

Externalities of the Metaverse Gaze

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Dedication

Without doubt, adversity, fear, and failure I would never have met my wife. And, I would not have gone to school. Every day for over a decade an immigrant has gone to work and made a living so the man writing these words had the privilege of attending college late in life. She worked hard through the adversity of a recession and now another that is arising around a pandemic. If there is anything good in here, it is because of her. I would not have had children. I would not have become an artist. And, I would not have made the "American" art in this document. An immigrant did all that. Any of the failures in here are mine alone. She gave me the privilege of an education. Hopefully I have done something worthy of her sacrifice.

For my boys.

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Abstract

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The metaverse is a catchall term encapsulating the confluence of our virtual, digital, and physical existences. As realities collide to become the metaverse, new meaning forms infiltrate our spaces armed with a lexicon of fragments. I probe this verse through scatter and fracture wielding the anterior language of oil painting—history’s most prolific form of propagandistic artifice. Forming constructs of alterity, the paintings assemble a fragmentary portrait of our metaverse gaze, where verse convergence has morphed our existence into a Möbius strip—a confluence of inseparable, borderless realities with doppelgangers and ersatz forms invited inward via the device.

This thesis and my paintings scrutinize our emergent metaverse and its gaze, creating a conversation and investigation into the precarity of global social conditions that subjugate humanity through a commodity driven existence—ultimately employing an artform that embraces the pixelated mirror coauthoring our reality with its own reflections.

Keywords: metaverse, metaverse gaze, metaverse artform, Möbius strip, hyperreality, oil paint, political, sociological propaganda, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, racism

A decade ago, I was emerging from a reality collapse with a locus in the Great Recession of 2008. Any new reality would be stained by residues from the other. Realities are peculiar perceptions neatly packaged in ornate wrappings. Constructing a new reality became troublesome, as I observed their fragile formation was not unlike a balloon—easily popped if poked or prodded with scrutiny. In the early 1990's, Jean Baudrillard wrote extensively about our waning grasp on reality. Since his writings, a new form of hyperreality entangles our senses and manifests as the *metaverse*—a catchall term encapsulating our collective physical and digital spheres where virtual and augmented realms converge.¹ A metaverse that has subsumed all previous realities, thus



Figure 1 Marc Bridger, *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019) 92"x72", *Couch Potatoes* (2019) 60"x72", *Achomlishments* (2019) 60"x72"

¹ Metaverse Roadmap, Glossary: *Metaverse*, accessed January 20, 2020.
<http://metaverseroadmap.org/inputs4.html#glossary>

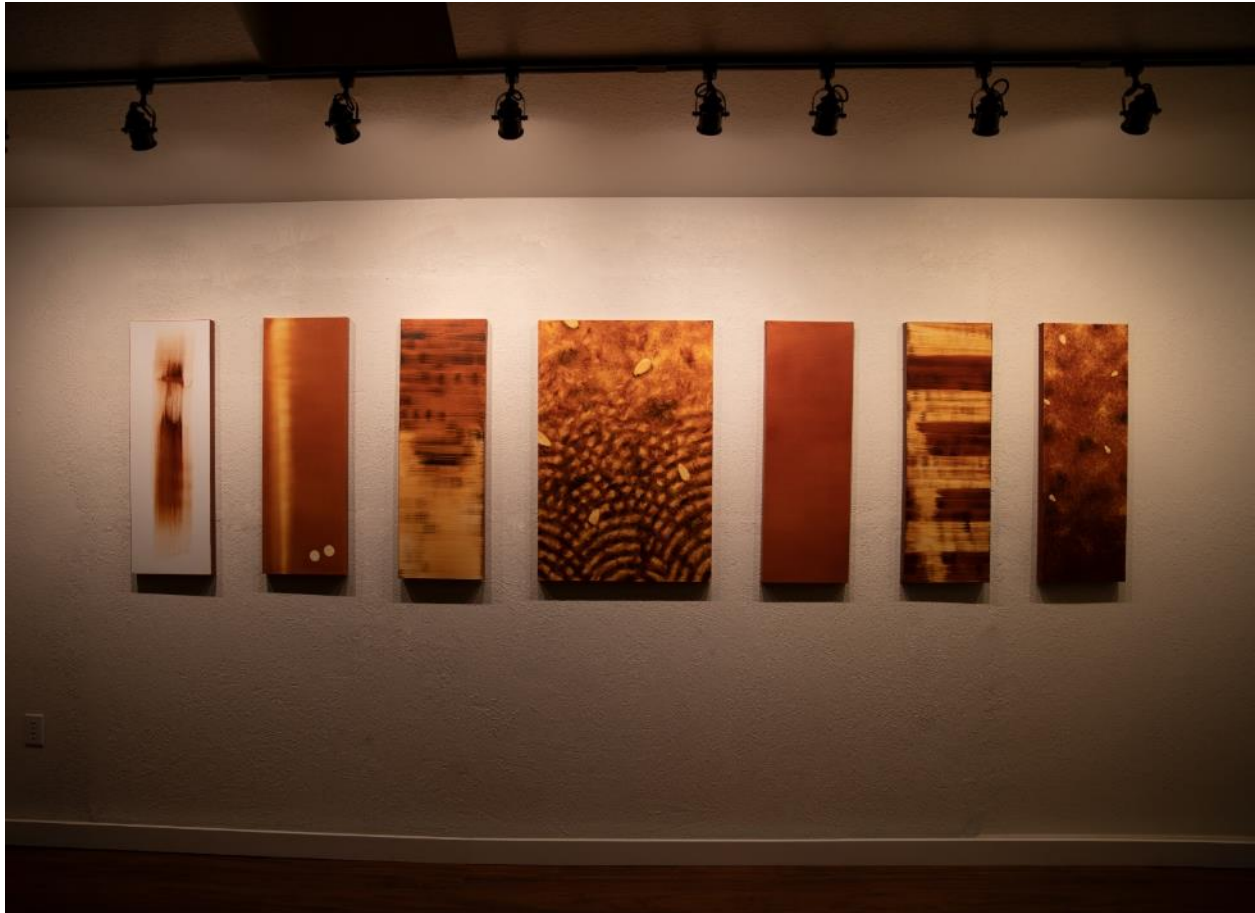


Figure 2 Marc Bridger, *No Trespassing* (2019), oil on canvas , 17ft x 3ft, 7-panel polyptych

altering the guidelines of life. The concept of the metaverse is expanded herein by observing and asserting how our physical and digital verses have morphed into a confluence of inseparable, borderless realities. Morphed into a Möbius strip—a two-dimensional plane that has been cut, twisted, and forced into occupying a nonorientable three-dimensional space and form.² Embedded in my inquiry into our altered reality is the idea of the *metaverse gaze*—a powerful phenomenon with a collective conscious perpetuated by propagandistic atmospheres that give rise to myths that alter the physical via the digital. Atmospheres and myths that form metaverse ambits of refracted realities. Realities where doppelgangers and ersatz forms are invited inward via a

² McAdams, H. T. "The Sieve of Eratosthenes and the Mobius Strip." *The American Mathematical Monthly* 55, no. 5 (1948): 308-09. Accessed February 21, 2020. doi:10.2307/2305481.



Figure 3 Marc Bridger, *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019), 30ft x 15ft (approx.), metaverse artform

a duplicitous device. A device that is both mirror and window—surreptitiously and simultaneously coaxing the metaverse gaze. And it is this gaze that triggers the underlying fear driving my work, as our socio-political climate sways further left and right. Within my body of work, each metaphor rich fragment contributes to a portrait of our metaverse, while the artform itself becomes an iteration of self-referential simultaneity. A transcendent reflective residue of verse convergence. As such, the artform arises as a complex emerging utterance. An amalgam of discourse that becomes its own recursive conversation and substrate beneath its subject—a third-order simulacrum. This thesis navigates these assertions by translating and traversing our twisted reality, its phased artform, and the fragments emerging as externalities of the metaverse gaze.

"Space Invaders" encapsulates these concerns in a body of work where imaginative plots and the McDonald's crew reemerge as celebrity signifiers; while consumerism, corporate antagonism, and political vicinities fortify the social tensions that become hostile invaders within my paintings. From



Figure 4 Marc Bridger, *Pair of Dise* (2020), 50ft x 30ft (approx.), metaverse artform

diminutive hatching paint marks to vacillating bands of darks and lights, my paintings interrogate reality collisions through an infusion of personal figurative images enmeshed with nostalgia, advertising emblems, and the spectacle of pop-culture. Wielding history's most prolific form of propagandistic artifice, the latest paintings fracture and fragment to form constructs of alterity, while transcending their liminal existence between digital and physical spheres. Open constructs that push the boundaries of painting's periphery, while simultaneously capturing the precarity within our metaverse milieu. But beneath each capriccio one may apprehend the intrinsic urgency of an artist, husband, and father vainly struggling to elude fear's shadow.

1. Part 1 – Overview

Double-Slit Doppelganger (2018-19), *Achomlishments* [sic] (2019), and *Couch Potatoes* (2019) encompass the first half of the "Space Invaders" series (Figure 1). Subsequently, the body fragments into the spatial paintings: *No Trespassing* (2019), *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019), and *Pair of Dise* (2020) (Figures 3-5).^{3,4,5,6} Including these fragmentary paintings, there are six works in the body with a cumulative total of fifty-two (52) oil on canvas paintings and fragments. Part 1 and 2 of this



Figure 5 Marc Bridger, *Guest Network* (2018-19), oil on canvas, 54.5" x 34"

³ Bridger, Marc, Gallery image of *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019) 92"x72", *Couch Potatoes* (2019) 60"x72", *Achomlishments* (60"x72"). Photograph by Marc Bridger (2019).

⁴ Bridger, Marc, Gallery image of *No Trespassing* (2019), 17ft x 3ft. Photograph by Marc Bridger (2019).

⁵ Bridger, Marc, Gallery image of *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019), 36ft x 15ft. Photograph by Marc Bridger (2019).

⁶ Bridger, Marc, Gallery image of *Pair of Dise* (2020), 36ft x 15ft. Photograph by Marc Bridger (2019).

thesis present recondite terms such as *metaverse* and *metaverse gaze* that are expanded to contextualize the subsequent discussion.

The sartorial bandits, marks, hatching, and related motifs were initiated in *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2018-19) (Figure 1). The painting includes a young Guatemalan refugee named Claudia Gomez as the primary protagonist. Preceding this painting, my sons and spouse were models in figurative work that subtly commented on anomie, dissonance, and innocence lost in a device-oriented sphere. *Guest Network* (2018-19) is a formative transitory study where the playful hamburger eyes in *Doppelganger* make an appearance from the darkness; just over my young son's hip (top-center of Figure 5).

After *Doppelganger*, the primary figures in the "Space Invaders" series change. Since intent intermixed with personal experiences persist as our most potent tangibles upon which to react, I observed the parallels between *Doppelganger* and our lives. Moving into 2019, the headlines and events unfolding in the United States were frightening, including the rise in overt white supremacy, violent actions by law enforcement against minorities, malice at the border, and the outwardly xenophobic rhetoric. Therefore, my work's direction drifted toward a concern for my family as well as those under hate's reticle. My spouse, an immigrant from Brazil, subsumes Claudia's role as a border bandit, while our sons' mixed nationalistic heritage and race are appropriately vilified and garbed. As such, the series continues to engage our social condition, examining our waning grasp on a lone physical existence by wielding the pixelated mirror of the metaverse that alters our personal reality and then fuses itself with that reflection.

1.1. Fear and Faith

It is a recent revelation and event—seeing through the decussations of paint, beneath the underpainting, gesso, and canvas. There it lies under every expression and mark: *fear*. You won't

find it in my previous statements or prior words. But it is there; lurking and staining the canvas. It seeps down and up into every layer of the work—a transparent pigment that manifests in motive, while wielding its creator as brush. Piet Mondrian said of Neoplasticism in an interview:

“People too often view the work of art as an object of luxury, something merely pleasant, even as a decoration—something that lies outside life. Yet art and life are one; art and life are both expressions of truth. If, for instance, we see that equilibrated relationships in society signify what is just, then one realizes that in art, too, the demands of life press forward when the spirit of the time is ready.”⁷

I first began to critically consider fear in Chicago’s outer suburbs back in 2004. A dense flat cloud hovered a few feet off the floor with occasional gusts accumulating various breaths into a lurid stench. Dimly lit lamps with shades from the 70s alongside furniture from a period before illuminated a dark, dank, and musty AA room. I sat there tapping my foot while attempting to appear insouciant. A few months later, I would be keeling before a sponsor, while humbly reading from notebook paper where fears were jotted quickly the night before. I was anxious to get through those steps and this one was a breeze. Fears? That’s easy. You see, the fourth AA step is to make a “searching and fearless moral inventory” of ourselves after having admitted we were powerless over fear in the first.⁸

⁷ Mondrian, Piet, “A Dialogue on Neoplasticism”, Translated by Hans L.C. Jaffé, De Stijl. accessed June 24, 2020 <https://modernistarchitecture.wordpress.com/2010/10/17/piet-mondrian%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9ca-dialogue-on-neoplasticism%E2%80%9d/>

⁸ The 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), [alcoholics.org](https://www.alcohol.org/alcoholics-anonymous/), accessed February 02, 2020, <https://www.alcohol.org/alcoholics-anonymous/>

I began confidently reading my fears while noting a sort of pitiful facial expression in my young sponsor. It was just a brief look, but in that look, I apprehended a doubt. Both in him and



Figure 6 Marc Bridger, *Couch Potatoes* (2019), oil on canvas, 60" x 72"

simultaneously in my assured oratory. While I do not recall each specific fear, I do remember they were all similar in theme to the one I do recollect stating with conviction: "I am afraid of heights."

While I had fallen into an abysmal chasm at that point in life, it would take much more adversity and several more years before I would reach the precipice of my ignorance and do something about it. With two years sobriety and three years beyond my divorce of twelve, I relocated in 2005 to start over. I purchased a small house in Florida with a VA loan and married a Brazilian immigrant that was residing in West Virginia. We had met on a Christian dating website which was a somewhat taboo method at the time; especially for a couple that proclaimed that God and Jesus had brought them together. However, for over ten years I had cultivated a parallel persona in a reality known as a Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) game. I played and escaped to several over the ensuing decades including Ultima Online, Everquest, and Dark Age of Camelot, along with other aliases that arose on gaming forums and similar emergent communities within a digital existence. Therefore, the method of meeting her online seemed normal to me. Growing up in the "Bible-Belt" along with the "higher power" underpinnings of the AA program led to an ascetic life. Yet, deep beneath my devotion were doubts. Doubts safely sealed in faith by fear—the evangelical's versatile gyve. A spherical shackle with its own version of escapism.

Online, we can live alternate lives. Whether that occurs in an MMO like Ultima Online and Everquest, or through Facebook and Twitter, we are digitally detached from our physical being and can portray parts of our personality that is otherwise suppressed. This online manufacturing of identity along with the culture of digital realms is signified in my work through various forms, including 1980s video game inclusions that tap into nostalgia. In *Couch Potatoes* (2019) (Figure 6) a Pacman ghost sits on the female bandit's knee, peering into the device that gives it life—a sort of

odd twist on the mirror, vanity, and creation.⁹ The series title “Space Invaders” is a double entendre with multiple meanings and references that signify popular culture, gaming culture, and the online side of the metaverse. Space Invaders was a popular video game from the 1980s, but the word “space” is an underlying theme in my work referencing ideology as a hostile invader that infiltrates personal spaces through our devices. Space itself becomes a spatial form and takes on new metaphorical meanings in the later fragmentary works while assisting in their openness and unfinalizable state (Figures 3 and 4).¹⁰ Ultimately it is this emancipatory space that leads the work to its autoexhibiting metaverse artform which is navigated in Part 3.

One method fears manifest in my paintings is through costumes, caricature, and clothing. My wife and our sons’ mixed nationalistic heritage and race are appropriately vilified and garbed with the stripes of the outlaw (Figure 6). These sartorial bandits derive their dress from the initial work in the series that introduces 1970s and 1980s McDonald’s nostalgia as allegorical constructs. Thus, my immigrant wife takes on the role of the Hamburglar, along with her crony sons. (Figure 1).

Similarly, the physical border situation and refugee vilification is a consideration in the fragmentary work *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019) that embeds 1980s advertising slogans from McDonald’s and Taco Bell, intertwining contemporaneous border issues with the confusing sensibilities of misinformation that emanate from the metaverse (Figure 7).¹¹

⁹ Bridger, Marc, *Couch Potatoes* (2019)

¹⁰ Bridger, Marc, *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019) and *Pair of Dise* (2019)

¹¹ Bridger, Marc, Sobriquet *Taco Mac*, from *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019)



Figure 7 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Taco Mac*, from *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019), oil on canvas, fragment: 30"x48". Advertising motifs, symbols, and logos commingle with concerns relating to misinformation, corporations, capitalism, and culture. The unfolding border skirmishes take on new meaning through these fragmentary lenses.

In 2009, we had our first child—born beneath a looming storm that had begun to manifest in 2008 with news reports of a recession. News reports that talked of banks, bubbles, and blunders. But, none of that concerned me, as I had a deep trust in God and “America.” We believed, like many “Americans,” there were people in charge out there that made sure the right thing would be done. We were hard working and “America” was the greatest and most powerful nation on the planet that demonstrated meritocracies thrived. Plus, shortly after my son was born, we had a new President and he would ensure good came to “Americans”. Afterall, *God has a plan* and we were faithful Christians in a country where its leaders frequently proclaim: “God bless America.” A nation with a moniker placed in quotes to emphasize the demonym's appropriation. A name inferring two continents that includes far more people and cultures than the one represented.

My previous ties to Christianity and its connection to the conservative right, occasionally manifest through symbols. Beginning with *Run a Make Border the For!*, my painting surfaces fragment with the inclusion of digital spatial intrusions (Figure 3).¹² Each fragment is accompanied by a *sobriquet*,



Figure 8 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Reality Wave*, oil on canvas, fragment 36"x36" from *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019). Among many embedded forms, spheres, and symbols is a Jesus Fish that references religion, politics, and cults.

¹² Bridger, Marc, *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019)

since they are not physically or conceptually considered independent works or panels in the true sense of a polyptych. Instead, each canvas fragment is a part of a larger whole, while space is a digital intrusion into the picture plane (explicated in Part 3). The *Reality Wave* fragment from *Run a Make Border the For!* embeds the “Jesus Fish” into the narrative, linking to the evangelical political power arising in recent years (Figure 8).¹³ Depending on their arrangement and context, the dark and light alternating bands of the thief can be recontextualized to invoke U.S. “Americanism” through the flag’s stripes that connote nationalism. Jasper Johns *Flag* (1955) uses

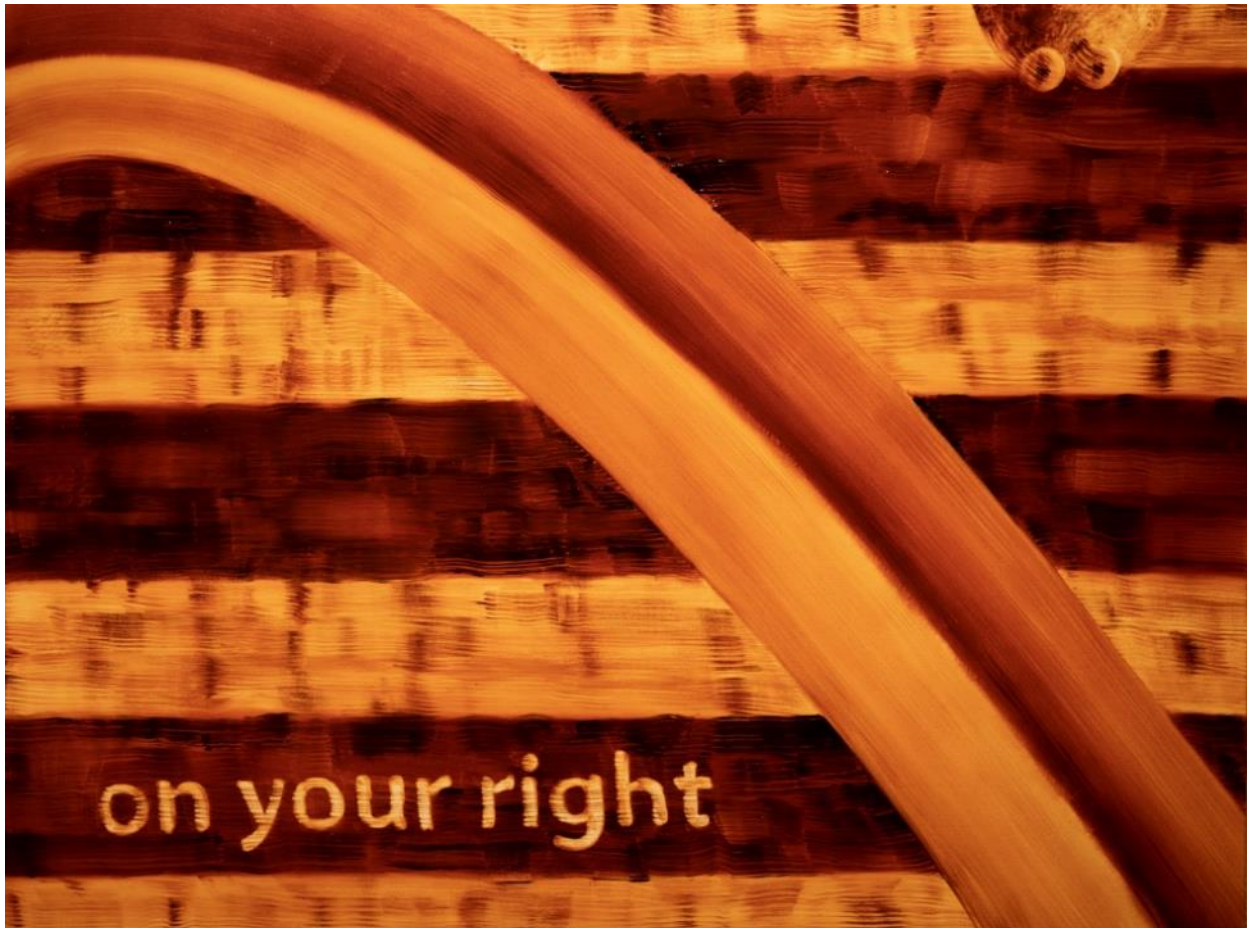


Figure 9 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *This Exit*, oil on canvas, fragment 36"x48" from *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019)

¹³ Bridger, Marc, Sobriquet: *Reality Wave*, from *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019)

the same symbology to evoke nationalist sensibilities. Similarly, in the *This Exit* fragment the bands evoke nationalism through the similar signifier of U.S. “American” flag stripes (Figure 9).¹⁴

The tacit and trite metaphor of reality as a bubble has intriguing parallels throughout work prior to and including the “Space Invaders” series, where balloons, eyes, and spherical forms are constantly emerging like the one located at the center of *Couch Potatoes* (Figure 6). The eyes can have varied connotations and their context expands potential meaning construction. Despite their ambiguity, privacy is a chief concern among metaverse culture in recent years, subsequent to the revelations exposed by Edward Snowden. The eyes are befitting signifiers for the intelligence conglomerate of nations known as the “Five-Eyes”, along with CCTV, and various other monitoring infrastructure emerging from the device saturated metaverse. The Five Eyes Intelligence Oversight and Review Council (FIORC) is an intelligence alliance comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.¹⁵ Similarly, the Fourteen-Eyes includes the Five-Eyes nations along with Belgium, Italy, France, and other European nations. The Fourteen- and Five-Eyes alliances gather, analyze, and share online behavior and browsing data amongst their respective intelligence agencies, subverting the privacy rights of citizens. Relatedly, Siri, Alexa, and Cortana provide big tech with uninterrupted live wire-tapping.¹⁶ Thus, the spheres, eyes, and balloons all become reminders of our fragile metaverse reality, its democracies, and the precarity shrouding their existence (Figure 8).¹⁷ These whimsical cartoon-like forms are predominately influenced by

¹⁴ Bridger, Marc, Sobriquet *This Exit*, from *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019)

¹⁵ Five Eyes Intelligence Oversight and Review Council (FIORC), accessed March 15, 2020
<https://www.dni.gov/index.php/who-we-are/organizations/enterprise-capacity/chco/chco-related-menus/chco-related-links/recruitment-and-outreach/217-about/organization/icig-pages/2660-icig-fiorc>

¹⁶ Hern, Alex, “Apple whistleblower goes public over ‘lack of action’”, The Guardian, accessed May 20, 2020,
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/may/20/apple-whistleblower-goes-public-over-lack-of-action>

¹⁷ Bridger, Marc, sobriquet *Reality Wave*, from *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019)

Phillip Guston's late figurative work which used hooded figures, shoes, bizarre eyes, and other ordinary objects from 1969 forward.

