with as much elo-

1 “Shannon County Warrants”, Summersville Beacon (Summersville, MO), Jan. 25, 2017
quence as the victims – the victims equating concern over a broken phone to their own well being, the arbitrary offer of candy bars and tea, and the way Anita claimed, “Devin say he was Satan...” Damned if I say it's funny, but I laugh, nonetheless. For the longest time I have struggled with the bittersweet emotions that I experience when explaining my home to an outside audience.

Media inspired stereotypes of rural America have been fashioned through characters seen on the Andy Griffith Show and Beverly Hillbillies and evolved to become more disparaging as time progressed. It's easy for me to take the dismissive route, hamming up these stereotypes of the lower-class Midwesterner. I can simply brandish the area as a haven for uneducated cousin-fuckers, spoon-slappin' to a banjo riff. It's much harder for me to convey the intricacies of the concurrent existence of beauty and humor in the grotesque image that I witnessed in the people and places of my upbringing. In my work I portray these obscure and delicate feelings in an impolitic and blithe manner. It is akin to someone with Tourrette's gilding a Fabergé egg. The work comes from my own manic defence as I try to reconcile my past experiences and illustrate my frustrations with insufficient channels of communication.

In this thesis, I defend my process through analyzing humor in the grotesque and demonstrating how it applies to the area of my upbringing through comparisons of old masters, theorists, and contemporary artists.
Jack's Recliner, Photograph, 2011
Work Gloves and Samurai Swords, Photograph, 2011

Mother T. & Dale, Photograph, 2011
Pumps at Night, Photograph, 2011

Lunch & Decor, Photograph, 2011
Doll, Photograph, 2011

Heaven Help Us, Babies Got Her Blue Jeans On, Photograph, 2011
Carl's Jr. and Shit-Caked Denim

At the start, I was pursuing three-dimensional illustration. Around this time I was heavily influenced by the works of Chris Sickles and Kim Keever. I had no previous knowledge in this area, but I felt it was time to separate myself from illustration methods that were leading to complacency and arrested development. By branching out I would gain skills that would reduce my conceptual restrictions. The idea that I could create a single figure and reuse in different scenes was an attractive approach. It saved time, got the story across and was consistent throughout. Using polymer clay, fabrics, beads and rocks, I created my first figure, Carl’s Jr.; lovingly named after his place of birth.

The first group of photographs were titled The Completely and Utterly Alone Ranger. It depicts Carl’s Jr. in the depths of methamphetamine induced psychosis. The scribbled drawings, replicating schizophrenic graphomania, overlaid the photographs and spilled out of the frames and onto the walls, bridging the visual gap to bring the audience closer to the central image.

Feeling that the photos weren’t conveying enough of a narrative, I decided to take a series of photographs and pair them with a short story in the format of a children’s book. I chose this format because I believe that writing and images are equally as informative in the progression of a narrative. I enjoy looking at picture books as much any two year old, so why can’t I make one that’s more suited to my tastes? Using a heap of garbage from the basement of Brick City, I created a scene that could be used as a setting for the story. Since Carl’s Jr. was the only figure I had at this point, I created a narrative in which he is all alone and finding destructive ways to cope with his depression. The writing is hand drawn and overlaid in three’s to replicate the graphomania from the previous work.
this is Carl’s Jr.
Can you find him?

Looking for love in all the wrong places.

It’s hot in Carl’s Jr.!
It’s hot out in the Carl’s Jr.!
Carl's Jr. mixed up grain alcohol to make the loneliness go away.
Suicide is the only answer.

Carl’s Jr. can’t go through with it

Carl’s Jr. can’t go through with it.

Creature Comforts Learning to Walk

While I was still working on the Carl’s Jr. book, I was reverting back to the comforts of pen and ink illustrations. It became a cathartic and meditative process compared to the meticulousness of sculpting and was also an expedient way to convey my ideas.

Around this time, I was also looking into other forms of storytelling and picked up video editing and animation software. Seeing that I had all the components available to make an animation, I found it was the next logical step in the progression. The use of video and animation allowed me to introduce new sensory elements, such as motion, timing and sound, that I couldn’t achieve through still images, alone.
100 Acre Trailer Park, Pen and Ink, 2014
Chinese Pine Trees, Pen and Ink, 2014
"Walkin', Mixed Media Animation Stills, 2015"
Walkin’, Mixed Media Animation Stills, 2015
Egg Cartons, Broken Blenders and Dolly Parton’s Knockers

I found polymer clay was too heavy and wouldn’t accept paint the way I hoped it would. At this point, I began experimenting with alternative media. I did not want to create work that was precious, smooth, plastic or valuable. I wanted to create figures that entertained as well as disturbed, and were durable enough to last for an intended purpose.