By 2011, my balloon and bubbles had burst—beginning with one that shrouded them all in naiveté. Thinkers such as Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, and Christopher Hitchens combined with ideas navigating economic externalities and corporate complicities; catalyzing a deep investigation into the recession fueled by a voracious appetite I developed to know the truth. The truth about the U.S. and its history. The truth about its God. And, the truth about the truth. Life's phantasmagoria was under siege along with all the scrim it used to veil its spin. But, as I shoved the drapery of life aside, I would often discover my own complicities enfolded in fear. For the first time, I began to understand. While the demythologizing process would take many more years, each myth vanquished would reveal a new kind of fear. Until one day, I felt comfortable enough about my new reality, worldview, and pursuit of knowledge that I let go of fear. But, as I would discover in “Space Invaders”, I never let it go at all. I merely gave it a mask and a new place to emerge.

1.2. Artworld Arrival

I got here late. A dilatory arrival to this artworld. Bereft of any skill or knowledge—a child's interest embedded in a simpleton searching for a purpose at forty. Three years after the recession I was starting over and was finally going back to college. Behind, I was leaving an ineffective career in technology. Mostly, though, ignorance was the torment I was trying to flee. A dullard propagandized and indoctrinated in the religion of jingoism and Jesus. Ten years ago this rube initiated a reboot—a reprogramming via a confluence of new interests, ideas, and insights, while doubt succeeded my savior.

But the faith I forfeited was supplanted by something peculiarly familiar. As I wrapped up a B.F.A. four years later, a professor looked at my art and deemed it a failure. I was bothered that he was right. I could see the failure exuding in so many ways. But it was a different kind of failure than the one he derided. For him, the work lacked a formal preoccupation with medium specificity. For him, they were didactic. For him, they were "preaching to the choir." And, for him, they failed in conformity to a modernist aesthetic he clung to with fervor. But I could see other failures. Certainly, some of his assessments resonated and beneath the fanaticism I could see where he was right.

Nevertheless, I was startled—confused by a deep sense of déjà vu triggered continuously within the vast sphere of open-mindedness that is art. The epiphany was slow but assured—I was fleeing zealots and dogma beneath a steeple and I ran directly into the clutches of an entirely new Christ. One with an acceptive messiah of impartiality, garbed in diversity, with its priests gowned in neutrality. It had its own shrines, saints, and celebrities. A new kind of faith. A new kind of cathedral. The same kind of zeal.

But within my new faith, I could not locate a cognate congregation—a satisfactory sect. A chapel to my liking. A pulpit, pew, and preacher to call my own. Evangelicals have Baptists, Church of Christ, Methodists, Presbyterians, ad infinitum. Art? It too has denominations. Fiends and fanatics of movements, cult followers, and critics mired in the tabernacle's doctrine. It too, has agents of hypocrisy. It is a variegated vista of pluralism with manifold modes—but my interest in them too diffuse. Faithful, but recalcitrant and recusant.

Thus, in these pages you will discover a success in failure. An artist that delves into representation, overt political themes, caricature, didactic meanderings, and numerous other no-no's that invoke gasps, feigned faints, and derisive dismissals. Over the years as my affection for art and its knowledge grew, I was simultaneously in search for a truth. A truth kept hidden away by another

kind of zealot. An elusive truth about perception and reality. And, the emerging phenomena that



Figure 10 Marc Bridger, Detail from *Couch Potatoes* (2019). Copied limbs, repetition, doppelgangers, and numerous other similar devices connote reflection, recursion, duplicity, and the farces associated with information, while identity manufacturing is rampant among the aliases of online realms.

reality's truth is a form of reflection (Figure 10).¹⁸

My artworld arrival and its formative months

coincided with a reality

under siege as I began a

journey late in life to attain

what Germans call

Bildung—the long process of

personal developmental

expansion through the

spiritual, cultural, and

social maturation including

a self-cultivation process.¹⁹

Yet, spiritual and cultural

development would prove

problematic as I discovered

that both are tightly

¹⁸ Bridger, Marc, Detail from *Couch Potatoes* (2019)

¹⁹ Varkøy, Øivind. "The Concept of 'Bildung'" *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 18, no. 1 (2010): 85-96. Accessed February 4, 2020

intertwined with the reality they prop up; and once that reality is in shambles, so too was my place in its culture.



Figure 11 Marc Bridger, detail of the Hamburglar in *Double-slit Doppelganger* (2019), garbed and transformed into the metaverse myth of refugee as culture thief.

1.3. Externalities

While discovering the artworld's nuances, I was simultaneously effacing a past of indoctrination. Doubts about nationalism, history, and our role in other nations coincided with reevaluations in religion and similar themes. As the Great Recession delivered its destruction, I developed enormous skepticism; doubting all forms of information and knowledge, including perceptions of my identity. An identity rooted in a prolific symptomatic syndrome known as American Exceptionalism.

American Exceptionalism coincides with our revolutionary beginnings as a nation along with a creed derived from the Declaration of Independence that notes an ideology "described in five words: liberty, egalitarianism,

individualism, populism, and laissez-faire.”²⁰ American Exceptionalism shapes “American” reality as one of many nationalistic myths that alludes to the country and its inhabitants as having a uniquely virtuous sense of duty and responsibility to spread a superior type of government and ideology worldwide—one of democracy, personal liberty, and freedom.²¹

But what we declare and what we do as a nation are in hypocritical discordance. This is exemplified by the CIA meddling in South and Central America such as Chile, Guatemala, and Brazil. Meddling that demonstrated we were more interested in controlling a nation’s assets than fostering a sense of democracy. We instigated dictatorial coups, overthrowing democratically elected governments that subsequently subjected those nation’s citizens to violently oppressive regimes—obliterating their reality while bolstering our own. Coincidentally, a young Guatemalan refugee is the main protagonist in *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2018) (Figure 11), while my Brazilian wife subsumes her role in later work, forming tangential connections to the United States posturing against Central and South America, along with the plight the U.S. helped create.²²

Overseas the same has been true for democratically elected leaders such as Mohammed Mossadegh who was at one time on the cover of Time Magazine for his notable leadership. Before Kermit Roosevelt, grandson to Theodore, led a CIA effort to overthrow Mossadegh’s government as fear arose in the region around oil’s control.²³ Mossadegh, a democratically elected leader, was replaced by the United States. Replaced with Mohammad Reza Shah, one of the most brutal and

²⁰ Lipset, Seymour, *American Exceptionalism*, The Washington Post, 1996, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/americanexceptionalism.htm>

²¹ Ibid

²² Bridger, Marc, detail of *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019)

²³ Ayella, Joe, *American Coup*, 2010

oppressive tyrants of our time. The exact same thing we did in Chile by assisting in the overthrow of Allende and installing the despot Pinochet. A repetitive pattern that continues into the present.

As time passed, I came to doubt everything to a point of diffidence. In a journey such as this, when most of your beliefs are deconstructed and unmasked as forms of deceit, the inner soul becomes a sort of *externality* to the unfolding process. A process imparting knowledge, but a sort of knowledge that becomes detrimental to the enclosure that forms the balloon of reality—emancipated through exile, as dissidence supplants existence.



Figure 12 Francisco Goya, *The Third of May 1808* (1814), oil on canvas, 104.7 x 135.8" (Museo del Prado, Madrid)

Externality is an economic term “referring to a cost or benefit incurred or received by a third party”; however, the third party has no control over the creation of that cost or benefit.²⁴ The term is appropriated and used in related ways throughout this thesis. After the housing bubble of 2008 that led to Bears Sterns demise and the subsequent recession, many people became *externalities* of the financial catastrophe through job loss, foreclosure, and bankruptcy. Thus, externality is a consequence, much like the notion of “collateral damage” in that it relates to a party that has become impacted by an event, without control over their participation or outcome.

The years following the 2008 recession were a catalyst for discovery, revealing we had become externalities and members of a precariat class of people. Precariat is a portmanteau combining *precarity* with *proletariat*, but is “distinguished from the proletariat, which is unified by its labor conditions, in that it is fragmented and molecular. It encompasses a range of subjects of revolt, from higher-educated casual workers in the media and culture industries, to undocumented migrants” while capturing the precarious conditions emanating from housing and employment



Figure 13 Marc Bridger, *Externalities of 2008* (2014), mix media diptych, 20" x 60"

²⁴ Investopedia, *Externality*, accessed January 27, 2020, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/e/externality.asp>

within the current capitalist system.²⁵ To describe this new reality, I completed an undergraduate mix-media drawing titled *Externalities of 2008* (2014) that borrowed from Goya's *Third of May 1808* (1814) and carried this description:

"The housing bubble ushered in a moment in history when the evolution of capitalism should have afforded society an opportunity to reexamine the role of its financial infrastructure to ensure all were empathetically and equitably considered Goya's historical depiction of an execution is used as a metaphor for the acts exacted on Americans, and subsequently the entire globe, by the 1%, free market, corporate government, and the federal reserve." [*Externalities of 2008* (2014)]²⁶

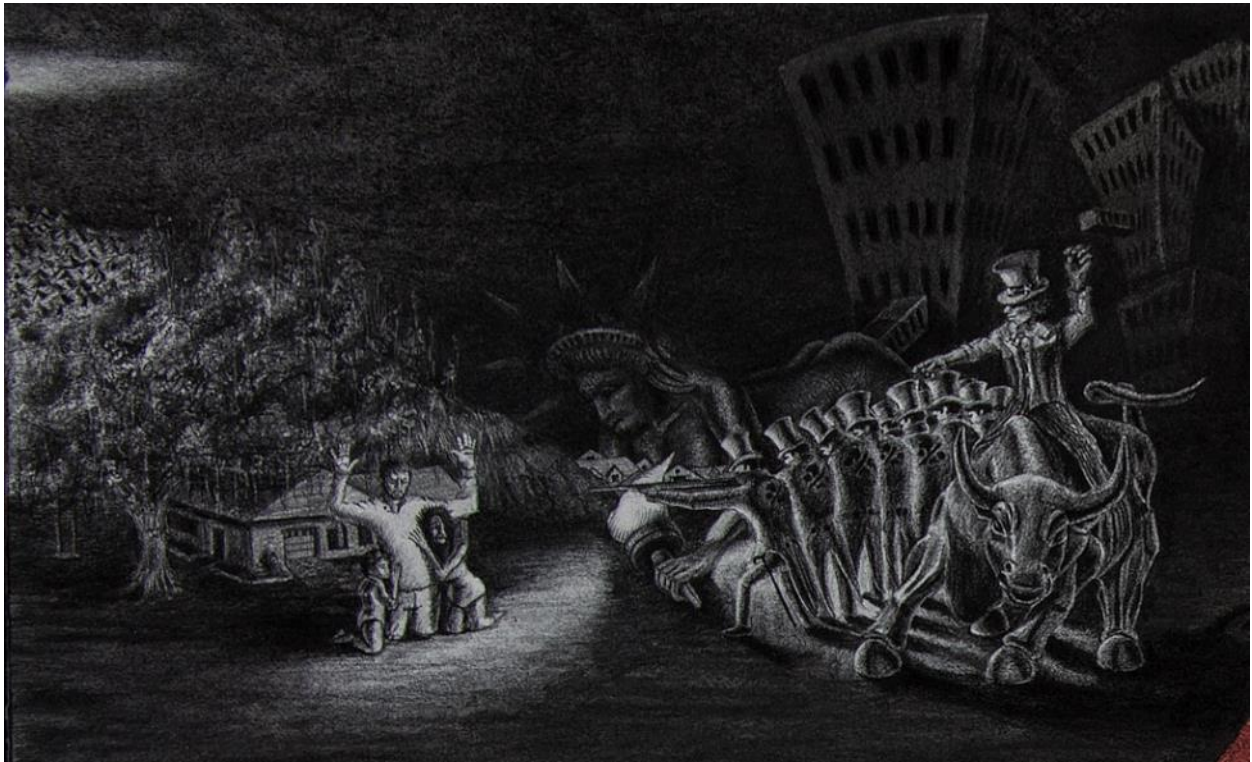


Figure 14 Marc Bridger, Detail *Externalities of 2008* (2014)

²⁵ Robinson, Andy, "Precariatans of all countries, unite!", Ceasefire, March 18, 2011, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-precarity/>

²⁶ Bridger, Marc, excerpt of artist statement for *Externalities of 2008* (2014)

The drawing interrogates the myths propping up the mainstream reasoning behind the recession.

The idea of an externality along with the drawing's personal, political, and fragmentary nature exhibits early evidence as a harbinger to the current "Space Invaders" trajectory (Figure 13-

14).²⁷ Within the drawing was embedded a "Corporate Hanging Family" motif I developed in

2013 that was based on the common bumper-sticker of a family holding hands; however, each family member hung from a figurative noose. (Figure 15).²⁸ The motif expressed my dismay at the recession's destruction, while connecting to the reality collapse through a demythologizing process, including the notions of externalities. The motif reemerged in *Double-Slit Doppelganger*



Figure 16 Marc Bridger, Detail of "Corporate Hanging Family" motif from *Corporate Freedom* (2013)



Figure 15 Marc Bridger, Detail from *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019) with the corporate hanging family faintly displayed in the window.

within the right window-slit (Figure 16).

The idea of an *externality* is revisited throughout this body of work with a varied twist that delves beyond literal economics to the value we incur and place

²⁷ Bridger, Marc *Externalities of 2008* (2014) and detail images

²⁸ Bridger, Marc "Corporate Hanging Family" motif

upon a life. Beginning with *Doppelganger* (2018-19) (Figure 1 and 47), the main protagonist is an externality to a sinister uprising; infiltrating as a set of metaverse events that would envelop her



Figure 17 Marc Bridger, *Achomlishments* (2019), oil on canvas, 60"x72"

individuality, persona, and ultimately her life as she is transformed into a metaverse myth.²⁹

1.4. Cultural Transience

My reality collapse coincided with a re-reality centered in digital spheres, art, and a city culture apprehended by a device's window—a linking lens to the emerging metaverse. A metaverse that encapsulates many components from each sphere into an emergent amalgam. In “The Radicant” by Nicolas Bourriaud an alternate viewpoint for postmodernism is presented as *altermodernity*. Bourriaud sees art as a traversal of multiculturalism immersed in globalization where artists become “tenants of existing forms.”³⁰ Urban wanderers and nomadic sign gatherers that are not of a single root, but of a *radicant*, like the ivy that “develop their roots as they advance.”³¹ As they traverse, travel, and translate, these artists put down new roots constituting a “laboratory of identities” expressing not their origin, but the “path they take between that tradition and the various contexts they traverse” as they perform acts of translation in their work.³² I found profound resonance in this philosophical outlook where artists become “semionauts” who set forms in motion as part of a universal megalopolis, as part of “the city, the city, the city”.³³

And that is when it dawned me—my incompatibility. The origin of being an outcast along with its fraught and disorienting friction. The reason I often have felt lost in translation this past decade. This new world of art and its artworld belong very much to the culture of cities. Its history, galleries, museums, and most of its creation are all in the city. This book by Bourriaud invokes the city and its

²⁹ Bridger, Marc, *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2018-19)

³⁰ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lukas & Sterberg, New York, 2009, 56

³¹ Ibid 51

³² Ibid 51-52

³³ Ibid, 36-53

synonyms on every page. Art belongs to the city. And I am not from the city. My culture and roots are different. There is an assumption in this book about Westerners and postmodernism clumping us all into a single culture while “the other” are submitted to a sort of “reverse colonialism.”³⁴ Since arriving I have feared fitting in. But, who doesn’t? But it was a different kind of fear of fitting in. Without articulating it, without saying it, without uttering it I knew my history, roots, and drawl were deemed lesser. Prior to the age of forty, art and city culture were exotic mysteries shrouded in fast confusion and foreign languages. And I had sought refuge from the mores of my shattering reality in this new art culture, only to find it too had a prerequisite in the city.

Bourriaud says “we must move beyond the peaceful and sterile coexistence of reified cultures (multiculturalism) to a state of cooperation among cultures that are equally critical of their own identity—that is to say we must reach the stage of translation.”³⁵ Whatever transgressions I make in art formally or otherwise, I hope in this supplication you will discover an authenticity in the words and work. An echt revolt and refusal “to be assigned to any identifiable and irrevocable aesthetic family” as I wander through many existing forms and realities for truth.³⁶

From the early 90s forward, I became immersed in the internet along with an online gaming culture and its escapism. Thus, it is the digital realm and its culture that I translate. It is that culture that I traverse as an ivy weaving through various social and political phenomena arising in two domains that have become the metaverse. An intertwining vine looping and linking art cultures with social and digital realms, while often recalling a past quixotic reality. Wandering through identity, spatial enigmas, and absurd replicants within our represented layers. A sojourner of the alias. A smirking

³⁴ Ibid 27

³⁵ Ibid 27-28

³⁶ Ibid, 57

outcast cognizant of his turpitudes and transgressions. Cognizant of his caricatures—cognizant of his sins. Probing life for new ideas, emotions, and understanding of the human condition. But embedded in the fabric is a fretwork—an infesting fear that infiltrates deep beneath the facades of intent and theory. Trepidations covered in paint. Bandits and phantoms that others don't see:

"There's a darkness upon me that's flooded in light
In the fine print they tell me what's wrong and what's right
And it comes in black and it comes in white
And I'm frightened by those that don't see it."³⁷

Through a methodical study of society, culture, and art; I have been assembling a new reality. But the metaverse has become meddlesome. I see the hivemind and its actions culminating in a stampeding herd. Meanwhile, doubts are cause for recoil as captured on each canvas. The metaverse is in mutiny—sabotaging and jeopardizing this fragile new verse. While its gaze yields a coup of thought and imposter knowledge, the metaverse takes ahold of a soul and creates a minion. It creates a follower. But it is also an orchestra's conductor waving a baton to blaring stridency. A ghastly gawk and leering gaze that observes, adjusts, and alters. I see the specter's ruse and perhaps you will too, as we exhume my work and reveal a frightened soul. A refugee of ignorance—afraid of the farces that prop up our reality and its faiths. Afraid of this city, its cult, and its art.

The work in this body demonstrated a maturation in style and direction. It is work that is testament that authorship is dead, as everything I do is easily attributable to another artist, action, or thinker. Underneath these motives, however, there is a crisis in choice. A dilemma rooted in derision and the ebullient conceit that has attempted to efface certain leanings in my work. Fear fuels a quixotic paranoia that seems embattled by a desire to participate. Yet, it is failure that

³⁷ The Avett Brothers, "*Head Full of Doubt/Road Full of Promise*", YouTube, Accessed January 20, 2020, 4:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QeYSqZPzwr8>

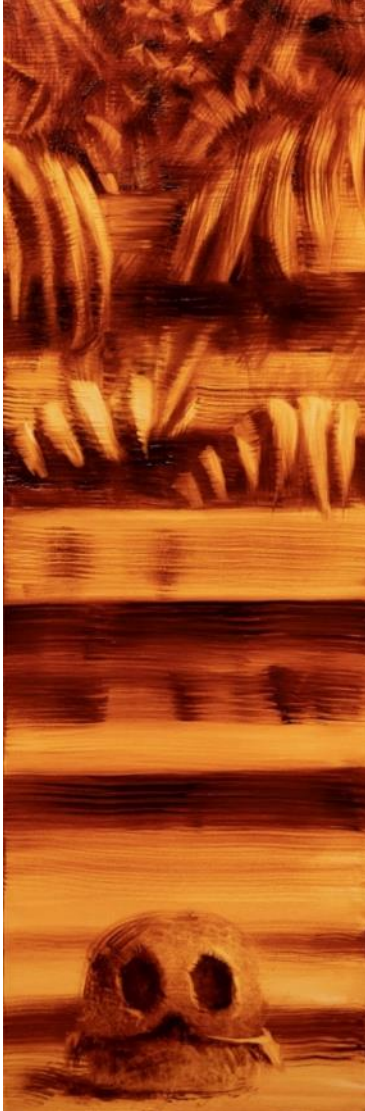


Figure 18 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Skull Burger*, oil on canvas, fragment: 12" x 36" from *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019). A twisted consumerist memento mori with stripes evoking nationalist flag symbolism and reality phasing.

shrouds every motive in fear. While writing this section I revisited a chapter by Nicolas Bourriaud that is uncanny and serendipitous to the theme, tenor, and tone of my doubts. Doubts about my work's "legal status" and the bubble I am attempting to penetrate—protected by "customs officers and border guards of culture" that thrill "its jurists to no end" as they open "police investigations" probing: "what right do you have to enter art's soil? ... Is it art or not?"³⁸

1.5. Metaverse

Globally, we are at the forefront of a new social construct where each of us is a colluding participant in a dilemma of authenticity.

Existing in a liminal arena of overlapping physical and digital spheres—interlacing realities. Existing as a *consequence* of our metaverse. The word metaverse is a portmanteau originating as a neologism by Neal Stephenson in the 1992 science fiction novel

"Snow Crash" where in the acknowledgments he discusses the

words "avatar" and "metaverse" as being his inventions upon

deciding that "existing words (such as 'virtual reality') were simply too awkward to use."³⁹ Subsequently, the metaverse has become a

catchall term for our collective physical and digital spheres, where virtual and augmented realities

³⁸ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lukas & Sterberg, New York, 2009, 105-6

³⁹ Stephenson, Neal, *Snow Crash*. Budapest: Metropolis Media, 1992.

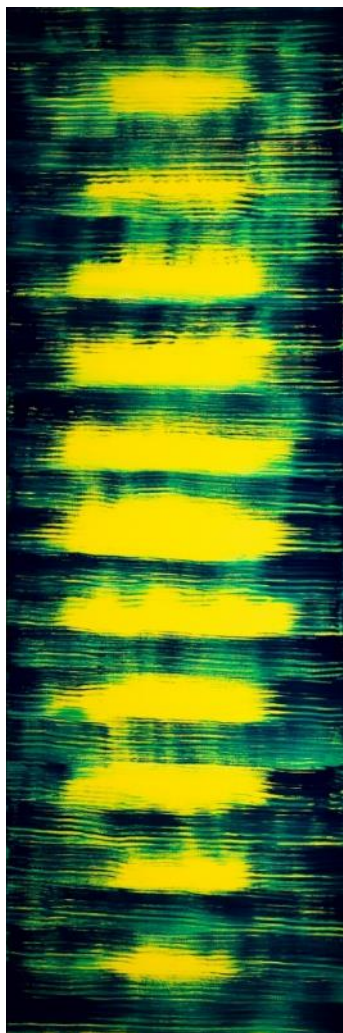


Figure 19 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Interference Pattern*, oil on canvas, 12" x 36" from *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019). The supersaturated yellow-green hues signify the hyperreal metaverse.

converge.⁴⁰ Recent journal articles expand on this confluence using the term metaverse "as a vehicle for shifts in cyber-physical evolution on various levels."⁴¹ *Double-slit Doppelganger* uses simultaneity and duplication coupled with innuendo to implicate the metaverse as the triggerman behind a young refugee's death. As such, the complex externality and consequence within the work is depicted in several forms of simultaneity including the coffin and hole flanking the bottom edge of the canvas (Figure 47).⁴²

Jean Baudrillard wrote extensively about simulation, simulacra, and hyperreality. Simulation employs models that can deceptively mimic reality, while simulacra are complete replacements and substitutes without any "relation to reality whatsoever."⁴³ Gilles Deleuze describes simulacrum as a copy without an original by expressing "the simulacrum is an image without a resemblance."⁴⁴ Whereas, hyperreality is an inability to distinguish the simulation from reality—more real than real.⁴⁵ Jean Baudrillard's famous analogue for a hyperreality is Disneyland where it exists in order to "hide" the "real";

⁴⁰ Metaverse Roadmap, Glossary: *Metaverse*, accessed January 20, 2020, <http://metaverseroadmap.org/inputs4.html#glossary>

⁴¹ Rehm, Sven-Volker, *The Metaverse as Mediator between Technology, Trends, and the Digital Transformation of Society and Business*, Journal of Virtual Worlds Research, Vol 8, No 2, 2015.

⁴² Bridger, Marc, *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019)

⁴³ Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation*, The University of Michigan Press, 1994, 6

⁴⁴ Boundas, Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, 295

⁴⁵ Baofu, Peter, *The Future of Post-Human Mass Media: A Preface to a New Theory of Communication*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 11

thus duping us into a confused state of simulation by “concealing the fact that the real is no longer real.”⁴⁶ Coupling the metaverse with the ideas of simulation, simulacra, and hyperreality; we are now embedded in a commingling domain of binary corporeality. Thus, hyperreality encompasses an inability to consciously differentiate fantasy realms from life and this is exacerbated by a society in a phased transition to metaverse existence. An existence that is perhaps a simulacrum of reality—a covalent bond and heterogenous gestalt that has led to a form irreducible to its contributing constituents.

The last work in the “Space Invaders” series was heavily influenced by Baudrillard, hyperrealities, and the metaverse. *Pair of Dise* (2019) interrogates absurdity while leveraging it as method and strategy—in a domain of bits where allusive meanings and adjacency thwart understanding (Figure 4).⁴⁷ The atmosphere is a subversive haze enmeshing text, sign, and image; where clarity is apprehended by ambivalence. While the work embodies 31 oil on canvas fragments, it is a single polysemic portrait with a hybridized and fragmented surface structure—fragmented with digital space which is a material of the metaverse (an assertion detailed in Part 3). The painting’s strategy is supported by intertextual links via metaphor, sign, and image. Underneath the absurdity is an inquisitive intent probing our hyperreal metaverse and its sense of aporia. A metaverse of utterances that alter reality with bewildering dissonance. A dissonance muffled in acquiescence by inuring recursion.

Guy DeBord’s “Society of the Spectacle” and Jean Baudrillard’s continuation of situationist concerns provide a latticework of influence in “Space Invaders”. Early on a list of words was

⁴⁶ Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation*, The University of Michigan Press, 1994, 12-13

⁴⁷ Bridger, Marc, crop of *Pair of Dise* (2020)

assembled from Baudrillard's "Fatal Strategies" and its repetitive language style along with varied concepts that aided as prompts when creating the fragments in *Pair of Dice* as well as inspired their correlating sobriquets. The metaverse was ferment for the barrage of advertising flack that pummels a user while browsing the internet. Propaganda, advertising, misinformation, and the fragmented nature of knowledge are tangential concerns within the fragmented painting.

Within this thesis introduction, metaverse was augmented with new meaning through the metaphor of a Möbius Strip to conceptualize an observed simultaneity. A Möbius Strip is a fascinating mathematical topological construct that in its simplest form can be created by cutting a strip of paper in two, flipping one end, and then taping the ends together.⁴⁸ The result is a



Figure 20 Marc Bridger, Möbius Strip

⁴⁸ Möbius Strips, Brilliant, accessed January 20, 2020 <https://brilliant.org/wiki/mobius-strips/>

paradoxical two-dimensional plane occupying a three-dimensional spatial form with a nonorientable surface that shares a single side and boundary (Figure 20).⁴⁹



Figure 21 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Parody's Gaze*, from *Pair of Dice* (2020), oil on canvas, fragment: 15" x 30"

Life's physical and virtual convergence has never been so prolific as the present, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic that is arising around the words on this page. Globally, Zoom chats and Microsoft Team conferences have supplanted our physical interaction. Before its onslaught, I had contemplated various ways that the physical and digital had converged within this thesis. Examples that may now seem benign to the pandemic's firsthand experiences where its vagaries have forced us to grasp at technology. And grasp at the metaverse—our only gateway to the neighbor's gaze. Physical existences have now become fully integrated and reliant on the twisted form that is our metaverse.

⁴⁹ Bridger, Marc, Mobius Strip Illustration, illustration created for this thesis.

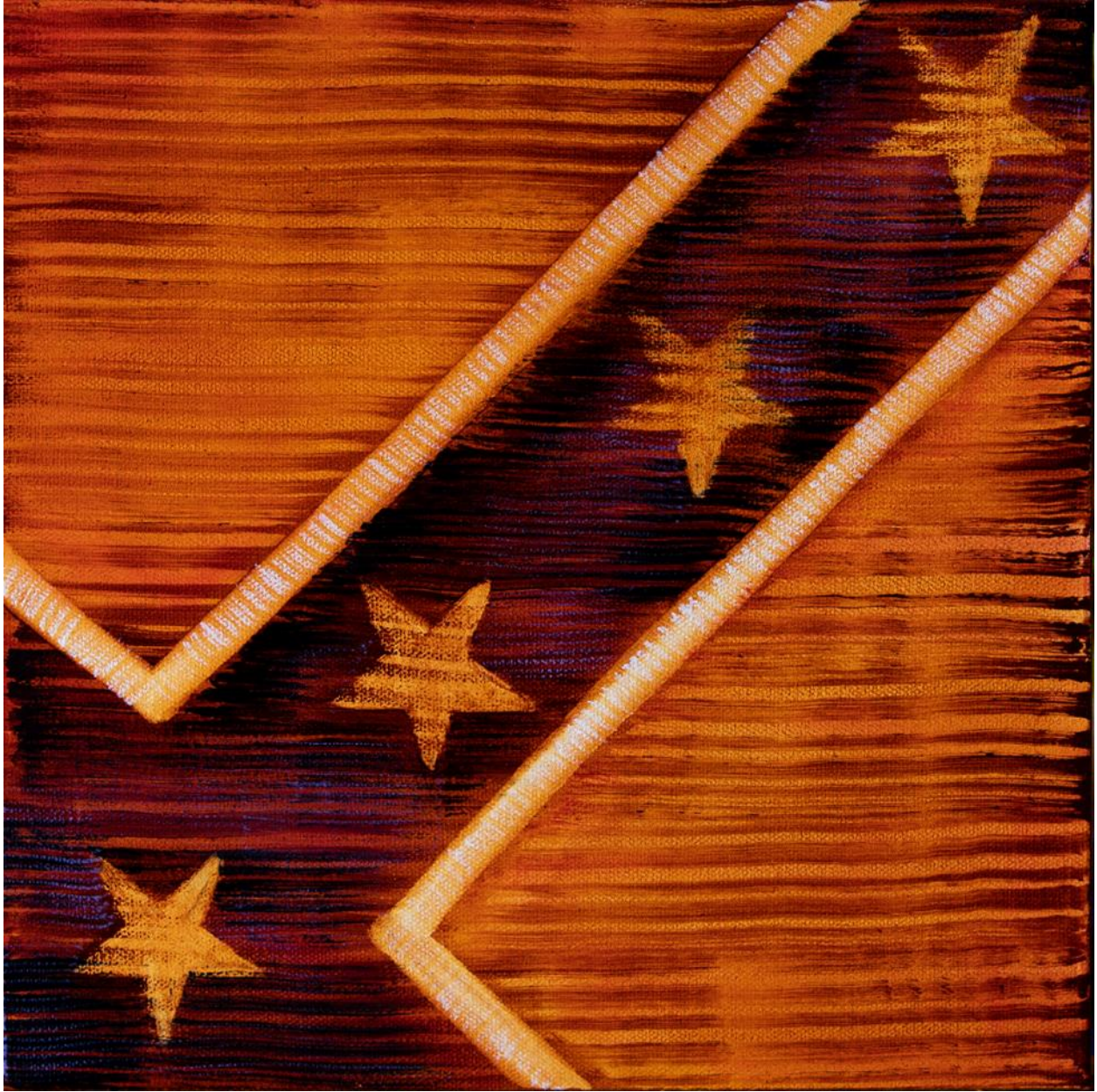


Figure 22 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Redirect*, oil on canvas, fragment: 12" x 12" from *Pair of Dice* (2020), Redirection, rereality, recursivity, replication, and reuse are common themes weaving throughout the "Space Invaders" series.

Upon contemplating the metaverse through the topology of a Möbius-strip, I discovered cohorts with similar conclusions, coupled with its correlating mirror-like quality; or its gaze. Zoénie Liwen Deng revealed a comparable connection in art and digital spheres where the participant is simultaneously both involuntarily and voluntarily "involved in this Möbius-strip-like cycle of

exhibitionist and voyeurist, looking and being looked at, and touching and being touched."⁵⁰ As



Figure 23 Marc Bridger, Detail from *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019). Claudia's simultaneity is present in the doorway, emerging as a metaverse myth (Hamburglar), inferred by the presence of her coffin, the Twitter Buzzard and hole, and waves.

such, our reality in the metaverse has morphed to a condition of simultaneity; where the two realms and their inhabitants are symbiotic. The magnitude and severity of this commingled relationship varies including forms of codependency.⁵¹

Simultaneity, symbiosis, and recursivity are qualities of the metaverse that also manifest in the artworld—a complex emergent system that is teleologically open and autoreferential, creating and relying upon feedback loops.⁵² Speaking of art as an instantiation of itself with a purposiveness without purpose where side-effects emerge as epiphenomenal components that help create an entwining loop, Jason Hoelscher uses several biological and information

⁵⁰ Deng, Zoënie Liwen. "Participatory Art On-off a Digital Platform: A Mobius Strip: On Cyber Nails in Curated Nails." In *Boredom, Shanzhai, and Digitisation in the Time of Creative China*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019, 291-98, Accessed January 20, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvqr1bnw.24.

⁵¹ Fox, Richard and Jennifer Ramos, *iPolitics: Citizens, Elections, and Governing in the New Media Era*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2012, 77

⁵² Hoelscher, Jason, "The Poetics of Phase Space: The Open Artwork at the Edge of Chaos", Spring 2014, accessed March 19, 2020



Figure 24 Marc Bridger, Detail of center fragments from *Run a Make Border The For!* (2019)

systems analogies to describe this autopoietic quality in art.⁵³ In the essay “The Poetics of Phase Space”, Hoelscher includes a footnote along with his analogies to assist the reader in imagining this circular artworld reality, explaining “a thing’s purpose by stating that its purpose is to be what it is”—“inherently open and ambiguous—textually analogous to a Möbius Strip.”⁵⁴ The idea of the metaverse and artworld realities as another form of twisted feedback loop (Möbius Strip) interlaced within that larger macro system of the “society of the spectacle” is further developed in Part 3 of this thesis as it specifically relates to art.

The melding of realities as a single verse is further bolstered in situations where the digital transforms the physical, or vice versa. 3D Printing and human scanning into 3D models reveal

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ibid

oscillations that now manifest as a digital-to-physical or physical-to-digital transformation. These technologies emerge in engineering, art, and medicine, yielding simple examples of sphere fusion. Internet and gaming preoccupations that were once denigrated have slowly been recognized as concerning sources of verse convergence—where addiction has led to problems in relationships, failing school, and other online behavioral incompatibilities.⁵⁵ Escapism is bolstered through hyperreal Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) worlds, permitting physical realities and concerns to be paused, while traversing the imaginative and fantasy driven bits. Relatedly, social media platforms enable similar detours through alias negotiation. Violence between spheres has manifested in *swatting* which is a dangerous harassment tactic involving a prank call that instigates an act by law enforcement—typically for revenge. Often swatting incidents originate from online gaming cultures where a dispute unfolds beyond digital borders.⁵⁶ Notoriously, these digital events become physical tragedies, like the incident of Tyler Barriss swatting a fellow gamer to death via 911. As such, a digital domain vendetta is fulfilled by a physical death.⁵⁷ Ransomware reveals another digital to physical loop where hospitals now provide easy payoffs as lives are at stake when life-saving machines go offline due to hacks.⁵⁸ Thus, a digital demand is imposed through a physical ransom until a digital resolution eliminates the threat. Finally, a website presence and support for refugee border crossings may depict a water bottle or other humanitarian

⁵⁵ Ng, Brian D. and Peter Wiemer-Hastings. 2005. "Addiction to the Internet and Online Gaming." *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 8 (2): 11-113.

⁵⁶ Ellis, Emma Gray, *Swatting is a Deadly Problem*, accessed January 24, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/how-to-stop-swatting-before-it-happens-seattle/>

⁵⁷ Stevens, Matt and Andrew Chow, *Man Pleads Guilty to 'Swatting' Hoax*, New York Times, accessed January 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/us/barriss-swatting-wichita.html>

⁵⁸ Donovan, Fred, Cybercriminals Target Hospitals with SamSam Ransomware Attacks, June 27, 2018, accessed March 31, 2020, <https://healthitsecurity.com/news/cybercriminals-target-hospitals-with-samsam-ransomware-attacks>

aid catalyzing a subsequent physical intervention by law enforcement that results in that aid being destroyed—an act that leads to deaths and the subsequent prosecution of humanitarians.⁵⁹

These examples demonstrate domain convergence and the resultant emergent amalgam that is the metaverse, while the phenomena that arise around that complex system create additional looping dependencies with their own instances of epiphenomena. The underlying premise of “Space Invaders” initial work, *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (Figure 1 and 47), suggests it was the oscillation in the metaverse that fabricated and facilitated an online atmosphere of immigrant vilification where refugees were depicted as thieves of U.S. “American” culture.⁶⁰ One leading to an epiphenomenon of an aggressive border policy with violent border incidents. A posturing ultimately leading to the death of a young refugee that was gunned down despite being unarmed and without hostile intent. Seeing her as a culture thief emerged as a hybridized physical and digital perception, resulting in a physical annihilation as depicted in the painting through simultaneity (Figure 23).⁶¹ As such, this initial work supports a notion of verse convergence where the emergent metaverse and its gaze alters our physical reality in a loop that is indefinitely twisting—oscillating between the digital and physical, while releasing the energy the opposite side devours, transforms, and reiterates.

The condition of metaverse simultaneity is touched upon throughout the “Space Invaders” series in several ways, while Part 3 focuses on its artform presence. In *Run a Make Border the For!* (Figure 3), duplicity, duplication, and doppelgangers are an underlying theme where a concrete table, a

⁵⁹ Warren, Scott, Humanitarians are now prosecuted for giving aid to refugees at the border, Washington Post, accessed April 17, 2020 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/05/28/i-gave-water-migrants-crossing-arizona-desert-they-charged-me-with-felony/>

⁶⁰ Bridger, Marc, *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019)

⁶¹ Bridger, Marc, detail crop from *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019)

feature of the physical environment, is repeated across the four central panels (Figures 24).⁶² This scene setting is taken from an area at my home, personalizing this invasion of metaverse happenings. The space undergoes various transformations that are corollaries to the unfolding metaverse and its ability to digitally alter the physical sphere. Peter Drake is an artist sharing some aesthetic similarities in the underpainting hue employed, such as his acrylic on canvas *Overlook* (2008) in Figure 25.⁶³ Drake's narrative provides a compelling dialog and similar pessimisms about our society as demonstrated in the disregard of the passerbys—apt commentary



Figure 25 Peter Drake, *Overlook* (2008), acrylic on canvas, 89" x 117" (Artist's website: www.peterdrakeartist.com)

⁶² Bridger, Marc, detail crop from *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019)

⁶³ Drake, Peter, *Overlook* (2008), Acrylic on Canvas, 89" x 117"

on social indifference.⁶⁴ Gamesmanship emerges throughout "Space Invaders" and this pessimistic view of society is sardonically captured in the confounding sobriquet *Bikini Grimace*



Figure 26 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Bikini Grimace*, oil on canvas, fragment 48" x 60" from *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019)

(Figure 26).⁶⁵ Grimace, a peculiar and ironic McDonald's character, is a contradiction through moniker with its joyous smile adorned by an obese mass. The glutton's blissful disregard is highlighted as the scene transforms into a chaotic infiltration of spherical balloon-like eyes, sesame seeds, and the invasion of the McDonald's arch. Despite the crisis, the corpulent beast is joyously passive as it sunbaths in blissful disregard while enjoying a Coke.

The *hivemind* is the "collective thoughts, ideas, and opinions of a group of people (such as Internet users) regarded as functioning together as a single mind".⁶⁶ The notion of a hivemind as applied to emergent social phenomena, derives from a similar activity expressed in colonies of insects such as bees or ants. A renowned example of the hivemind arose in the *collective consciousness* of *Star Trek The Next Generation's* "The Borg". The Borg's social reality was depicted as a futuristic collective of cyborgs without autonomy, instead taking orders and direction from the hivemind collective. A collective conscious is a sociological term deriving from Emile Durkheim, the same sociologist that gave us the concept of anomie.⁶⁷ A collective consciousness describes a similar hivemind-like phenomena; however, it does not refer specifically to morality and conscience, but to an emergent and shared understanding of social norms.⁶⁸ "The Borg" were aware of their collective and actions within the group hivemind and it is important to differentiate this quality from most forms of collective conscious. Walter Lipmann referred to society as the "bewildered herd" as espoused by Noam Chomsky, indicating that participants are "spectators, not participants

⁶⁴ Peter Drake, Overlook (2008), accessed February 19, 2020 <https://peterdrakeartist.tumblr.com/post/167299851319/opening-soon-in-chicago-last-minute>

⁶⁵ Marc Bridger, sobriquet *Bikini Grimace*, from *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019)

⁶⁶ Mirriam-Webster, *hive mind*, accessed January 29, 2020 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hive%20mind>

⁶⁷ Durkheim, Emile. *The Division of Labour in Society*. New York: Free Press, 1997, pp. 39, 60, 108.

⁶⁸ Wren, Thomas, *Conceptions of Culture: What Multicultural Educators Need to Know*, 64-83, accessed January 23, 2020, <https://books.google.com/books?id=S39YDzhileEC>

in action”—the implication being that the participants were a sort of passive entity moving as a group. This hivemind herd condition of the metaverse was one of many prompts influencing the fragment (sobriquet) *Bewildered Herd* (Figure 27).^{69,70} The burgers are symbolic of a consumerist “American Culture” while their gazing eyes dart in various directions despite their seemingly collective desire to devour the fries.



Figure 27 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Bewildered Herd*, oil on canvas, fragment: 24" x 36" from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

⁶⁹ Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Bewildered Herd* from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

⁷⁰ Chomsky, Noam, Quotations, <https://chomsky.info/mediacontrol03/>



Figure 28 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Skull Burger*, oil on canvas, fragment: 12" x 12", from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

Another parallel phenomenon in nature is in aviary murmurations where a large group of starlings move collectively and without a specific leader; and similarly exhibited in schools of fish.⁷¹ These

⁷¹ Video: Swooping Starlings in Murmuration, [npr.org](https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2017/01/04/506400719/video-swooping-starlings-in-murmuration), January 4, 2017, accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2017/01/04/506400719/video-swooping-starlings-in-murmuration>



Figure 29 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Eldritch*, oil on canvas, fragment: 12" x 12", from *Pair of Dice* (2020)

complex systems are “highly adaptive, possessing a fluid boundary interface between internal and external states. Such systems are composed of diverse actors who dynamically interact with one

another [and their environment] awash in a sea of feedbacks."⁷² Hoelscher sees these biological swarming behaviors as initially chaotic, where the swarm reacts with disorder, but polyhedrally adjusts to the catalytic events stemming from subsequent "multidimensional systemic inputs" as espoused by Foucault.⁷³ However, this metaphor contributes to an "adjacent possible" which is a time when circumstances are fertile for change.⁷⁴ Coupled with the adjacent possible, an "aesthetic swarming behavior" waits for the ideal cultural conditions to emerge before culminating in a resultant style, artform, or movement.⁷⁵ Thus connecting to Hegel's "spirit of the time" where a "specific set of building blocks prompts multiple, simultaneous emergent phenomena that we interpret as the zeitgeist."⁷⁶ The implication is that art and the sociocultural phenomenon emanating from the metaverse often behave similar to complex biological forms. Sociologists have applied herd-like terms to a collective state and atmosphere, but it is important to emphasize that the individual rarely has direct control over this phenomenon. Not unlike a single fish in a school, or bird in the preconditions arising for murmuration. The societal phenomena transcends the individual, as "from Durkheim's perspective, morality and culture, the collective phenomena par excellence, exist autonomously in our social surrounding; they are imposed upon us, and individuals do not have any discernable impact on them."⁷⁷ A dictionary summarizes the connections by asserting "a *collective consciousness*, analogous to the behavior of social insects, in which a group of people become aware of their commonality and think and act as a community,

⁷² Hoelscher, Jason, Complexity Aesthetics: Recursive Information and Adjacent Possible, 2014, accessed March 24, 2020

⁷³ Hoelscher, Jason, Autopoietic Art Systems and Aesthetic Swarms: Notes on Artistic Emergence, Eventual Aesthetics, v2,n3, 2013, 27, accessed March 24, 2020

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Mises Institute, *Durkheim's Collective Conscience*, accessed January 29, 2020
<https://mises.org/library/durkheims-collective-conscience>

sharing their knowledge, thoughts, and resources: the global hive mind that has emerged with sites like Twitter and Facebook.”⁷⁸ This definition is slightly troublesome, as it suggests “awareness” and “act as a community” which is not applicable to all situations and actions that are often reflexive. Much like gaslighting, an awareness of the effect or power to control or inhibit is not always deliberate or known by the offender. Awareness implies a certain regulation of the situation that is too simplistic of hivemind complexity since it exists independently of the

individual. Awareness is a liberty that does not account for those members that participate in a herd-like manner, oblivious of their participatory contribution to the metaverse ambit and its gaze.

The infiltration of social media into our lives and its ability to exert a real and physical force from the digital realm is a recurring concern in the body of work. Social media logos are literally represented in *Pair of Dise* by a stack of floating icons that create an adjacent boundary to the spiraling invasion flanking right (Figure 30).⁷⁹ Embedded between each social media realm and its icon is a popular culture memento mori,



Figure 30 Marc Bridger, Detail *Pair of Dise* (2020). A row of icon fragments flank the work's left side.