Using a mixture of egg cartons, glossy magazines and glue, I made a paper pulp, that when dried, resembled the texture of well-treaded road kill. The rough texture not only resembled chewed up meat, but aided in the painting process by creating a type of topographic map where inks could pool and recede. The first experimental figures were Vacanti and Radioactive Disco Peanut. These figures were not directly inspired by redneck culture, but share similarities with the grotesque body that I wished to portray.

Finding that the paper pulp was too rigid to change poses, I began to study puppets, toys and the works of Jim Henson, Hans Bellmer, Bread and Puppet Theater and Ray Harryhausen. Using the paper pulp to sculpt the head and the hands, I then repurposed the body from an old ventriloquist doll to create my first marionette, Pat. Pat’s facial features and physicalities were modelled after reading Mikhail Bakhtin’s views on the grotesque body in his book Rabelais And His World.

The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world...This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body.²

By making the eyes bulge past their sockets, teeth jutting out from a gaping mouth, painting the surface to resemble burnt flesh and sprouting a red phallic nose from the center of its face, I tried to exaggerate the orifices and convexities we commonly attribute to the grotesque image. By using highly saturated colors, odd proportions and exaggerated features, it was my intention to make the object distinguishable enough from reality that it could be approachable.

After Pat's completion I recorded video of her/him in violent scenarios interlaced with grotesque images found in the Shannon County area. I based the video off of the Roger Miller song *My Uncle Used to Love Me but She Died*. I found its absurd lyrics paired with upbeat tempo strangely appealing and analogous to my work.

Pat is continually subjected to violent acts in the video, yet is never truly in danger due to she/him being an inanimate object. This decision was inspired by John Kricfalusi who found cartoons as a great escape to explore violence, disgust and other parts of humanity we contemplate yet never fully exercise. The nearly subliminal shots of dead animals and gore were inserted to play with the balance of humor in the grotesque, pushing the audience towards disgust, but not overwhelming them to the point of repulsion.

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Sculpting Stages of Vacanti, Photograph, 2014
Vacanti, Mixed Media, 2014
Radioactive Disco Peanut, Mixed Media, 2014
"MY UNCLE USED TO LOVE ME BUT SHE DIED"

BY ROGER MILLER
My Uncle Used to Love Me but She Died, Stills, 2015
My Uncle Used to Love Me but She Died, Stills, 2015
My Uncle Used to Love Me but She Died, Stills, 2015
My Uncle Used to Love Me but She Died, Stills, 2015
Dick Head Darryl, Stills, 2016
Dick Head Darryl, Stills, 2016
Dick Head Darryl, Stills, 2016
Dick Head Darryl, Stills, 2016
Dick Head Darryl, Stills, 2016
Daily Gas Station Donuts with Barefoot Junkies

In the Fall of 2015 I began the practice of drawing one image per day. What started out as month long personal challenge, became a journaling habit that helped me document my ideas and influences over the next two years. Daily occurrences, misinterpretations, newspaper articles and events were primary inspirations for these images. For the most part, all drawings were done with pen and ink due to my comfort with the media, its convenience, as well as its availability.
Sketchbook Entries 2015–2017, Pen and Ink
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Sketchbook Entries 2015–2017, Pen and Ink
**Chicken lips and Butt’ry Nips**

After starting the daily sketchbook entries, I began to incorporate them into other projects. The most notable of these would be my next book *Chicken Lips*. The story is formatted in the same children’s book style as *Carl’s Jr*. It is inspired by the time I had to drag a gut-shot possum from underneath the front porch as a child. I was the only one small enough to fit in the crawl space.

Blending personal anecdotes with snippets from classical texts and pulp harlequin novels, I tried to create a rhythm that would both confuse the reader, yet contribute enough to the story to create a feeling of “unheimlich”. Through this process I was able to focus on the main concepts that would eventually become my thesis abstract.
Chicken Lips, Book, 2016
In a small clearing
tucked back in a holler,
a jerry-built house with
three ornery brothers.