⁷⁸ Hive Mind, Dictionary.com, accessed January 29, 2020 <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/hivemind>

⁷⁹ Bridger, Marc, detail drop of *Pair of Dise* (2020)

connecting the spheres to their ultimate physical conclusion (Sobriquet: *Skull Burger* in Figure 28 and Sobriquet: *Eldritch* in Figures 29).^{80,81}

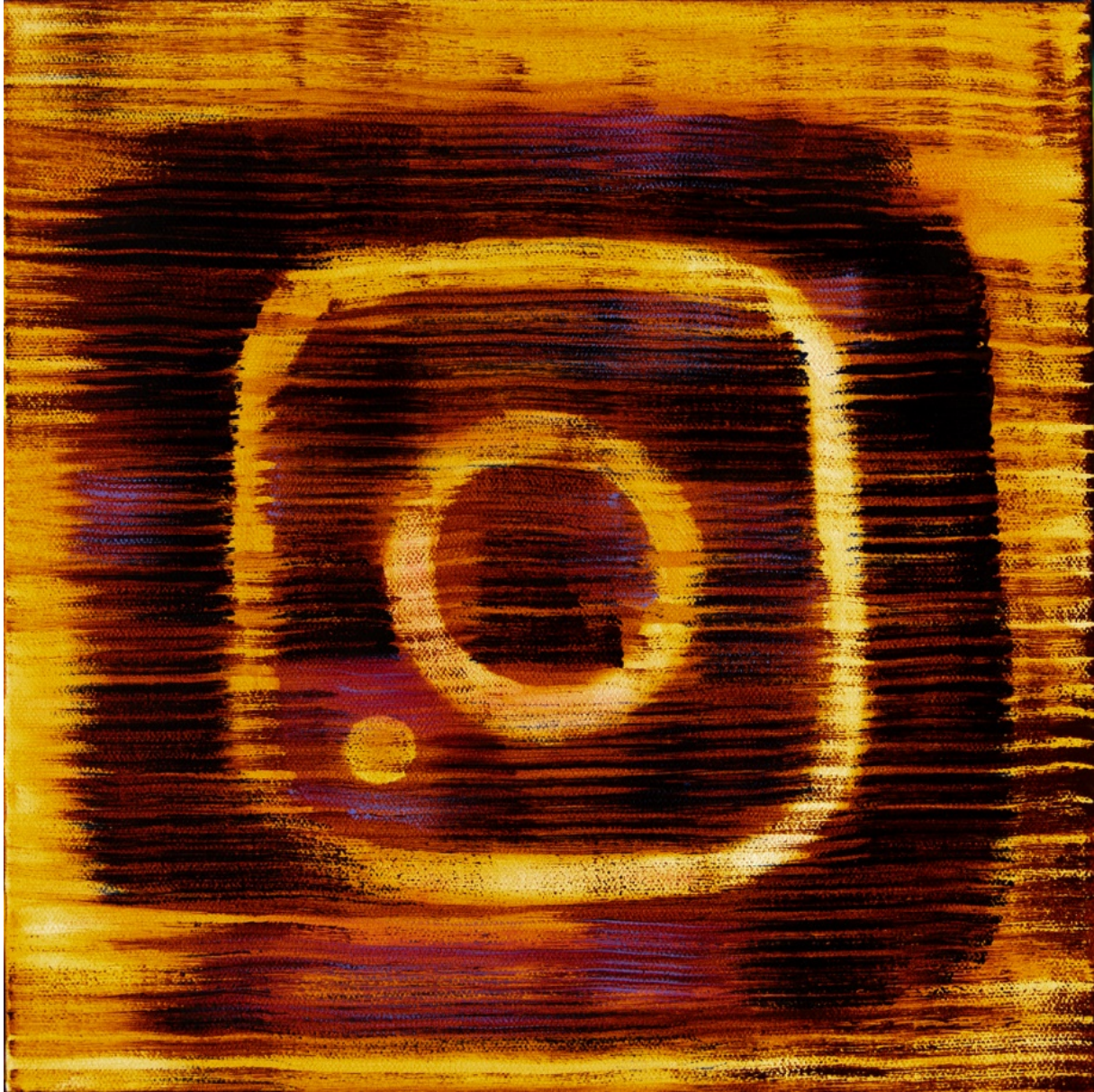


Figure 31 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall*, oil on canvas, fragment: 12" x 12", from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

⁸⁰ Bridger, Marc Sobriquet: *Eldritch*, from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

⁸¹ Bridger, Marc, Sobriquet: *Skull Burger*, from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

This emergent herd in the metaverse seems to act like weather phenomena: arising and visible, imposing and imminent, tumultuous and tormenting, sudden and subversive—and surreptitious in its exit. A furtive front that is seemingly singular, but maniacal in its multiplicity. No one raindrop has control over the flood, but it is a flood, nonetheless. As such, this situation relates to a “paradox of the heap” which typically involves a heap of sand with a reduction one grain at a time until a single grain remains—but, at what point did the mound change from heap to non-heap?⁸² Certainly a question for biologists and sociologists to contend with; nevertheless, a fascinating paradox for the discourse in my work that deals with realities that exude epiphenomena as expressed by metaverse convergence within an artistic articulation.

Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard have written opaque lines that clearly capture the “Society of the Spectacle” sensibilities. Their authoritative works are the core influences undergirding my expressions of a hyperreal metaverse. In “Fatal Strategies”, Baudrillard’s constant invocation of words that begin with the prefix *hyper-*, *re-*, and *un-* are uncannily similar in Debord’s language choices where life is an immense illusory “accumulation of spectacles” generating a discursive discourse about itself.⁸³ Debord describes a tautological “domain of delusion” mediated by fragments, images, and signs which is captured by Baudrillard as a place of reflection, reversal, representation, redoubling, reciprocation, recursion, in a reversible rerun of reality culminating in a hypertelic excrescence of hyperreal hyperdeterminism—where a “malicious curvature” “puts an end to the horizon of meaning”— “too bad we’re paradise.”^{84,85}

⁸² Wikipedia, Sortes Paradox, accessed January 30, 2020 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sorites_paradox#cite_note-Sorensen2009-3

⁸³ Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Black & Red, 1970

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Baudrillard, Jean, *Fatal Strategies*, (Semiotext(e): Los Angeles), 2008

Well before the internet, Guy Debord's words were prescient of the semiosphere and semionauts that would arise in our current metaverse convergence. The evidence of the digital impacting, altering, and destroying the physical has been mounting for decades; while art reflects this convergence in a looping discourse of inverted, entangled, and dislocated signs, images, and language snippets. We can look to art's artifice, dialog, and images where the origin of reality

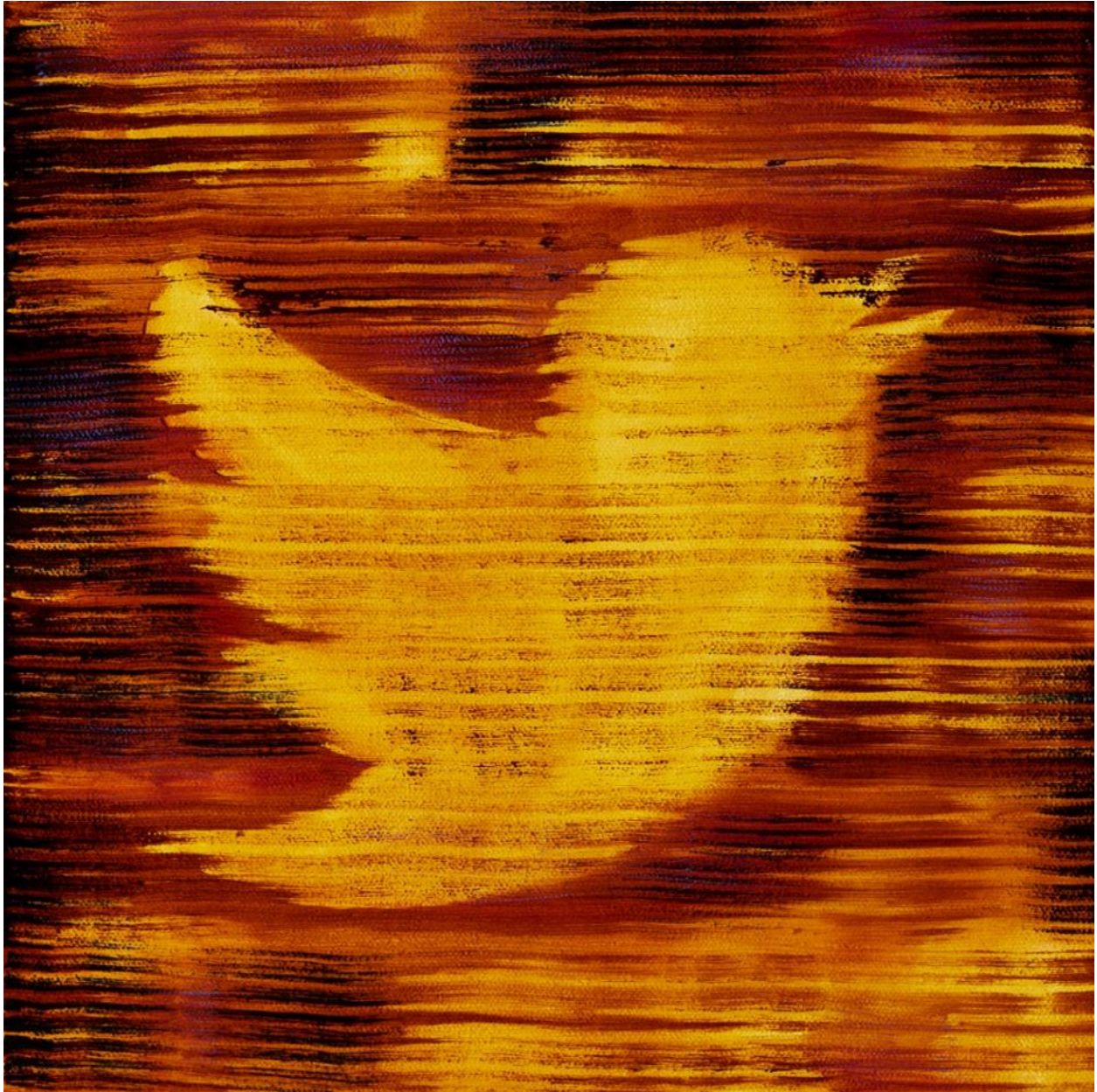


Figure 32 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Innuendo*, oil on canvas, fragment: 12" x 12", from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

confluence may first be experienced. Thus, it seems art provides a practical syntax for capturing the emergent language of our converging worlds where the digital now pens the happenings within our physical sphere. And this connection of art's tautological recursivity to similar auto-discourses in the society of the spectacle is the impetus of the paintings presented in this thesis. Nicolaus Bourriaud spoke of "nomadic sign gatherers" that "set forms in motion" to generate "journeys by journeys by which they elaborate themselves as subjects even as the corpus of their work takes shape."⁸⁶

1.6. The Metaverse Gaze

To articulate the phenomena probed in this body of work, the concept of a *metaverse gaze* is offered as a loose anthropomorphic sort of metonym that extends metaverse simultaneity with an observable quiddity. The metaverse and its atmosphere generate conditions relatable to past social phenomena, but tightly intertwined with the digital cultures that propagate its ideas. Besmirching, cancel culture, doxing, swatting, and similar actions coincide with gaslighting, propaganda, stigma, and stereotypes. These conditions are accompanied by misinformation, including disinformation, arising via headlines, Twitter tantrums, and similar storms with a locus in social media. While cancel culture began with celebrities, it is now common amongst all circles and propagated via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and similar platforms.⁸⁷ *Achomlishments* (2019) in Figure 17 deals with many of these topics while deriving its misspelled title from an incident where a photographer caught a snapshot of Donald Trump's handwritten speech notes. As part of

⁸⁶ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lukas & Sterberg, New York, 2009, 38, 56

⁸⁷ Romano, Aja, Why we can't stop fighting about cancel culture, Vox.com, December, 2019, accessed January 23, 2020 <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/12/30/20879720/what-is-cancel-culture-explained-history-debate>



Figure 33 Marc Bridger, Detail *Pair of Dice* (2020). Icon, image, text, space, and adjacency are powerful contributions to meaning construction. The work is a meditation on the spaces where these forms commingle to create latent metaverse myths and wisdom within our psyche. A meditation contemplating the power of spatial adjacency and its resultant innuendo. The work employs the same strategies common on the internet by advertisers and other entities that use suggestive image, icon, and tangency to transfer ideas.

contemporaneous culture and politics, the misspellings are frequent amongst his various tweets.⁸⁸

The appropriation sardonically underscores our need to scrutinize words, images, and ideas

including those coming from a national leader, while also highlighting his “accomplishments”.

Cancel culture is a contemporaneous stoning of individuals—a new form of mob-mentality, yet

different from the hivemind discussed earlier. Nonetheless, interestingly connected as a parallel

group phenomenon exacting its own form of social justice and vigilantism.

⁸⁸ Achomlshments title comes from an incident with Donald Trump explained in this article, accessed April 17, 2020 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2019/05/23/photo-trump-notes-white-house-news-conference/1203665001/>

Immigrant vilification demonstrates another broader tempest that envelops large groups and cultures that stem from similar forms of grapevine knowledge—knowledge that sometimes morphs into villainy. Similarly, the election of 2016 and its alteration via Cambridge Analytica connects to another form of atmospheric disturbance in the metaverse with wide reaching ramifications for democracies. Cambridge Analytica and similar online entities used data mining and propaganda to manipulate a small but focused group across many voting districts in order to sway elections via a specific demographic.⁸⁹ A similar phenomena is arising around COVID-19. Presently, social media is being weaponized by divisive donors organizing armed rallies and protests in opposition to the COVID-19 social distancing restrictions.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, social media provides a platform for digitally distributing information about social injustices such as George Floyd's recent death, minorities adjudicated by police, and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests opposing systemic racism.

Intermixed with information about these concerns is bias and persuasions from misinformation that assist in cultivating myths; propagating a metaverse wisdom that informs its habitants with a skewed sense of truth. A truth concatenated from image fragments, memes, Twitter tantrums, and other innuendo to form gales and tumults that adjust and alter both the physical and digital—our metaverse reality. Speaking in relation to online art critiques, Jason Hoelscher considers Jacques Derrida's phonocentrism which is privileging the act of speech over the act of writing, while writing itself with its absence of the speaker "opens up interpretative gaps that must be filled in by

⁸⁹Cadwalladr, Carole and Emma Graham-Harrison, Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica, The Guardian, March 17, 2018, accessed March 17, 2018
<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election>

⁹⁰Gabbatt, Adam, Thousands of Americans backed by rightwing donors gear up for protests, The Guardian, accessed April 18, 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/18/coronavirus-americans-protest-stay-at-home>

the reader.”⁹¹ This occurs online frequently where textual expressions lack the finesse and fidelity of physical interactions, often leading to “cascading information loss, meaning distortion, misunderstandings, and translation breakdowns” that inform everyday online communications.⁹² Similarly, a mere image without context, or a context of adjacency with advertising, memes, or other webpage flanks, presents an opportunity for the viewer to fill-in-the-blanks. These interests and concerns are navigated by *Run a Make Border the For!* and especially *Pair of Dise* via its internet imagery, insinuating sobriquets, spatial insertions, and the fragmentary nature of its presentation. One concern that is emphasized by the fragmentary strategy is that of meaning construction, which brings awareness of the art experience and its resultant readings into the dialog via its artform. Adjacency, images, and text along with their latent combination in the websphere can be powerful—as evinced in the 2016 election—notions navigated in *Pair of Dise*. As Susan Sontag indicates, “the problem is not that people remember through photographs” it is they remember “only the photographs” and this “remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding—and remembering.”⁹³ However, by placing a photograph near implied texts and images, an adjacency occurs not unlike the one emerging in a meme or advertising chumbox. These conditions recall a long history of collage that employ the contrast of text and image in art. While the Cubists and Dadaists, such as German artist Hannah Höch, yield early work in this area; contemporaries such as Banksy continue to wield text and image to underscore social conditions in ways that connect to the commixing action in the websphere.

⁹¹ Hoelscher, Jason, *Site/Non-Site/Website*, accessed March 23, 2020 https://www.academia.edu/2309690/Site_Non-Site_Website_Presence_Absence_and_Interface_in_the_Online_Studio_Critique

⁹² *Ibid*, 10

⁹³ Sontag, Susan, “Looking at War: Photography’s view of devastation and death.”, *The New Yorker*, December 9, 2002

Web browsing's ability to commingle adjacency into a form of knowledge and the related social phenomena emerging in our metaverse reality also inform the fragmentation initiated by *No Trespassing* (2019), followed by *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019) and finally *Pair of Dise* (2019-20). Influenced by the long history of commingling collages from Dada to Cubism, fragmentation via space becomes its own form and the material of the metaverse in topics navigated in Part 3 of this thesis.

Zoénie Deng explains that members of online subcultures and social platforms become “self-media; a term used by Chinese columnists, critics, and intellectuals to describe the situation in which the digital and the internet enable people to use media platforms to present themselves and publicize their viewpoints, activities, images, videos and so on; everyone is able to attract attention on social media by becoming self-media.”⁹⁴ Deng examines participatory art and this phenomena in *Cyber Nails* (2014), in addition to the voyeurism of internet culture and how the “digital embodies the corporeal and vice versa, blurring the binary of the corporeal self and digital other”.⁹⁵ Deng’s work correlates to my observations and interests in our metaverse milieu where a “two-way uncanny reflection and refraction of the actual and the virtual” create new lenses for life.⁹⁶ The metaverse enables a lorgnette to be fashioned that both alters our vision and masks our identity, enabling abrupt perspectives and abrupt consensus—rapid realizations and rejoinders.⁹⁷ Skewed spectacles that have a stigmatic reach back into our physical world. Back into a world that touches participants who have never traipsed the added dimension of our Möbius Strip—but are

⁹⁴ Deng, Zoénie Liwen. “Participatory Art On-off a Digital Platform, 292

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 296

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Bridger, Marc, Lorgnette, illustration created for this thesis.

nonetheless lured into the same topological occupancy including its various gazes. And so, we all

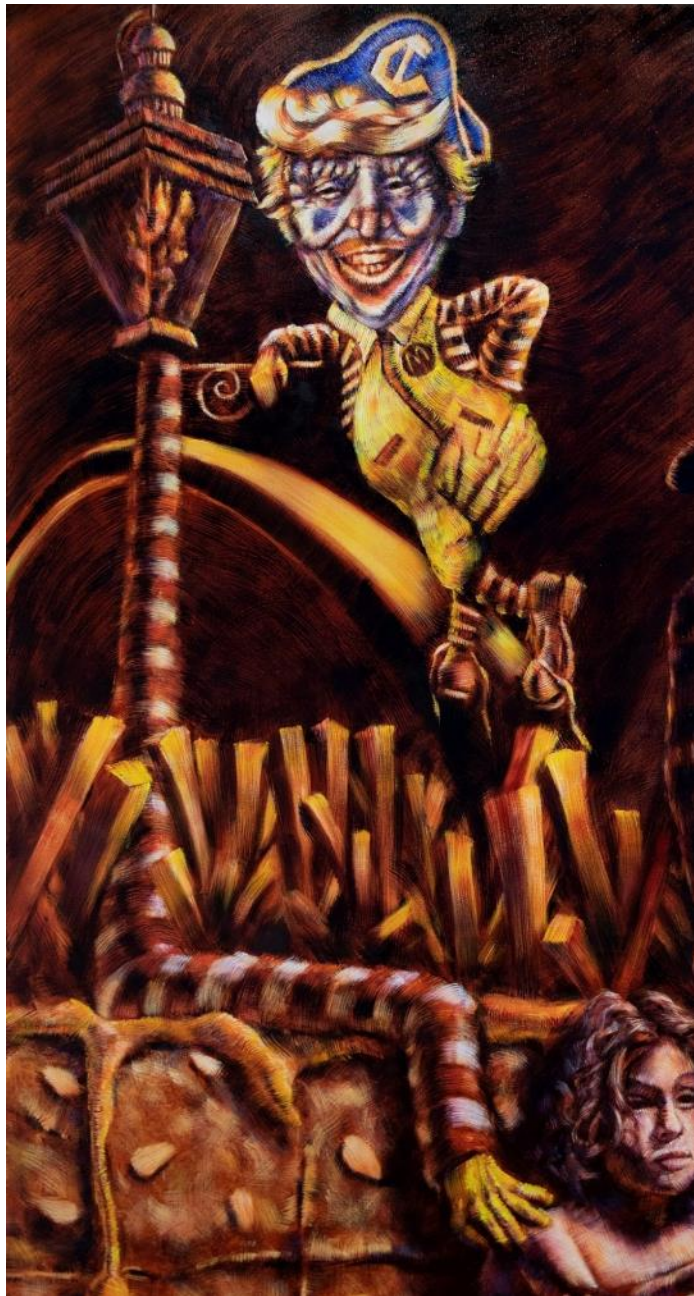


Figure 34 Marc Bridger, Detail of gaslight pole/arm from *Achomlishments* (2019)

become the voyeur and the viewed, assailant and victim, innocent and guilty. This is a premise connected to the main protagonist, Claudia Gomez, entering the portal within the painting *Double-slit Doppelganger* (2019) as depicted in the cropped image in Figure (23).⁹⁸

1.6.1. Gaslighting

Since 2017, headlines have bombarded us with warnings of gaslighting, a manipulative atmosphere where psychological tactics are used to instigate a question of sanity in people—realities we know to be true and real are eroded by an inuring and sinister attrition of disinformation. Provided below is a deft summary of gaslighting that a Wikipedia entry derives from Theodore Dorpat's book on the subject:

⁹⁸ Bridger, Marc, Detail of *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019)



Figure 35 Marc Bridger, Detail *Couch Potatoes* (2019). Interference pattern lighting emitting from a gaslight

"Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation in which a person or a group covertly sows seeds of doubt in a targeted individual, making them question their own memory, perception, or judgment, often evoking in them cognitive dissonance and other changes such as low self-esteem. Using denial, misdirection, contradiction, and misinformation, gaslighting involves attempts to destabilize the victim and delegitimize the victim's beliefs. Instances may range from the denial by an abuser that previous abusive incidents ever occurred to the staging of bizarre events by the abuser with the intention of disorienting the victim."⁹⁹

The word *gaslighting* originates from the 1938 stage play "Gas Light" along with the later 1944 film release starring Ingrid Bergman, Charles Boyer, and directed by George Cukor where Bergman's

⁹⁹ Gaslighting, accessed February 21, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaslighting>

husband deliberately attempts to make her “lose her mind” by manipulating her verbally and through the editing of her physical environment.^{100,101} Throughout the movie Bergman observes the dimming of the gas lights that corresponds to a malicious act by her husband who subsequently suggests the dimming is a figment of her imagination; thus, the term *gaslighting* took on the meaning of psychological manipulation and the conditioning associated with forcing people to adjust their perceptions—change their reality via suggestive attrition.¹⁰² A difference between the movie and the contemporary use of the term is that generally people do not consciously try to gaslight and manipulate, but the effect is the same through sustained comments and rhetoric.¹⁰³ The term has emerged in numerous moderate to left-leaning journalistic outlets such as The Guardian and CNN in reference to Fox News, Donald Trump’s varied rhetoric, and his associated tweets.¹⁰⁴

The gaslighting tactic is relevant to the atmosphere within our metaverse reality and the information that informs its gaze. The tactic is associative with forms of manipulation such as sociological propaganda which is used over time to adjust our perceptions of people, places, or events. The underlying premise in *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019), suggests that this manipulative force in the metaphorical form of a *gaze* helped to create the volatile atmosphere that made a refugee’s border crossing a deadly event. Similarly, the gaslight becomes the central light source emitting the varied source of banding, Moiré patterns, and interference patterns emanating in a

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

¹⁰¹ Abramson, Kate. "TURNING UP THE LIGHTS ON GASLIGHTING." *Philosophical Perspectives* 28 (2014): 1-30. Accessed February 21, 2020. doi:10.2307/26614542.

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ Ibid.2

¹⁰⁴ Gabbatt, Adam, Fox News covers impeachment hearing by defending Trump and gaslighting viewers, accessed February 21, 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/13/fox-news-impeachment-hearing-trump>

physics double-slit experiment. Thus, the lighting in the narratives along with Moiré and interference cover the figures, objects, and scenes in a skewed form of perception—the patterns suggest that what we are looking at is a consequence of the herd's gaze, which itself is formed from gaslighting, sociological propaganda, and online communication (Figure 35).¹⁰⁵ These forces act like attrition—bewildering the masses and adjusting the perception of refugees, immigrants, minorities, and others in “another light”. Thus, we are constructing our metaverse reality based on

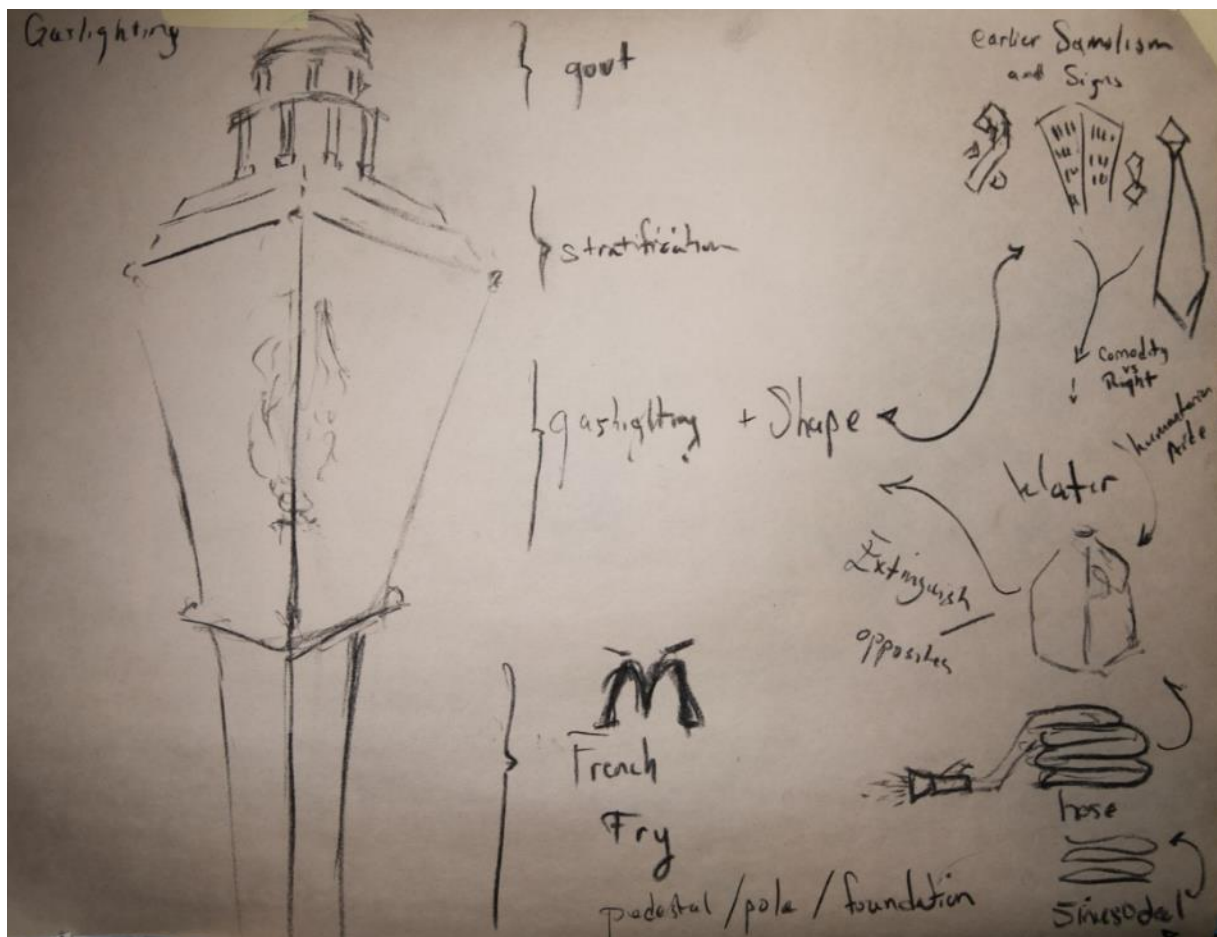


Figure 36 Gaslight concept sketch. Each segment connects to another idea or entity

¹⁰⁵ Bridger, Marc, detail crop of *Couch Potatoes* (2019)

lies—based on metaverse myths and wisdom that have become deadly and detrimental to an open-minded and egalitarian culture.

Infusing the cultural condition of gaslighting emerges through various motifs, but the most obvious one is found in *Couch Potatoes* (2019), *Achomlishments* (2019), and *Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia* (2019-20) (a 60" x 72" fragment in *Pair of Dice*). In these works, a gaslight performs the emanating force that bands the figures and alters the reality within the narrative. In the detail image shown in Figure 34, the gaslight sits atop the red and white striped pole-arm that flanks the left side of the canvas, moving downward over the sofa and into the personal space of my son.¹⁰⁶ This pole correlates to the red and white stripes of Ronald McDonald's costume, while also connoting notions of nationalism and propaganda. Leading the eye downward, the gaslight pole terminates with an eerily positioned hand that is awkwardly caressing my son's shoulder. The gaslight as a motif has connections to the oscillating light-waves and their propagation as carriers of information in the metaverse's fiberoptic cables. But, also as a metaphoric wave of information that emits outward and illuminates various forms that can be considered the recipients of the gaslight, thus altering their reality. The light waveform itself is developed conceptually in a later section where quantum physics embeds additional theory into the fray, enriching the works with nuanced images, motifs, and metaphor that introduce entanglement, superposition, and doppelgangers into the equation.

The gaslight structure atop the pole was considered sincerely in its conceptual construction, as illustrated in the concept sketch (Figure 36). The top of the light is crowned with a capitol dome

¹⁰⁶ Bridger, Marc, detail from the painting *Achomlishments* (2019)



Figure 37 Marc Bridger, Detail *Couch Potatoes* (2020)

and columns to invoke a sense of government, while the top has stairways that connote class stratification. The glass panes and gaslight are literal, correlating to the gaslighting and its related psychological concepts. Emanating from the light is an interference pattern, while the sartorial bandits' stripes are a consequence of this unique lighting. At the micro level, the paintings themselves use a stylistic cross-hatching that connects to the Moiré patterns located in the digital and mechanical reproduction realms. A perceptual shift in a "work of art can occur any time an aspect of the work can be perceived in two clear and different ways" and these are a planned and deliberate experiential phenomena within the body of work.¹⁰⁷ For example, the mark-making,

¹⁰⁷ Knudsen, Stephen, Practical Aesthetics: Examining Artwork With a Critical Eye, artcalendar.com, October 2010, accessed March 23, 2020

cross-hatching, and partitive optical paint relates to interference patterns and the variegated surfaces that read differently based upon distance. This stylistic hatching becomes a corollary for the artificial identities manufactured online. The perceptual shifts at varied distances link the viewing experience to the fragility of our realities along with the necessary scrutiny we must exert on our information and resultant perceptions. The images in Figures 37-39 provide detail samples of hatching paint lines that assist in perceptual shifts, further emphasizing this stylistic feature that is often lost to the gestalt of a digital translation.

The corporations represented as skyscrapers in earlier works such as *Externalities of 2008* in Figure 13-14, show an exaggerated rectangle that becomes bulbous at the top. This inflated rectangular form derives its shape from a tall modern skyscraper, while representing capitalism



Figure 38 Marc Bridger, Detail *Couch Potatoes* (2020)

and the corporation's sphere of influence in our culture. The corporation as an autonomous legal entity has been a prompt in previous work and continues to have a presence in "Space Invaders." The exaggerated skyscraper was reused in *Achomlishments* (2019) for the French fries, creating a wall behind the sofa that embeds symbolism and forms from earlier works that signified corporate influence and domination over our lives, government, and the border situation that creates skewed perceptions of refugees (34). The same exaggerated rectangular form was often inverted in drawings to connect to the bottom half of a necktie. Thus, the form could flip-flop between a symbolic corporate skyscraper or the raiment of their domain.



Figure 39 Marc Bridger, Detail *Achomlishments* (2020)

1.6.2. Sociological Propaganda

Propaganda is a capacious topic and phenomenon with wide ranging forms and psychological impacts. Its multifaceted categorizations are largely beyond the scope of this thesis; however, my

work comments on and employs propagandistic styling and motifs at times, while being concerned with its much more subtle and lesser known forms. It is the concepts of the metaverse, its myths, and its gaze where propaganda becomes especially influential and relevant. Propaganda also contextualizes the subject of fear and doubt embedded in this thesis. As I am terrified of propaganda, especially its more clandestine, subversive, and subtle sociological form.

Despite its dated and exclusionary title, the topic is lucidly navigated by Jacques Ellul in “Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes.” The introduction of the book demythologizes the common belief that “education is the best prophylactic to propaganda”, rather, asserting that education is an “absolute prerequisite”.¹⁰⁸ Educated intellectuals are the most vulnerable for three main reasons: 1) they absorb the largest amount of secondhand unverifiable information; 2) feel compelled to have an opinion on every important question of our time; thus succumbing to opinions offered by propaganda on all indigestible pieces of information, 3) consider themselves capable of “judging for themselves” and thus “literally need propaganda”.¹⁰⁹ The first vulnerability links strongly to the notion of how knowledge and formative wisdom are gained in the metaverse, and the repercussions of that via the gaze; a concern undergirding fragmentary choices in the “Space Invaders” series.

Ellul indicates that propaganda is the “expression of opinions or actions carried out deliberately by individuals or groups with a view to influencing the opinions or actions of other individuals or groups for predetermined ends and through psychological manipulation.”¹¹⁰ Many disturbing

¹⁰⁸ Ellul, Jacques, Konrad Kellen, and Jean Lerner. *Propaganda: The Formation of Mens Attitudes*. New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, 2005, vi

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

¹¹⁰ Ibid, xii

revelations emerge in the study of propaganda. Some noteworthy points related to Cambridge Analytica and the notions of a myth based *metaverse wisdom* include points related to Political Propaganda vs Sociological Propaganda. Sociological propaganda is subtle and subversive and far more creative in its delivery methods than political propaganda with its stereotypical loudspeakers, fliers, posters, and overt delivery methods that emerged in the era of Stalin, Hitler, Viet Nam, and similar periods. Instead, the phenomenon of sociological propaganda is more vast using methods to “integrate the maximum number of individuals into itself, to unify its members’ behavior according to a pattern, to spread its style of life” and “impose itself on other groups” while emerging in less controllable forms.¹¹¹ Sociological propaganda is very difficult to grasp and easily dismissed due to it being discounted for not matching a perceived overt form. It is concerned with the “penetration of an ideology by means of its sociological context” through diffuse methods that lead to the “participation of the masses and adaptation of individuals to participate actively” but more rarely employs “catchphrases or expressed intentions.” Instead, it may advertise a “certain style of life.” Importantly, however, is that it emerges in our art, advertising, public relations, films, and now the digital domains via social media and binary methods of consumption.¹¹² The inuring effect is an adoption of habits via a “sort of persuasion from within” with new criteria for judgement, choices, and preferences; while the effect is a progressive adaptation that “unconsciously molds individuals and makes them conform to society”.¹¹³

It is worth emphasizing the *atmosphere* component attributed to sociological propaganda that forms a new reality and is not typically a directed or an overt propagandistic action; rather, it is the

¹¹¹ Ibid 61-63

¹¹² Ibid 64

¹¹³ Ibid 62-64

emerging cloud that assists, affects, and conditions through gradualism. As such, it is closely related to the hivemind. And so, a culture and reality form around this type of phenomenon, as Ellul points out that “sociological propaganda springs up spontaneously; it is not the result of deliberate propaganda action. No propagandists deliberately use this method, though many practice it unwittingly.” And this *unwitting* component is a fascinating attribute fusing many of the ideas herein that articulate the metaverse phenomenon. The metaverse myths, its epiphenomenal wisdom, and its subsequent gaze rely on properties of sociological propaganda, while the individual begins expressing it in books, blogs, films, art, and other outlets involuntarily without cognitively realizing it is occurring.¹¹⁴ Dominic Pettman in a forward for Baudrillard’s “Fatal Strategies” describes the masses as a “transpolitical condition” comprising “a kind of headless body, whose radical passivity absorbs all attempts at manipulation from above through gestalt apathy.”¹¹⁵

The gaze is well established in the West and art where it represents a product of social structures dominated by a plutocracy of white elites in power with colonization and its impacts remaining influential contemporaneously. The *metaverse gaze* is derivative of the art historical variant but relates directly to the happenings that originate within our bits. Bits altering the physical realities of global participants—regardless of their presence or absence online. Bits forming a malaise of misinformation entwined with disinformation.

¹¹⁴ Ibid 61-66

¹¹⁵ Pettman, Dominic, Introduction to Jean Baudrillard’s “Fatal Strategies”, Fatal Strategies, (Semiotext(e): Los Angeles), 2008

Absurdity succinctly summarizes the strongest force within our “Society of the Spectacle” and its propagandistic atmosphere, providing the impetus in *Pair of Dise* (2020). An absurd atmosphere producing our metaverse reality and its “informed” gaze. The strategy and convergence of the conditions that create the metaverse gaze and its environment of dis- and misinformation are manifested and expressed in several fragments including “chumboxes” (Figure 40).¹¹⁶ Chumboxes are the paid advertisements situated on websites by content providers. Flanked right, left, or



Figure 40 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *The Lure*, oil on canvas, fragment: 48" x 36", from *Pair of Dise* (2020). This fragment appropriates a renowned chumbox used by advertisers that is juxtaposed next to a promotional snippet and grotesque image that together form “click bait” for the viewer.

¹¹⁶ Bridger, Marc, Sobriquet: *The Lure*, from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

tucked below; these objects concatenate text and image into lures—into clickbait that employ ambiguous imagery of body parts or grotesque forms without specificity. Thus, the chumbox amalgamates data with advertising motive to present the participant with a skewed form. A mutation leading to myths and metaverse wisdom. Curiously, the chumbox has emerged as a capitalistic necessity where journalism attempts to monetize web content as corporations compete for clicks. As such, the chumbox is often juxtaposed with legitimacy. It is housed within the same frame as credentialed brands, while its sponsorship obfuscates the charlatan through stylistic choices that make it blend with the genuine via position, place, and proximity. These conditions are explored and expressed through the images, spatial insertions, and other components that make up the fragmentary painting *Pair of Dise*.

Just like a website, adjacency of image and text in *Pair of Dise* are indeterminate while operating to keep the work open, unfinalizable, and fluid—qualities Jason Hoelscher navigates in the essay “The Poetics of Phase Space.” Hoelscher’s intertwines the topics of openness by other authors such as Immanuel Kant and Umberto Eco with his own observations, elucidating the importance of a work remaining indeterminate and tautologically recursive within a *possibility space* that wields artistic *negentropy*.¹¹⁷ The spatial insertion into the fragmentary work along with the varied images and texts create a richly flexible set of conditions for viewers to fabricate meaning, while maintaining “structural vitality”—a sort of barrier that keeps a work’s reading within the confines

¹¹⁷ Hoelscher, Jason, “The Poetics of Phase Space: The Open Artwork at the Edge of Chaos”, Spring 2014, accessed March 19, 2020



Figure 41 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Poet*, oil on canvas , fragment 12"x36", from *Pair of Dice* (2020)

of the world intended by the author. --- An intent that explores the roots of metaverse absurdity, yielding skewed information, attitudes, and perceptions. One aim of the fragmentation is to privilege a pluralistic interaction via viewer interpretation and a refashioning of meaning. As Umberto Eco indicates, a “work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood” while every reception of a work is an “interpretation and performance of it.”¹¹⁹ Thus, the work connects to its radicant roots of online browsing methods where members of the metaverse are beginning to traverse an ecumenical and unified culture, yet each brings a distinct and unique cultural history into their metaverse presence. As such, the fragmentary work aspires toward a sensitivity to this multiculturalism via the spatial insertions and arrangements that are fluid for each viewer; allowing each to interpret, rearrange, and discover new meaning forms based on their distinct cultural perspective.

¹¹⁸ Ibid

¹¹⁹ Eco, Umberto, *The Open Work*, “The Poetics of the Open Work”, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1-5

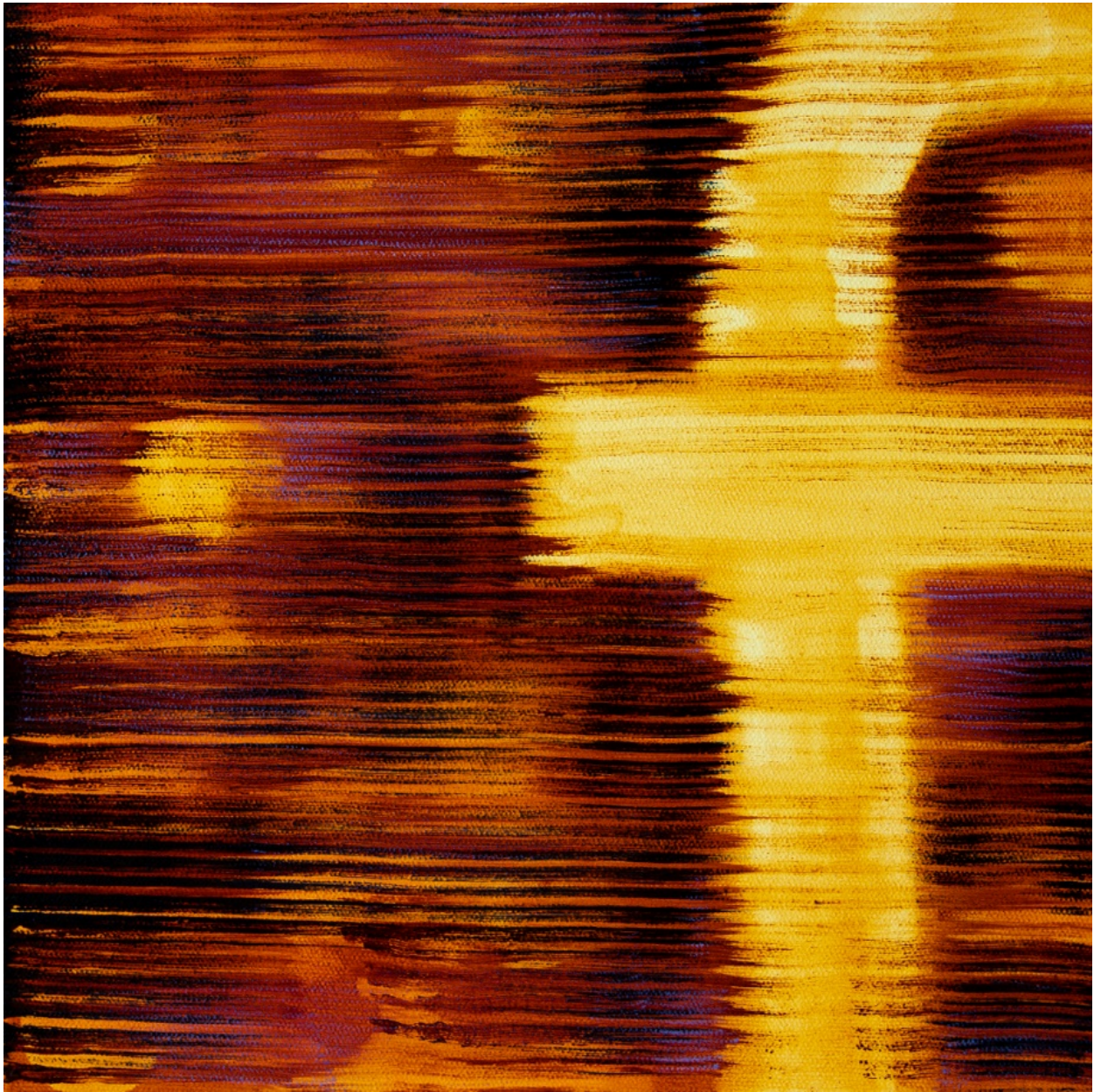


Figure 42 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Hyperdimension*, oil on canvas, fragment: 12" x 12", from *Pair of Dice* (2020)

While discussing art and its information component, a highly entropic work is one that is open to maintaining a recurring ability to surprise the reader, an attribute Hoelscher relates to its relative entropy—"the maximum value it could have while still restricted to the same symbols." A typical

textual sentence has low entropy since it clearly states its information and leaves little room for interpretation or interchange, while an identical number of characters jumbled up is highly entropic since it provides a great deal of unpredictability and latitude for meaning.¹²⁰ Yet the jumbled characters have an overly entropic quality that leaves it with little utility as a carrier of information. Art balances entropy at the “edge of chaos”, also known by Hoelscher as dynamic equilibrium, to present an indeterminate and open work for the viewer, but one that also maintains enough structural vitality to moderate its discursiveness. Paradoxically, internet memes and typoglycemia can be entropically high and low, bordering on the edge of chaos as slippery linguistic tools, which is a strategy in the main central panel—sobriquet: *Residue of Silence* (Figure 43).¹²¹ This panel’s central location can spiral the entire work’s interpretation into a fantastical gargantuan meme that comments on society, politics, and art. While not intended, this reading and leap through juxtaposition is not nearly as absurd as its other attributes. The fragment’s aim is a connection to the concerns of sociological propaganda and the deleterious misinformation arising as myths and its epiphenomenal metaverse wisdom through memes, Reddit posts, Twitter tantrums, advertising, and other snippets. At 72" x 60", the fragment houses the text: "That's so unfunny I laughed backwards." This personal meme exploits the slippery linguistic ambiguity

¹²⁰ Hoelscher, Jason, “The Poetics of Phase Space: The Open Artwork at the Edge of Chaos”, Spring 2014, accessed March 19, 2020