Built in pieces
by soft headed vagrants,
mistaken for a dump
with a most unpleasant fragrance.

“Do you see it, Darlene?”

“Yes! You’re beautiful damn ya! Right now I want to look at it and make you look at it.
What does she mean, Flick? It’s a pretty fragile shelter they’ve built for themselves.”
Long Cut, Snuff and Berry Blend Pouch; meaner than shit and foul at the mouth

Their names given by someone, by whom they don’t remember, forgotten and happy alone in that timber.

“-- Snuff, the songsters among birds? The bill takes the place of teeth?”

“Long Cut, run – foolish thing, but never come in – are you lost?”

*Chicken Lips*, Book, 2016
Speaking of fowl,  
the brothers had one!  
That laid magical eggs  
full of wonders and fun.

She came from the east,  
silver curls so fair,  
bright-eyed and bushy tailed.  
A peculiar au pair.

"Why not?"
Snuff asked abruptly, touching the tips of his fingers to his burning mouth.

"You should be grateful to her."

"Isn't darkness settling over the fields?" Asked Long Cut.
Black Cats, skin mags, switchblades and dope; the only things she couldn’t lay were parents and soap.

The boys didn’t care, not one little hair, the skin off their teeth in no need of repair.

“Berry, it is computed that eleven thousand persons have at several times suffered death, rather than submit to break their eggs on the smaller end.”
Snuff proclaimed.

*Chicken Lips*, Book, 2016
Berry, the runt, 
ever got his own egg. 
The only fun for him 
was picking scabs from his leg.

He would huff and puff 
and wallow about, 
blowing piss and vinegar 
out his little pig snout.

"A manly boy does not imitate bad things in men."
Long Cut spit.

"Fat, dead, mad, light, sweet, deaf, white, short, sick, slack, bright!"
Berry yelled.

"Go to bed cherub, you look played out on your feet."

Chicken Lips, Book, 2016
On the Fourth of July, 
Possum gave law the slip, 
while Sheriff watched fireworks 
thrusting air with his hip.

“This event – you will not be surprised, because of my known interest in all occurrences in the heavens.”
Wheezed the Sheriff.

“I like lots of colour, excitement and danger!”
He said to no one in particular.
Possum, cold and peckish,
finds a house in the woods.
Peeping Tom’s hungry boys,
better lock up your goods.

“Don’t do anything foolish, Berry!”
The brother’s counseled.

“How many ounces in a pad of butter? Or gold?!
How many things make a score? A dozen? A gross?!”
Asked Berry.
Quiet as the church mouse he ate a few days before, Possum snakes through the brother’s front door.

Cold wormy digits clasp down on a beak. The boys hear the rustle. They’re up on their feet!

“Get out of my sunshine.”
Squawked the boys.

“All animals seek food”
Said Possum.

*Chicken Lips*, Book, 2016
“Take your mitt’s off her!”
Berry bellows in flight.

Possum doesn’t listen,
just absconds into night.

She lifted her small mournful face, her dark eyes drowned in tears.

“To speak, to thieve, to think, to weigh, to break, to draw, to drive away.”

*Chicken Lips*, Book, 2016
They’re hot on your heels,
Possum, better think quick.
Squirrel down that porch hole!
Lickity split.

Pursuit of Possum beginning to fail.
They soon lose sight of his scabby pink tail.

“I’m in a kind of rage now.”
“On the bat’s back do I fly.”
The worthless borrow.
The worthless do not repay.

_Chicken Lips_, Book, 2016
Longcut’s too bulbous.
    Snuff’s too round.
“Quit fiddlin’ with your pecker, Berry,
    get underground!”

But wait!
    Possums pulled a fast one.
    That dirty ol’ shit!
Taking Chicken Lips hostage
down deep in that pit.

“Avaunt, and quit our shores: it fits not us to
    help men who the gods hate, and will have perish.”
    Says Berry.

“Gosh, what a callous man you are!” Possum responded.
    His low voice, dark and faintly mocking.
Possum stomps a mudhole in the back of Berry’s head. A tooth gone flying, shaky breathing, is he dead?

"What’s a few teeth more or less?"

Laughs Possum.

Those powerful jerks on his arms and his spine would have broken a lesser man.

Do you think him dead?