¹²¹ Bridger, Marc, *Pair of Dise* (2020) fragment

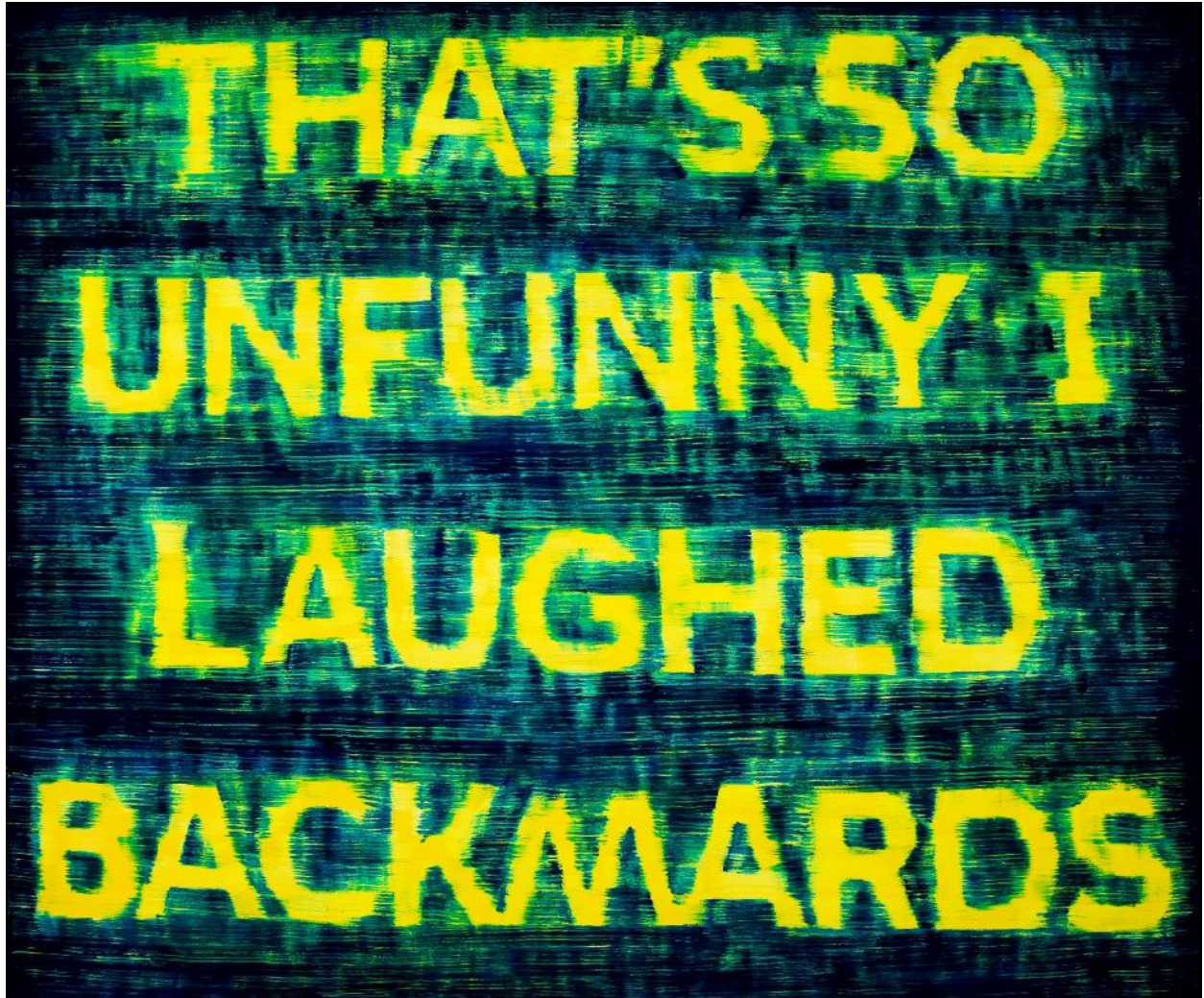


Figure 43 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Residue of Silence*, oil on canvas, fragment: 72" x 60", from *Pair of Dise* (2020). I created this textual meme on a cyber-bullying gaming website over ten years ago where it was subsequently appropriated by a forum member and run through a meme generator to add an image. The meme is embedded in the work here as an open device that situates various interpretations around the locus of memes, metaverse myths, and adjacency knowledge; while its misspelling ties it to contemporaneous spelling blunders along with a viewing experience shrouded in misinformation—revealed via the experiential surprise delivered in the device of typoglycemia.

within the determiner "that" which is a device navigated in past textual paintings that were influenced by Magritte, Baldessari, and others. Along with the embedded absurd humor, the misspelled backwards (backmards) yields a viewer experience correlating to perceptions and the underlying misinformation theme; while the word "unfunny" links to Baudrillardian style wordforms. At the time of *Pair of Dise's* inception, I encountered the following influential reaction by an author to humor's power and curiosity:

What can be more fragmentary, elliptical, outside of reason, than laughter? Laughter as the question that remains a question; that opens a question that retains its radicality as question. In this way, laughter "retain[s] for the event its radical definition and its impact in the imagination. It is characterized entirely, in a paradoxical way, by its uncanniness, its troubling strangeness – it is the irruption of something improbably and impossible – and by its troubling familiarity: from the outset it seems totally self-explanatory, as through predestined, as though it could not but take place. (Jean Baudrillard)"¹²²



Figure 44 Marc Bridger, Detail from Sobriquet: *Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia*, from *Pair of Dice* (2020)

¹²² Ward, Rachel, Jeremy Fernando, "Being - Thinking - Writing Jean Baudrillard", accessed March 21, 2020 <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=685>

The meme in *Residue of Silence* is one I created on a cyber-bullying gaming site over 10 years ago and yields an underlying personal connection to the digital spheres where aliases in the metaverse facilitate alternate existences. Humor is subtly and overtly explored in several fragments including the laughing boy in Sobriquet: *Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia* (Figure 44).¹²³

Typoglycemia

I cdn'uolt blveiee taht I cluod aulacly
uesdnatnrd waht I was rdanieg; the pha-
onmneel pweor of the hmuan mnid. Aoc-
cdrnig to a rseearch taem at Cmabrig-
de Uinervtisy, it deosn't mtttaer in waht
oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny
iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat
ltteer be in the rghit pclae. The rset can
be a taotl mses and you can sitll raed it
wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the
huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter
by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe. Scuh a
cdonition is arppoiatrely cllaed Typogly-
cemia

Memes are a fascinating phenomenon that have become online linguistic fragments that help us convey information swiftly and economically. A recent Guardian article articulated their evolution deftly by stating that “memes were once just people ‘dicking about on the internet’ yet are now one of the Earth’s most valuable forms of communication. They distill into a single image, or loop of video, an obscure yet still universally understood circumstance, often involving emotions that actual human words cannot quite nail.”¹²⁴ The intentional but subtle meme misspelling

Figure 45 Marc Bridger, Typoglycemia example

links to misinformation and urban legends via the phenomena of typoglycemia; a neologism

¹²³ Bridger, Marc, Detail crop from Sobriquet: *Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia*, from *Pair of Dice* (2020)

¹²⁴ Dent, Grace, “The gig economy has made ‘Karens’ of us all – angry and needing the manager”, The Guardian, accessed March 21, 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jun/29/karen-voice-demanding-speak-to-manager>



Figure 46 Marc Bridger, Detail from Sobriquet: *Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia*, from *Pair of Dice* (2020)

related to cognitive processes and reading comprehension whereby partially scrambled text can still be easily understood and read despite misspellings (Figure 45).¹²⁵ Cognately, this phenomenon relates tacitly to the notions of negentropic entropy mentioned earlier that assist in opening a work's equivocality but gently corralling it within a sphere of meaning with a specific structural vitality. Since around 2003, an internet meme of scrambled text has circulated exploring the phenomenon of typoglycemia.¹²⁶ However, as an analogue it can connect to the surprise elicited when information is critically penetrated with scrutiny. This underlying concern of scrutiny simultaneously emerges via the painting's crosshatching style and related perceptual shifts that occur within proximity, forcing an optical partitive deconstruction into the constituent marks that

¹²⁵ Bridger, Marc, image. Text accessed 4/19/2020 from <https://findwords.info/term/typoglycemia>

¹²⁶ Typoglycemia, accessed March 23, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Typoglycemia>

create experiential resonance with the notions of scrutiny, perception, and distance (Figure 46).¹²⁷

The remaining panels in *Pair of Dise* have an equally reasoned presence in questioning our enigmatic metaverse absurdity, providing the viewer with a wide array of prompts. Each supports the theme while connecting to space as it relates to the socio-political atmosphere via metaverse transience and the dissonant aura surrounding those experiences. Part 3 of this thesis explores fragmentation and space as an online anchor for fabricating work that liminally exists between physical and digital existences but emerges as a gestalt that transcends its constituent parts.

Hoelscher's and Eco's ideas of structural vitality, indeterminacy, unfinalizability, and their use of artistic negentropy coupled with dissipative structures, creates the open-ended artwork's ability to be revisited over and over again, maintaining its facility to repeatedly surprise.¹²⁸ Artistic negentropy is the "amount of information input and structure invested into a painting", while the concept of *dissipative structures* closely exist in "dynamic equilibrial systems" which "become increasingly complex over time by shedding their entropy into the environment in the form of materials used for future stages of energy intake and transfer."¹²⁹ Hoelscher uses these concepts to apply to art, stating that instead of a biological dissipative structure shedding its entropy into a biosphere, that art is an equivalent information-based form—shedding information entropy into the *semiosphere*. A semiosphere where the open artwork shares a biological form's "qualities of unfinalizability and open teleology."¹³⁰ *Pair of Dise* aspires toward this open-ended unfinalizability while traversing sociopolitical cultures that are imbricated with art culture in an amalgam that creates a portrait of metaverse absurdity.

¹²⁷ Bridger, Marc, Sobriquet: *Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia*, from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

¹²⁸ Hoelscher, Jason, "The Poetics of Phase Space: The Open Artwork at the Edge of Chaos", Spring 2014, accessed March 19, 2020

¹²⁹ Ibid

¹³⁰ Ibid

These concepts connect to Nicolas Bourriaud's idea of a "semionaut" along with the varied significations, myths, and emergent meanings that can arise in the fragmentary paintings.

2. Part 2 – Figurative Representation Attractor

Art and paintings have what Immanuel Kant referred to as a "purposiveness without purpose", a quality Jason Hoelscher refers to as tautologically recursive with autoreferentiality along with an open teleology.¹³¹ Not only does art yield aporias, indeterminacy, and unfinalizability, at the micro single-work level, but the styles and movements themselves reflect this quality at the macro-level through a mechanism that keeps movements on the *edge of chaos* (dynamic equilibrium) in highly entropic systems that employ attractor basins.¹³² These recondite terms are meticulously navigated by Hoelscher to demonstrate art's theoretical parallels to both information and thermodynamic biological systems. Artists and critics challenging the borders of what defines a painting is a recursive art historical endeavor taken on by a vast array of actors over the past century, giving rise to a specific type of art attractor basin known as a *figurative representation attractor*. The premise is that movements are entropically balanced to include enough unpredictability and interchangeability to invite revisiting, surprise, and change through constant redefinition. As Hoelscher puts it, our stylistic movements like the figurative representation attractor are "orderly enough to be coherent and communicative, but fluid enough and chaotic enough never to arrive at a fixed point" and are in a dynamic equilibrium. Thus, they invite contemporary interpretations through a revisiting.

¹³¹ Ibid

¹³² Ibid

Much like art itself, the beauty of art's stylistic attractors is their inherent indeterminacy recursively rewards rereading's and reinterpretations in a "relentless range of exploratory stylistic attempts" over the course of history—inviting new participatory creations that expand the style, while inserting "distortions that arise with each iteration."¹³³ Hoelscher examples this recurrence of figuration (attractor basin) across a millennia of art history beginning with the Egyptian's, Greek and Roman sculpture leading to Cimabue's stacked angels, Michelangelo's statues and paintings, to later iterations of Manet and Matisse; while Braque and Picasso distorted the figure through simplified form and cubistic deconstructions. De Kooning and Guston took up the reins in the 1960s and 70s, while another iteration would follow with artists such as Yuskavage's "kitschy Old Master pinups".¹³⁴ This same figurative attractor basin was highly influential in my figurative work, which is the emphasis of Part 2. However, this figurative focus converges with a conceptual attractor basin into a mélange of interests that manifest as the metaverse artform in Part 3 of this thesis.

¹³³ Ibid, 11-13

¹³⁴ Ibid



Figure 47 Marc Bridger, *Double-Slit Doppelganger*, (2018-19), oil on canvas, 92" x 72"

2.1. Double-Slit Doppelganger (2018-19)

The main protagonist in *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2018-19) (Figure 47) is a young twenty-year-old Guatemalan refugee named Claudia Patricia Gómez González (Figure 48).^{135,136} Claudia had ambitions of being a forensic accountant and set out in early May of 2018 for the United States with hope for a better life. Before leaving, she told her parents: "I'm going to America. Don't worry, I'll be back in a

¹³⁵ Bridger, Marc, *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2018-19), 92"x72", Oil on Canvas, Copyright 2018 Marc Bridger

¹³⁶ Lakhani, Nina and Tom Dart, The Guardian, accessed June 30, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/02/guatemala-texas-rio-bravo-border-claudia-gomez>



Figure 48 The Guardian, Claudia Gómez González (Nina Lakhani and Tom Dart)

few years."¹³⁷ By May 23rd, she was dead. Despite being unarmed, a lone border agent shot a bullet into her head, as three other unarmed refugees scattered.¹³⁸

Claudia became an *externality* within a global refugee crisis and “Americans” are liable for the atmosphere fostered and adjusted by metaverse means. Ten years ago, Nicolas Bourriaud observed migrant concerns and noted the emergence of transnational cultures “triggering angry retreats into ethnic or national identity.”¹³⁹ A decade later, the rise of populism and the age of Trump have exacerbated ethnocentrism while the number of migrants and refugees has become a hideous global phenomenon. Leadership in other nations is following suit as evinced with Brazil’s far-right President Jair Bolsonaro. Ai Weiwei’s

documentary “Human Flow” (2017) yields a glimpse at the plight of millions fleeing domestic oppressive violence everywhere on the planet—permanently abandoning their reality including belongings, family, and home.¹⁴⁰ A reality relinquishment beyond comprehension for many of the eyes that may scan these words—including my own.

¹³⁷ Lakhani, Nina and Tom Dart, The Guardian, Claudia Gomez, accessed June 19, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/02/guatemala-texas-rio-bravo-border-claudia-gomez>

¹³⁸ U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Laredo Sector Border Patrol Statement, accessed June 19, 2018.

<https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/speeches-and-statements/laredo-sector-border-patrol-statement>

¹³⁹ Bourriaud, Nicolas. *The Radicant*. New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2010, 18

¹⁴⁰ Weiwei, Ai, *Human Flow*, Venice Biennale, 2017

2.2. Global Socio-Economic and Political Conditions



Figure 49 Alfredo Jaar, *This Is Not America (A Logo for America)* (1987), video projection

"American" culture's allure has become a sort of mutated amalgamation embodying nationalistic signs, celebrity adoration, and cult of personality all on a sesame seed bun. The work by Chilean-born artist and filmmaker Alfredo Jaar, underscores the appropriation of the term and its disregard for other nations and cultures within the Americas. *This is Not America* consisted of a series of projection sequences overlooking New York city's Times Square that included the image in Figure 49 as well as a new logo with the text "America" superimposed over a graphic that was inclusive of North, Central, and South America.^{141,142}

Some "Americans" often forget that the nomenclature is coopted from two continents containing many countries and is not a synecdoche as it is often used. *This Is Not America (A Logo for America)* (1987) is a timeless reminder of this important notion. U.S.

¹⁴¹ Jaar, Alfredo, *This is Not America*, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://publicdelivery.org/alfredo-jaar-a-logo-for-america/>

¹⁴² Jaar, Alfredo, *This Is Not America (A Logo for America)* (1987), Video Intervention at Times Square



Figure 50 Marc Bridger, Detail *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019). Officer Big Mac from McDonald's nostalgia is merged with the U.S. Border Patrol to capture a sense of law enforcement that is similarly skewed by the comingling of myths and innuendo that form perceptions leading to real physical consequences. A mutated justice derived from distorted, bizarre, perceptions, forming a hyperreal simulacrum.

While totalitarian and authoritarian regimes are typically associated with cult of personality, the United States has demonstrated striking similarities over the past forty years with extreme escalation post-9/11. After World War II, our military presence and standing army became prolific with over 800 known bases on foreign soil, not counting secret and unpublished installations.¹⁴³ No other country in the world places bases within the borders of other countries like the United States.¹⁴⁴ While the promulgation of military presence in other countries is a global norm in the reality of "Americans", the behavior is the exception amongst earth's nations.

¹⁴³ Fazi, Thomas and Enrico Parenti, *Standing Army*, 2010

¹⁴⁴ Ibid



Figure 51 Marc Bridger, Detail *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019), Piles of burgers evoke various concepts including the idea of minions, possessions, and consumerism. A sense of hoarding and the accumulation of wealth underpin the various corporate and political machines influencing border policies, rhetoric, and nationalism.

The entertainment segment along with the real and hyperreal spectacle perpetuated by the mass media, propaganda, nationalism, and our jingoism has manufactured a globally dominant personality that flaunts itself as a God-fearing world power with a supreme military and flag of freedom.¹⁴⁵ While we are returning to pre-World War II era isolationism, the overt global propaganda of American Exceptionalism throughout the past century has been to ensure the U.S. is known as the world's salvation army; along with its population of immigrants that enjoy the

¹⁴⁵ Chomsky, Noam, *Manufacturing Consent*, Pantheon Books: New York, 1988

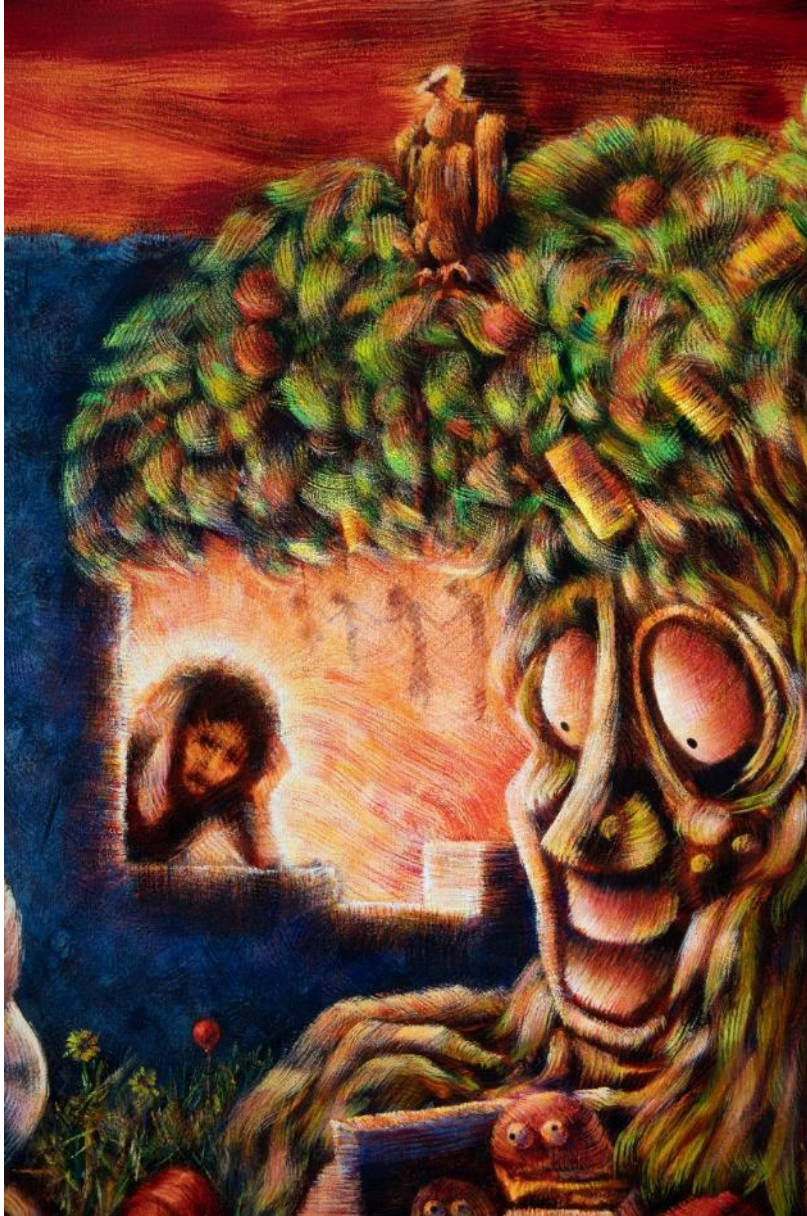


Figure 52 Marc Bridger, Detail *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019), McDonald's characters including the apple pie tree were consistent figures we could interact with as kids of the 1970s and 1980s. Tactile experiences that included hopping into the lap of a plastic Ronald McDonald on a bench. The characters and symbols are illustrative of corporate behaviors that prey upon children and parents through the warm sensation elicited by a smiling cartoon-like figure that masks various ulterior motives. The tree itself is a useful device in forming various allegorical allusions.

liberty of religion, politics, and life. The appeal of this perceived "America" is particularly fierce among dissenting and persecuted foreigners who seek asylum and a conflict free life—and our country has been publicized as that sanctuary. Our meretricious reality and those of other bordering nations worldwide is revealed in "Human Flow" by Ai Weiwei documenting 65 million people who have been displaced to avoid war, famine, terror, and other oppressions.¹⁴⁶ Weiwei's film provides a comprehensive overview of the world's refugee situation with Syria representing a significant portion of those seeking asylum.

¹⁴⁶ Weiwei, Ai, *Human Flow*, Venice Biennale, 2017

However, for the first time since World War II most of Europe is closing their borders to these people—an example set by the United States. Ironically, Syria’s devastating circumstances have direct links to our invasion of Iraq and the Frankenstein we crafted as ISIS; yet, there is no refuge for those seeking our amber waves of grain.

My paintings probe U.S. “American” myths, narratives, and platitudes that are false or facile. Those perpetuated in politics with nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric that dehumanizes refugees and immigrants as rapists, robbers, and wretches terrorizing America through violence and job loss.¹⁴⁷ Despite a clear and well documented practice of corporate welfare through tax incentives given to high-tech corporations and manufacturing firms in the ostensible trade of potential jobs, it is individuals that are manipulated and conditioned to believe the impoverished and immigrants are the true recipients of welfare. Sociological propaganda assists in fabricating the welfare myth under the guise of “socialism” while corporations such as Amazon, Google, Apple, and Foxconn are all recipients of actualized corporate welfare via tax-free subsidies.¹⁴⁸

Yet, we are now gripped by a president that perpetuates the rhetoric further, weaving blatant deceit into a narrative for nationalistic minions to devour as truth. This inculcation through inuring comments engenders metaverse myths and the formative atmosphere that cloaks our reality. For example, Trump’s vilifying rhetoric at the time of *Double-Slit Doppelganger’s* inception was common, while his words apprehended immigrants and refugees as an “infestation”; words that

¹⁴⁷ CBS News, “Video shows woman berating Latino man, calling Mexicans ‘rapists, animals’”, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/video-shows-woman-berating-latino-man-calling-mexicans-rapists-animals-esteban-guzman-california-2018-06-27/> accessed June 27, 2018

¹⁴⁸ Rushe, Dominic, “It’s a huge subsidy: the \$4.8bn gamble to lure Foxconn to America”, The Guardian, accessed July 03, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/jul/02/its-a-huge-subsidy-the-48bn-gamble-to-lure-foxconn-to-america>

contain numerous points of hypocrisy and caustic ironies.¹⁴⁹ Everything associated with “all-American” stems from a population of immigrants who came to a land and pilfered it from the natural inhabitants. Donald Trump’s current wife is an immigrant and his youngest son is a product of that immigration. However, their wealth separates them from other immigrants, and this is crucial to understanding an underlying disdain toward a precariat class of people—some of which are migrants, refugees, or minorities.

A common campaign promise and subsequent topic for President Trump is the wall between Mexico and the United States; a topic catalyzing numerous tirades about immigrants, along with errant writing and oration on migrant villainy. The wall and the filthy “infestation” it is designed to impede elevates the theme of borders, divisions, divisiveness, and its associated enforcement in our conversations. This becomes the mantra of the metaverse—a rumbling form of effective rhetorical attrition humming steadily. ICE and border patrol, along with law enforcement in general, have seen a surge in violence and inhumane treatment, simulating the rhetoric of their commander-in-chief. Border agents have been frequently found destroying humanitarian aid and water left for refugees in arid regions to assist migrants that often die of dehydration.¹⁵⁰ This destruction of water connects to other initiatives in my work that deal with water privatization and the resource as a market commodity versus a human right. Contributing to the body of influences in my work was video evidence of law enforcement destroying humanitarian aid left

¹⁴⁹ Graham, David, “Does Trump Know What ICE Does?”, accessed July 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/07/does-trump-know-what-ice-does/564371/>

¹⁵⁰ Wang, Amy, Border Patrol agents were filmed dumping water, Washington Post, accessed February 01, 2018 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2018/01/23/border-patrol-accused-of-targeting-aid-group-that-filmed-agents-dumping-water-left-for-migrants/?utm_term=.f77215213da8

for border refugees via milk-jugs filled with water.¹⁵¹ At the bottom left edge of the doorway inside the wall, *Doppelganger* includes a water jug that recalls this practice by the U.S. Border Patrol (Figure 53).



Figure 53 Marc Bridger, Detail *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019)

¹⁵¹ MSNBC, Video shows border agents dumping water left for migrants, <https://www.msnbc.com/all-in/watch/video-shows-border-agents-dumping-water-left-for-migrants-1144118339539>



Figure 54 McDonald's Wiki, McDonald's Characters

Our simulated reality has an atmosphere rich in fear—a byproduct of political rhetoric that has created a hyperreal nationalistic climate where false narratives and defiled ideas expropriate authentic actuality with simulacra. Where the vilification of those fleeing destitution for a promise of prosperity via the red white and blue are simultaneously barricaded by the border of its advertised liberty—held ransom for a select few. Where strata and striations are the economics of

humanity. We have erected a golden arch above this nation, signaling people from afar about our greatness—about opportunity. And then presented them with a border between death and freedom's phantasmagoria.

2.3. Allegorical Content and Characters

Digital gaming is one of the numerous allegorical devices in "Space Invaders." However, the McDonald's allegory is the most prolific and obvious, connecting to me personally as a child of the 70s and 80s whereby corporations used the lure of fantasy and cartoons to entice and exploit

children and parents (Figure 54).¹⁵² As such, interests in corporate misconduct, advertising, propaganda, and other forms of manipulation that prey upon the credulous are satisfied within my



Figure 55 Marc Bridger, Detail *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019); a confluence of Donald Trump and Ronald McDonald after pilfering the crown of Captain Crook.

allegorical concoctions. Similarly, health, food safety, and consumerism connect to this specific allegory, as it is supported by an unsustainable beef industry and corn subsidy that packages our fast-food market via a lobby of corporate behemoths that transforms us into dimwitted lardasses. Incidentally, McDonald's and fast food are some of Donald Trump's favorite preferences. Thus, I see the armament of fast-food, consumerism, characters, and narratives as unique opportunities for twisting the predator's barrel. Claudia Gomez is costumed as the Hamburglar and contrasted with a hybridized Officer Big Mac as the U.S. Border Patrol agent that took her life. Meanwhile, Trump has pilfered the crown of Captain Crook—a character and hat signifying the chicanery necessary to usurp Ronald's position as chief clown. These paintings provide an outlet for expression while simultaneously serving as a structure for social engagement (Figure 55).¹⁵³ The vilification and attack of immigrants create frictions that envelop us as a multicultural and multiracial family. Thus, the series explores ideology as a form of invader that alters reality.

¹⁵² McDonald's Wiki, McDonald's Characters, <https://mcdonalds.fandom.com/>, accessed January 30, 2020, https://mcdonalds.fandom.com/wiki/McDonald%27s_Wiki

¹⁵³ Bridger, Marc, detail of *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019)



Figure 56 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet *Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia*, oil on canvas, fragment: 60" x 72" from *Pair of Dice* (2020)

McDonald's proliferation world-wide along with its iconic characters has established the fast-food

chain as a symbol of “Americanism” that has infiltrated nearly every culture on the planet.

McDonald’s uses numerous symbols including the *Golden Arches* which connote happiness and peace through the associated rainbow arcs, prosperity through the term and color gold, as well as other rhetoric assigned through marketing schemes. Thus, the McDonald’s chain signifies and reinforces numerous propagandistic “American” stereotypes, platitudes, and catchphrases such as “all-American” and the “American Way”, while the food is often characterized as “All-American food”.¹⁵⁴ Many of these cliché phrases are enmeshed with white conservative middle-American idealized perceptions that leave people of color, minorities, and the disadvantaged cropped from the frame. Incidentally, Captain Crook, Ronald McDonald, and the Hamburglar are (appropriately) white, while all other characters of color are anthropomorphized creatures such as Grimace, Mayor McCheese, and Officer Big Mac—a conglomeration of human torso, law enforcement, and Big Mac head.

Consequently, it seems fitting that Donald Trump and our nation realize meaning, hypocrisy, and irony in the allegorical connections to Claudia and the McDonald’s characters. The Hamburglar is a thief. A villain that wants what we want and what we have—hamburgers. The hamburgers and the target of the Hamburglar’s thievery are a metaphor for “American” prosperity, property, and the “American Way” of life we have sold the world through numerous forms of propaganda. The hamburgers are symbolic of our immigrant lure—the magnetism of the West with its freedom of religion, speech, and numerous other feigned liberties. Similarly, the Hamburglar’s relationship to Donald Trump correlates to a personal connection through my multiracial and multicultural family. Trump’s continued vilification of immigrants and refugees as thieves, outcasts, and rapists

¹⁵⁴ McDonaldland/Gallery, 1971-1979, accessed February 06, 2020, <https://mcdonalds.fandom.com/wiki/McDonaldland/Gallery>

is personified within the scene through the temptation of the hamburger that Trump covets. Thus, the numerous hamburgers are representative of the U.S. allure, wealth, excesses, and similar notions. The Hamburglar's thievery connects to the violation Trump has fabricated by all people foreign. Therefore, Claudia as the Hamburglar signifies the vilification we have assigned

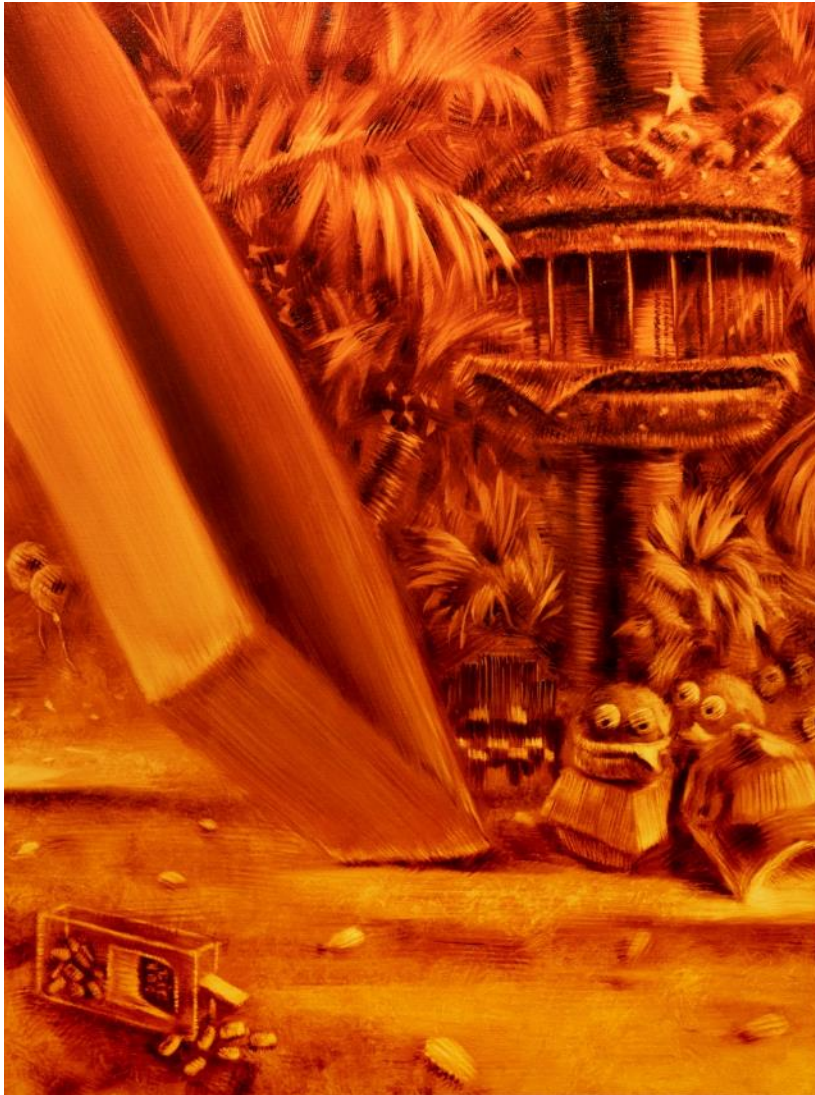


Figure 57 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Big Mac Jail*, oil on canvas, fragment: 30" x 40" from *Run a Make Border the For!* The golden arches cut through the entire work, traversing several panels while transforming in appearance throughout the

immigrants, while simultaneously luring her here with the propaganda of liberty and opportunity.

Captain Crook, another of the McDonald's character villains, has his crown pilfered by Trump, asserting a sardonic comment about his presidency. Meanwhile, Officer Big Mac has numerous intentions, the most apparent of which is law enforcement. Specifically, he represents Border Patrol as commanded by the "Chief Happiness Officer" himself,

Ronald McDonald.¹⁵⁵ Donald Trump's continued border escalations have led to increased violence against migrant border crossings, including events much like we are experiencing with our police force killing unarmed civilians. The United States imprisons more people than anywhere in the world, while Oklahoma is the "world's prison capital".¹⁵⁶ Our punitive culture of imprisonment coincides with the routine violence perpetuated by law enforcement as seen with Claudia Gómez González.¹⁵⁷ Thus, among numerous significations and purposes, Officer Big Mac emphasizes law enforcement in a McDonald's reality, where the hyperreal metaverse has constructed and perpetuated its veneer via our attitudes, snippets, and images that form a vortex for our salacious innuendo.

2.4. Claudia Gómez González

My personal connection to Claudia's story is via my wife, Adriana, in that they were both young females with hopes of a future within the United States. Adriana is a Brazilian native and obtained a proper visa, saving up her money over several years. Nevertheless, she enjoyed the privilege of education at a university, learned English, and while of meager means, had resources that permitted the legitimate leverage for entering the United States legally through a student visa. Still, the principal difference is the privilege. She was empowered through economics; Claudia was not.

¹⁵⁵ Chief Happiness Officer, Ronald McDonald, McDonald's Wiki, accessed June 30 2018, https://mcdonalds.fandom.com/wiki/Ronald_McDonald

¹⁵⁶ Prison Policy Initiative, accessed February 08, 2020 <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/2018.html>

¹⁵⁷ Lakhani, Nina, and Tom Dart, "Claudia was a good girl. Why did they kill her?", accessed June 02, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/02/guatemala-texas-rio-bravo-border-claudia-gomez>



Figure 58 Marc Bridger, Detail *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019)

Creating a work emphasizing Claudia, was motivated by several angles of interest and concerns with U.S. "American" realities, culture, and the indoctrination that enthralls many of its citizens.

Furthermore, I was drawn to the history of the narrative and its efficacious power that's been exploited since the Renaissance, while the French Romanticists were at the height of this form.

The painting attempts a connection to the social atrocities that lack humanitarian intervention due to social stratification and economic disenfranchisement.

The dismemberment, beheadings, and constant horrific pressure Mexican families endure from cartels were and remain repeat headlines. Central America's violent 'northern triangle', an area encompassing Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and other surrounding countries, is the most

murderous region outside of an official war zone.¹⁵⁸ The exact triangle Claudia was fleeing. Nearly two years later nothing has changed as two-thirds of migrants fleeing Central America's northern triangle "have experienced the murder, disappearance or kidnapping of a relative before their departure".¹⁵⁹

Similarly, the massacres and ethnic cleansing in Myanmar of Rohingya Muslims demonstrate a contemporaneous barbarism in our capacity to exact physical acts of mutilation, torture, and genocide, while maintaining a global conscience bereft of empathy, girded by indifference, and satiated by preoccupations with consumerism, entertainment, and metaverse meanderings.¹⁶⁰ At home we rationalize, dismiss, forget, or ignore our own black site of torture in Guantanamo. Our society of the spectacle turns atrocities into forms of entertainment where devices, screens, and webpages gently buffer us from external realities, while permitting brief interludes with them as appetizing headlines or Netflix binge bytes.

Plight's reality is filtered through the lens of the metaverse—an altered domain that sits in the same mental spaces as our entertainment. Thus, the inner realities of the metaverse are like sudsy bubbles that cling to one another, pressing their surfaces flatly and appearing as one, while permitting a twisted view inward toward the others; yet remaining buffered, separate, and safe. And I think the internalization and bordered distance from these realities along with a matching method of consumption mimicking entertainment, contribute to the wall of indifference we erect

¹⁵⁸ Council on Foreign Relations, Central America's Violent Northern Triangle, accessed June 19, 2018 <https://www.cfr.org/background/central-americas-violent-northern-triangle>

¹⁵⁹ Agren, David, "More than two-thirds of migrants fleeing Central American region had family taken or killed", *The Guardian*, accessed February 11, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/11/migrants-fleeing-central-america-guatemala-honduras-el-salvador-family-taken-killed-study>

¹⁶⁰ Reuters, "Massacre in Myanmar", February 08, 2018, accessed April 12, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-rakhine-events/>

as a space between us and them. The concepts of Baudrillard's hypertelic hyperreality and thinkers such as Guy Debord presciently articulate our reality with ideas that buttress this story in its method of consumption, interaction, and impact on our own lives as a mere wince among the numerous tweets we devour daily.

Impoverished people are fleeing violence—devoid of agency in a world that defines a person through economic wealth. Marginalized, their destitution and adversity enter our sphere as paltry bits among the periphery of our distractions, diversions, and dissipations. Thus, we remain sheltered in our own spherical bubble where we can safely observe the happenings of others in their bubbles. However, our reality has often directly altered theirs. Clinging together through surface tensions and adhesions, we carry their bubbles to alternate locales; while our corporations and government exacerbate their plight by way of dictatorial coups along with the domination of natural resources through the chicanery of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF).¹⁶¹ We bestow them with infrastructure, while indenturing them in debts that funnel their wealth through corrupt local actors and into U.S. bank accounts. This is especially true of the relationship between the U.S. and its South and Central American neighbors. So, there is a caustic irony in these people fleeing a homeland plundered by the U.S. with a desire to live and work within the burglar's pocket. They seek what the U.S. and its Western cohorts tout—a chance of opportunity, safe living, and the liberties we take for granted daily. They flee their homes attempting to enter the thief's nest. Yet, the scoundrels that pilfered their livelihood are also the armed sentries scouring the garrison border—gatekeepers to opportunity's coffers.

¹⁶¹ Devine, Jack. 2014. "What really Happened in Chile: The CIA, the Coup Against Allende, and the Rise of Pinochet." *Foreign Affairs* 93 (4): 26-35.

One critic of Ai Weiwei's "Human Flow" discussed its vulnerability to "fetishising or aestheticising the migrants as spectacle."¹⁶¹ During and after *Doppelganger's* creation I had similar concerns, doubts, and fears in my own work. Nevertheless, I felt I made a genuine attempt—as hard as is possible for an educated white privileged male—to connect to this young refugee and her tragedy. While seemingly impossible, empathy and a sustained engagement with these global conditions coupled with an encounter via art does, I hope, yield a compassionate link. As our realities remain far too insulated from theirs, when it is ours that has profited from their decaying demise. While I have connections to this story through my wife and her family along with my sons and the differing, cultures, ethnicities, and nationalities within our home, I primarily connect to Claudia's travesty from the trigger side of the gun—as an instigator, participant, and culpable "American" that has exacted this horrid conclusion on minorities and migrants throughout Western history. And the metaverse is merely another way of buffering the same behavior via the device.

Therefore, my link to this story is via my nation. The United States has a record of exploiting Latin America's resources. Our irresponsible, clandestine, and unscrupulous political, military, and business dealings have looted other nations of wealth and governmental representation, while subjugating them with onerous debts that have reified the rancorous realities and atmospheres of violence. Claudia and Adriana were both young single women with ambitions and hopes of coming to America to forge a future and life in a country that has advertised its success to the world as a place of opportunity. But more disturbing than the flaunting of that opportunity is our own covetous and miserly grasp.

Through art, I have attempted a deeper connection and involvement with these types of events. I see my boys and I think of my wife. I see them, and I also think of Claudia. They are the products of

¹⁶¹ Bradshaw, Peter, "Human Flow Review—Ai Weiwei", accessed January 20, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/dec/07/human-flow-review-ai-weiwei-migration-documentary>

immigration. Their flesh is colored by nearly every race on the planet. No flag, nation, or border can represent them. But as Claudia had demonstrated, those things can certainly destroy them.

Claudia came here to participate in the culture we brandish. In the painting she is a faint swirl-like ghostly depiction on the other side of a door (Figure 59).¹⁶² The work not only deals with realities,



Figure 59 The Guardian, the patch of grass in Rio Bravo where Claudia Gómez was slain. (Nina Lakhani and Tom Dart)

but it merges the lapse of time into simultaneity to portray an entry, exit, and result—before she is transformed and gazed upon by our metaverse. Transformed into a vilified culture thief. A derelict wall located at the scene of her death is used as the demarcating, double-slit division within the painting (Figure 75).¹⁶³ It divides the canvas and her realities, while becoming symbolic of the border she attempted to traverse. Not only the physical border, but the imagined

¹⁶² Bridger, Marc, Detail crop of *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019)

¹⁶³ Lakhani, Nina, and Tom Dart, *The Guardian*, accessed June 30, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/02/guatemala-texas-rio-bravo-border-claudia-gomez>

culture that is a tawdry product of our metaverse, propaganda, and hivemind. Upon entering that door, she was transfigured and became entangled within our vision of her—she became *observed* by our metaverse. A refugee remodeled and reconfigured by a rereality—transmogrified into an externality of the metaverse gaze. To express these ideas, quantum physics and sociological concepts assist on the emerging side of the wall.

2.5. Quantum Physics

Quantum physics often deals with perception and reality. As Stuart Hameroff indicates:

“there are an infinite number of universes, and everything that could possibly happen occurs in some universe. Death does not exist in any real sense in these scenarios. All possible universes exist simultaneously.”¹⁶⁴

Quantum physics provides a rich set of theories and ideas for art’s language, transcending aesthetic concerns into an area of science that is often philosophical. And at times as similarly subjective as art and religion. As such, there is a similitude and resemblance existing in cultural transience where we have more in common than we often realize, as we are all attempting to immortalize ourselves in some way. The philosopher and quantum physicist with their ideas and theories, the scientist with their experiments, and artists with their ideas, paintings, and sculptures. And, the evangelical too—where a minion’s hymns are the heartbeat of immortality.

¹⁶⁴ Hameroff, Stuart, TEDx, January 18, 2011, accessed March 20, 2020
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iIyEjh6ef_8&feature=emb_title

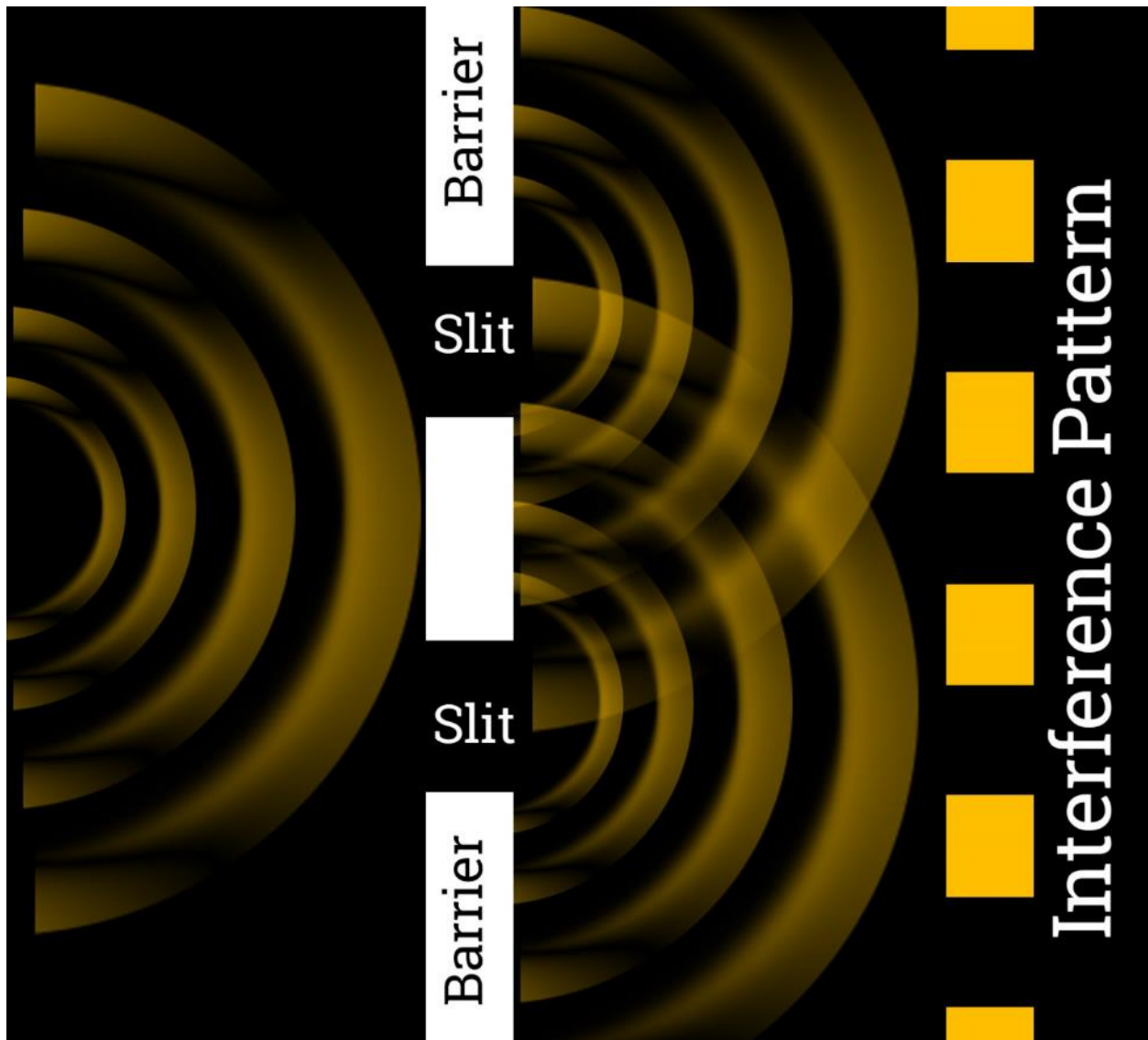


Figure 60 Marc Bridger, Wave replication from double-slit barrier and resultant interference pattern

Interwoven throughout my paintings, motifs, and narratives are branching metaphors that act as lenses for seeing our culture's socio-political condition and its result, such as Claudia's tragic reality. The ideas help express reality convergence, alterations, and destructions along with the mélange of myths and rhetoric that culminate as the metaverse gaze. Thus, my paintings are fantasy blended with the real; not unlike the veneer we live daily among the variegated bits, images, and emotes embellishing our existence.