Chicken Lips, Book, 2016
Bet you did!

Well, Possum thought so too.
Berry out-possumed Possum
sneaking a peashooter from his shoe.

“They are powerful important.
I have all my own!”
Berry answered Possum
with a wheeze and a groan.

*He who digs a pit for others
often falls into it himself.*
Berry loosed the acorn with a mighty fine crack. Possum falls dead before the ground met his back.

“The head and front of my offending hath this extent, no more.”
Chicken is rattled and Berry is too.
They climb into sunlight
to cheers and mountain dew.

What do we call eyes that sparkle? Birds that sing?
Bodies that shine? Thoughts that comfort? Children that Shout?
Her locks shone silver white.

Then he changed the quality of his deep caress to a strangely fiery tenderness.
“I suppose we’d better go home”
“Yes, home!”
The End
Wistful Memories and Shannon County Warrants

In the third year of the program, my subject matter and choice in media became clear. This led to the production of larger illustrative works titled Shannon County Warrants. The decision to move to a larger format came from my desire to implement greater detail and introduce smaller narrative elements. The detritus of rural existence extends the story through indexical narrative. The ephemeral artifacts of everyday life form a more cohesive narrative that is simultaneous as opposed to the chronological narratives formed in my videos and animations. The additional detail allows for greater complexity in textural surface that more closely resembles images of the grotesque. Again, pen and ink was used for its accessibility and expedience. The images are satirical amalgamations, extricated from anecdotes and experiences combined with outsider perceptions of the region.
*High as That Ivory Tower That You’re Standin’ In*, Pen and Ink, 2016
Coexist With Deez Nuts, Pen and Ink, 2016
Kershaw Lamp, Pen and Ink, 2016
Nature Boy, Pen and Ink, 2016
Rebel Buttholes, Pen and Ink, 2016
Meat Trap, Pen and Ink, 2016
Have You Heard the Good News?, Pen and Ink, 2016
Bonding, Pen and Ink, 2016
Birch Tree, Pen and Ink, 2016
Stand By Your Man, Pen and Ink, 2016
Squirrel Skimmin', Pen and Ink, 2016
Stoned Takers, Pen and Ink, 2017
Catch & Release, Pen and Ink, 2017
Cloud 9, Pen and Ink, 2017
Rascals Leading Rascals, Pen and Ink, 2017
Pall Malls & Pelts, Pen and Ink, 2017
Roger Miller on the Muppet Show, 1979, Pen and Ink, 2017
The Mustard Incident, Pen and Ink, 2017
That’s All Folks

“What’s the matter, boy? I bet you can squeal. I bet you can squeal like a pig. Let’s squeal. Squeal now. Squeal.”

“WEEEEEEEEEEEEE!”

This bit of dialog has branded every rural area in the U.S. since the summer of 1972. In the event that you have been tucked under a rock for the past forty years, the line of dialogue comes from the notorious hillbilly horror flick Deliverance. The film recounts the tale of a group of city-boys who fancy a float down the Cahulawassee River before it’s dammed up and the river is drowned under the resultant lake. Their journey takes an unexpected turn as they are accosted, beaten and raped by a gang of local yokels. The film employs no comedic elements to soften the blow of the scene’s horrific violence. Somehow, through the filter of media and our own sick humor, Deliverance has become a part of our modern culture parlance, and is often used as a comedic ploy.

From Joe Biden to South Park, the jokes have permeated mainstream society and branded anyone with a trailer and a banjo as a retarded sodomite. Let’s not forget the other prominent stereotypes pinned to the image of the redneck – unsophisticated, simple, white, loutish, awkward, provincial, uneducated, racist, crude, bigoted, rough, inadequate hygiene, reactionary, incestuous, alcoholic, proselytizing, misogynistic, indigent hate mongers, to name only a few. Popular portrayals have not painted the remote rural regions in a flattering light. Yet, from first-hand experience I have seen these stereotypes become a self-fulfilling prophecy in the violent and goofy shit that occurs

in the cultural fringes of our country. If the portrayal of a culture is continually reduced to a few negative attributes, it becomes much easier for those targeted to adopt them, or even become prideful in their solidarity. Like a blacksmith folding hot steel over on itself, the redneck image is solidified by the adoption of its ridicule. My work is not an answer to this conundrum, but its contemplation has been a formative creative journey.
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