Doppelganger's subject deals with death's violent rift and the subsequent tremor of grief shrouding Claudia's family and how it symbolizes current socio-political perspectives of refugees. The relationship of the event to tremors, waves, and waveforms are fascinating in their scientific and sociological associations with humans and our interdependencies on light and energy transmissions. The wave becomes a compelling metaphor, as it relates to Claudia's murder and has veritable authenticity in its connection to "American" culture and its container reality. The waveforms and her death are a product of our metaverse; a hyperreal construct perpetuated through the obfuscation of insular devices. The work interacts with the notion that we gaze upon and adjust the lives of others through our emerging complex system that is a collective conscious and hivemind, promulgated by the device. Rhetorical herds armed with myths and images that are

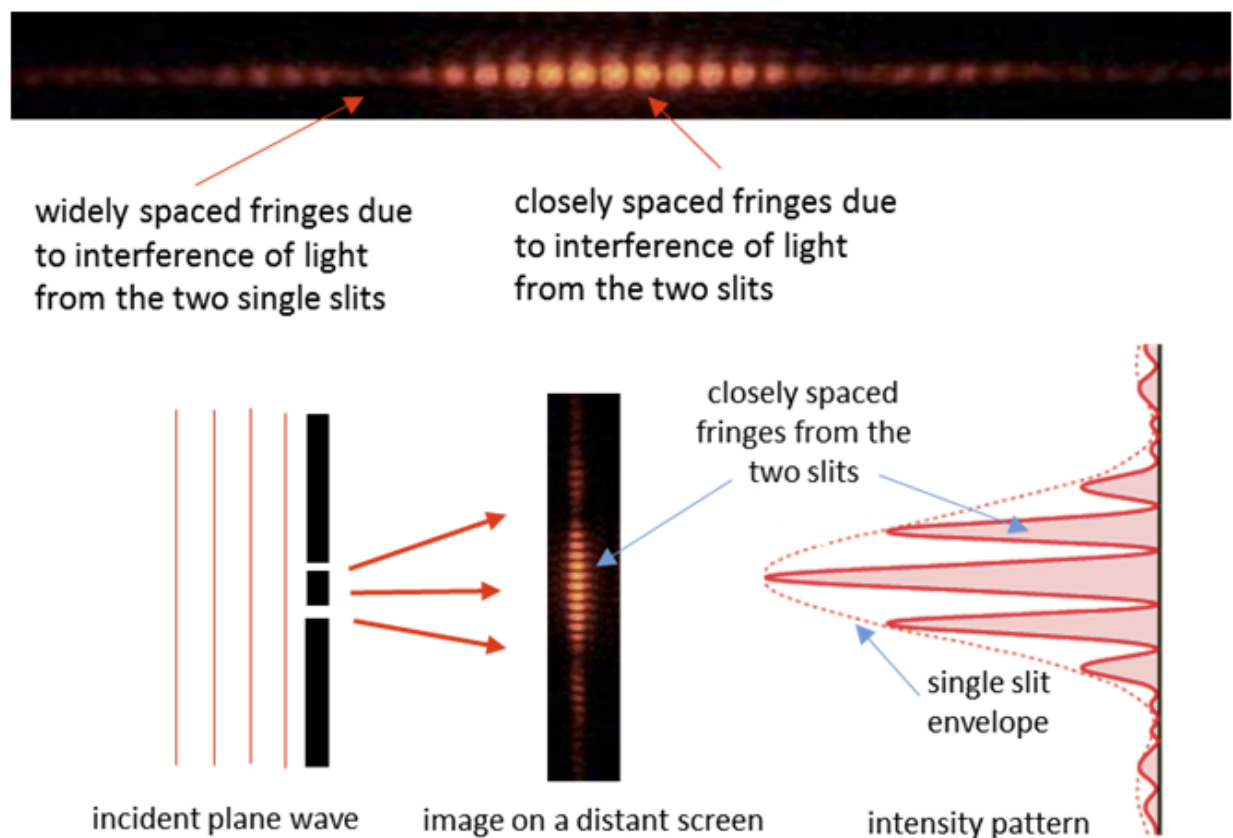
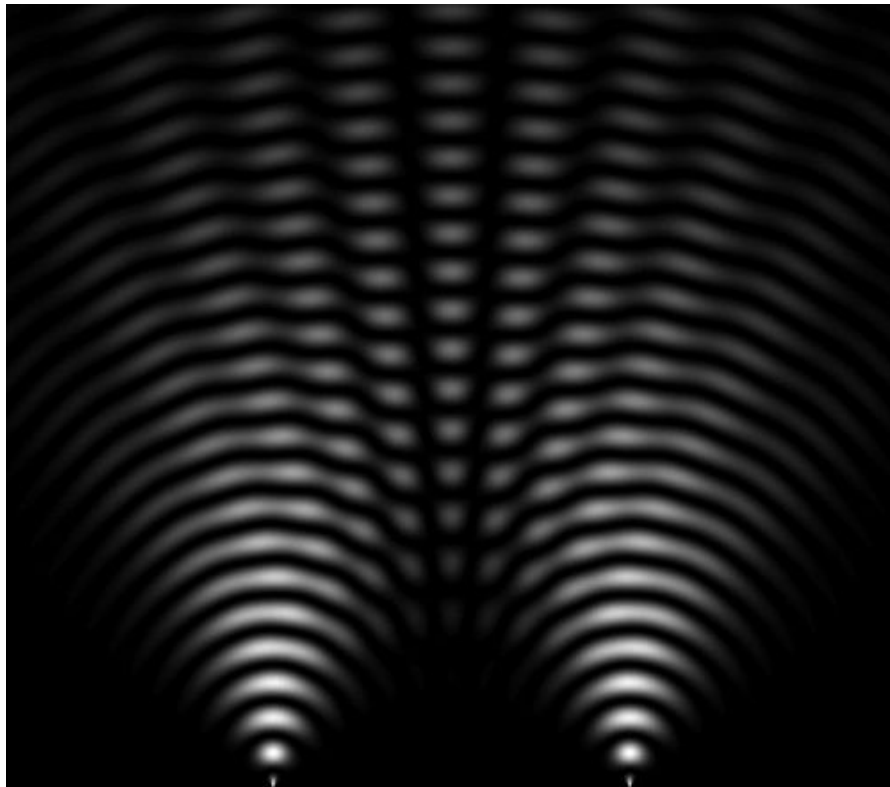


Figure 61 University of Sydney School of Physics, A Double-Slit Experiment and Interference Pattern



the amalgams of physical and digital domains. To encapsulate this condition, I employed quantum physics and its unusual phenomena to bookend and articulate our curious and bewildering reality conditions via its wave-like patterns and entanglement.

Figure 62 Simply Science, Replicated Light Waves Emitting from Double-Slit Experiment Claudia's life can be considered as a wave like those emitted from a pebble dropping into water. As her pebble enters the water her life and death emit circular waves outward. As her wave spreads it encounters other waves and they interact. But Claudia's wave was altered by our constructed metaverse which is understood in the painting to have a border and barrier with limited entry that transforms an entering wave and projects its energy into oscillating patterns (Figures 60-62).^{165,166} These same patterns exist at the micro level with the paint hatchings throughout the painting, while their most pronounced instance is formed in the grass beneath Claudia (Figure 63).¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Double-Slit Barrier and Interference Pattern, illustration by Marc Bridger for the purposes of this thesis.

¹⁶⁶ Interference: Young's Double Slit Experiment, University of Sydney School of Physics, accessed January 30, 2020 http://www.physics.usyd.edu.au/teach_res/hsp/sp/mod31/m31_doubleSlit.htm

¹⁶⁷ Bridger, Marc, detail *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019)

The bizarre conditions of our misinformation metaverse has a strangeness corollary in quantum mechanics. Jim Al-Khalili is a physicist that explains the “central mystery of quantum mechanics” while characterizing its events as a “lot of weird stuff that goes on” in an instructional video from The Royal Institution.¹⁶⁸ *Doppelganger* replicates the U.S. Border as a double slit barrier, which in quantum physics has two narrow slits placed near one another. When a wave of water or light passes through the barrier via these slits, a fascinating transformation occurs that exposes our reality to the physics of quantum mechanics, time, and entanglement.¹⁶⁹ As a beam of



Figure 63 Marc Bridger, Detail *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019). Waves, constructive interference, destructive interference, and its patterning emanate from the double-slit barrier across the grass on the transfigured side of the border where the metaverse manipulates its myths.

¹⁶⁸ Al-Khalili, Jim, *Double Slit Experiment Explained!* By Jim Al-Khalili, The Royal Institution, <https://youtu.be/A9tKncAdlHQ?t=3>

¹⁶⁹ Physics in a minute: The double slit experiment, accessed January 31, 2020 <https://plus.maths.org/content/physics-minute-double-slit-experiment-0>

monochromatic light (which is a wave) hits the wall and the two slits, it is *replaced* on the other side with two different waves that begin to spread out, diffract, and interfere with one another.¹⁷⁰ The two replacement waves coalesce to exhibit *constructive* and *destructive interference* during collisions. Crests that encounter troughs cancel out, while crests meeting crests or troughs meeting troughs will amplify those similar waveform features.¹⁷¹ If light is passing through the slits, the resultant pattern that emerges forms an extreme form of chiaroscuro—light and dark bands that are predictably created through observation and are known as an *interference pattern* (Figures 60-63).^{172,173, 174}

In *Doppelganger*, the wall at the scene of Claudia's death is transposed into a double-slit barrier. The barrier and its resultant interference pattern in quantum physics are considered difficult phenomena to explain even by physicists.¹⁷⁵ And the realm of physics and its visual artifacts lends a compelling corollary for similarly difficult sociological phenomena. Thus, physics lends various metaphors, motifs, and ideas for our bewildering dialog. A double-slit experiment will duplicate and copy an incoming wave and the animated effect of this duplication is easily located in online sources that depict this action via video clips or gifs. In *Doppelganger*, the copied and amplifying waves are emerging on the viewer's side of the wall where Claudia has transformed into a metaverse myth via the Hamburglar. This wall becomes symbolic of the border situation between

¹⁷⁰ Al-Khalili, Jim, *Double Slit Experiment Explained!*

¹⁷¹ Interference, accessed February 06, 2020, <http://physics.bu.edu/~duffy/PY106/Interference.html>

¹⁷² Ibid

¹⁷³ Physics in a minute: The double slit experiment, accessed January 31, 2020

<https://plus.maths.org/content/physics-minute-double-slit-experiment-0>

¹⁷⁴ Simply Science, Interference Pattern of Two Slits Illuminated With White Light, Simply.com, accessed 3/24/2020 https://www.simply.science/images/content/physics/waves_optics/interference_diffraction/Concept_map/InterferenceDiff.html

¹⁷⁵ Physics in a minute, accessed January 31, 2020

the United States and Mexico, including its aura of nationalism and ethnocentrism. A border situation symptomatic of the metaverse including the phobias, fret, and fear that arise in our balloon. Claudia's original form and wave are left behind the swirling doorway, while a replicated rendition of her emerges—a doppelganger with a new form and role.

These notions of light waves amplifying and being replicated, duplicated, and inverted, become metaphors and imaginative motifs for metaverse happenings. For example, one reading suggests that the wave is Claudia's life as altered by our gaze and the barrier slits. Thus, she can be seen figuratively as passing through the wall of indifference formed by our metaverse. A structural boundary that is a class delimiter between us and them. The demarcation where a physical reality, bereft of any tangible digital existence, is violently sucked into the enigmatic reality of a Mobius strip. A wall with passageways into a sphere where digital deeds are revisionary. Thus, the double-slit barrier is relatable to the metaverse barrier and the surrounding boundary that encases U.S. "American" reality via Mobius-strip like topology.

As a metaverse myth, Claudia is not seen as a 20-year old Guatemalan refugee. Instead, she is adorned in Twitter feeds, rhetoric, and the vilification that has occurred within the social media saturated domain that has transformed her into a bandit—a thief of U.S. "American" culture. Thus, she steps through the barrier's border into a peculiarly phased land. But, it's not a land—it is a reality perversion perpetuated by a herding hivemind that has fabricated the alter-reality for which she has become entangled. A verse and reality that escape her physical form but gaze upon and observe her ultimate outcome—transforming her into an externality of the metaverse gaze.

Nationalism and politics further shape and intensify her waves to bolster agenda setting rhetoric. As her wave expands, it is amplified by social media and further augmented through the device's propagation of story, while alternate paths for her are canceled out. As a wave passes into the

metaverse it is duplicated. Thus, the vilification has triggered a double that emerges along with the phenomena of a banding pattern. Our lives are pebbles too. We exert our own rippling waves that interact with other waves and each alters the other via constructive and destructive interference. Among numerous allusions, the interference arises as a metaphor for our apathy and participation in manufacturing myths that have created the altering atmosphere and externality. A gaze that has adjusted Claudia's outcome and disentangles her varied possible pathways. As such, participation in the metaverse and the stampeding thrums that emit outward waves interact with refugees and other people of the periphery; and thus, the indirectness of that interaction has real consequences. The interference is a patterning mark and index of society's spectacle and consumption.

2.5.1. Manufacturing a Disentangled Hamburglar

Quantum physics aids in creating compound branching metaphors. In *Doppelganger*, the original wave (Claudia) becomes a simulacrum of waves—she is transformed and replaced with new

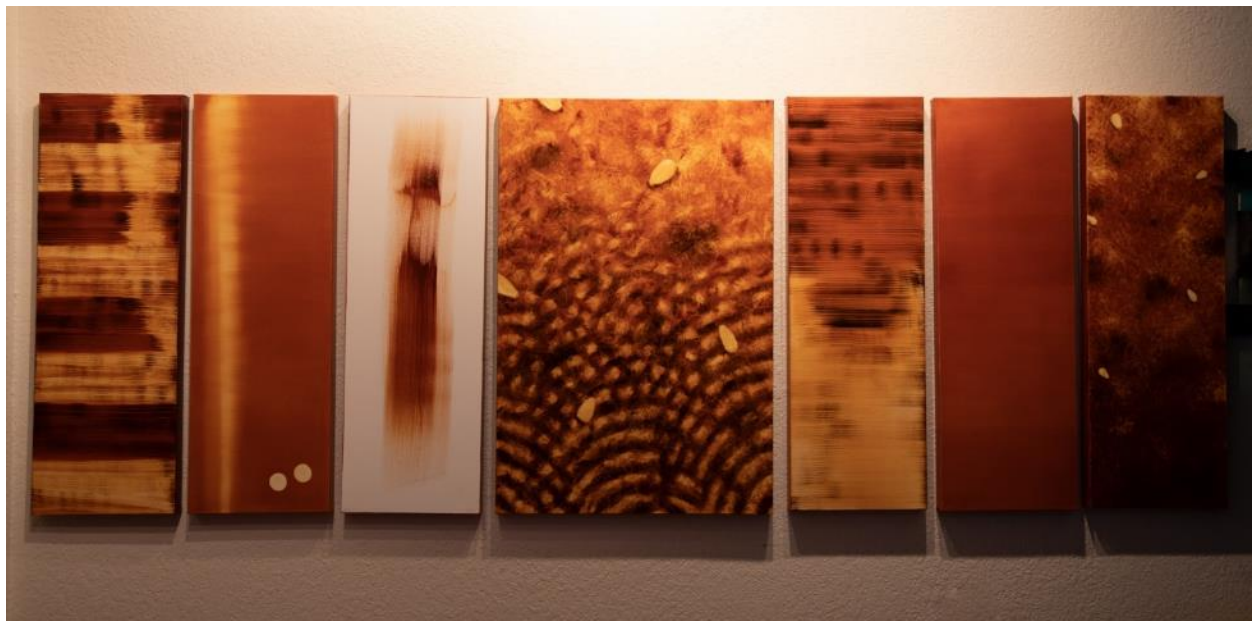


Figure 64 Marc Bridger, Detail *No Trespassing* (2019). The first form of fragmentation is introduced while the Moire patterns, banding, and similar motifs imply a barrier with the spaces recalling the separations between barrier bars.

versions via the barrier's windows—slits within the wall. And what emerged on the other side via an interference pattern is a caricature of our hyperreal metaverse, adorned by the hyperbolic words and villainy that have fashioned a sartorial bandit.

In the Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum physics the act of observing (gazing) modifies the light particle projected in the interference pattern.¹⁷⁶ The Copenhagen Interpretation “says that the wave function doesn’t have a physical nature; instead, it’s comprised of *pure possibility*.”¹⁷⁷ In addition, “it suggests that a particle traversing the double-slit experiment” (Claudia) “exists only as a *wave of possible locations* that ultimately encompasses all possible paths”¹⁷⁸ Entangled molecules and their *superposition* are unknown and have infinite numbers of possible outcomes. Consider, for the sake of metaphor, that these particles and outcomes are our realities and lives along with their possible paths. In quantum physics, the act of observing (measuring) a particle is a destructive act since it permanently fixes the particle’s location and annihilates all other possible outcomes from that point forward—opportunity’s door is closed through this act of seeing. Thus, the very act of observation changes the particle’s locational outcome permanently. As the act of observation and its subsequent effect on a particle cannot be undone—once measured (observed) its behavior, location, and outcome are permanently and irrevocably altered.

Thus, the observation component of the physics metaphor connects to the opticality in art which permeates in various ways. Similarly, this concept has a fascinating correlation to the colonial gaze in art along with the metaverse gaze developed herein. Our actions in the verse have

¹⁷⁶ Quantum Time, Exactly what is time?, accessed January 31, 2020 <http://www.exactlywhatistime.com/physics-of-time/quantum-time/>

¹⁷⁷ The Quantum Experiment that Broke Reality, PBS Digital Studios, accessed June 25, 2018, <https://youtu.be/p-MNSLsjdo?t=484>

¹⁷⁸ Ibid

repercussions. In essence, our digital culture and the vilification it produces alters time and space to influence a specified outcome versus a natural one, thus we have gazed upon and observed Claudia directly and indirectly and this cannot be undone—our lure, our social and cultural metaverse, is the *observer* and *effect* that altered her *arrow of time* and now she is dead.¹⁷⁹

There is a fascinating and counterintuitive concept called *quantum entanglement* that is at the heart of quantum computing and is also present within the double-slit experiment. Quantum entanglement demonstrates that particles that have had past interactions become “entangled” and this relationship endures—even if the particles are spread apart by light years.¹⁸⁰ Consequently, these particles are now permanently linked, but maintain infinite possibilities until measured. Thus, the measurement or alteration of one particle will have an instantaneous impact on the paired entangled particle, even if their distance is millions of miles apart—and this is the effect Einstein called “spooky action at a distance.”¹⁸¹

Our optical and observational sphere creates a metaverse gaze—propagandistic lenses with which it uses for skewed worldviews that are based upon metaverse myths and wisdom. These ethnographic lenses gazing upon refugees can disentangle their destiny and life—Claudia’s life—along with all possible outcomes, while yielding a sort of “spooky action at a distance.” A distance that is the buffer we enjoy between device and the actions it exacts through our aliased, masked gaze. An action that ensnared and attracted Claudia through our global depiction of the U.S. as the

¹⁷⁹ Quantum Entanglement, Wikipedia, accessed January 31, 2020
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quantum_entanglement

¹⁸⁰ Ibid

¹⁸¹ Hesse, Mary B. "Action at a Distance in Classical Physics." *Isis* 46, no. 4 (1955): 337-53. Accessed February 9, 2020.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/227576>

“land of opportunity”; thus, we lured her through a barrier to be gazed upon.¹⁸² A gaze that altered her outcome through observation, obliterating all other possible outcomes. In a sense our metaverse milieu created her doppelganger wave—a Hamburglar simulacrum on the wall’s emerging side, sartorially adorned in an interference pattern—a cultural bandit. An outlaw not of blood or bone, but of banner.



Figure 65 Eugene Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), oil on canvas, 102" x 128" (Louvre Museum, Paris)

¹⁸² Ibid

2.6. Art Influences

Activism from artists like the Yes Men, Ai Weiwei, Banksy, and Cesar Cornejo along with the pioneering conceptual work by Hans Haacke, Barbara Kruger, and Sol LeWitt are among many of my influences. Coupled with humanitarians such as Noam Chomsky, these artists and thinkers confront institutions and power concentration through their forms, images, and words.

Doppelganger was also influenced by the narratives of Neoclassical and Romanticist period artists including Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres and Jacques-Louis David; however, it was Théodore Géricault's *Raft of Medusa* (1819) and Eugene Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) that were especially influential in capturing a moment of contemporary history to immortalize in the tradition of oil painting (Figure 65).¹⁸³ Yet, Delacroix and Géricault's use of dramatic and romanticized figures was replaced with an allegorical whimsy quality via the inclusions of the McDonald's crew. These decisions connect to contemporary artists such as Hilary Harkness, Neo Rauch, and Nicole Eisenman's use of the narrative where compressed spatial depth and a simplified figure elevate awareness of conceptual importance and material use (Figure 66).¹⁸⁴ In addition, the figures in *Doppelganger* are transformed into caricatures—costumed character reductions as viewed through the stigmatic spectacles of our metaverse gaze. The strategy of an overt political depiction coupled with nostalgia-oriented figures was opted for its appeal to the diverse range of viewers existing beyond the confined spectrum of an artworld. A group of viewers

¹⁸³ Delacroix, Eugene, *Liberty Leading the People* (1830)

¹⁸⁴ Eisenman, Nicole, *Progress: Real and Imagined*, Oil on canvas in 2 panels, 96 x 180 in (243.8 x 457.2 cm) each, 2006 accessed February 17, 2020, <http://koenigandclinton.com/exhibitions/nicole-eisenman-progress-real-and-imagined/>

I consider sincerely when attempting to construct an engaging and accessible work that is sensitive to other realities, cultures, and emergent metaverse ambits.



Figure 66 Nicole Eisenman, *Progress Real and Imagined*, panel 1,(2006), oil on canvas, 96" x 180"

Rather than depicting a dramatized human form with illusionistic spatial depth, I chose to garb the participants in an aura of absurdity that permeates online existence, consumerist concerns, and news headlines. Absurdity reappears in the series and becomes a catalyst in the fragmentary painting *Pair of Dise* (2020). A great deal of my work involves a probing and search for understanding in an open dialog, while unfolding as a series of reactions that mark emotional highs and lows—emotions associated with disturbing cultural events impacting my loved ones. Fears unfold on the canvas and motivate numerous decisions resulting in a cathartic and meditative experience. Nicole Eisenman's words link to this purpose as she explains that "Nobody becomes an artist because they're happy"; "painting something gives you time to meditate on the

thing you are painting."¹⁸⁵ Recently, Ai Weiwei discussed creativity and protest in an article borrowing its title from his words: "An artist must be an activist", going on to say "many people have to leave their nation barehanded, and maybe before they used to have a palace. In China they say, you're born as a nude person, you die as a nude person. You should understand both ends."¹⁸⁶ While, Philip Guston noted that "paintings are, for the most part, not successful. They are valiant



Figure 67 Philip Guston, *City Limits* (1969), oil on canvas, 6' 5" x 8' 7 1/4" (MoMA, The Estate of Philip Guston)

¹⁸⁵ Maine, Stephen, "Nicole Eisenman's Allegorical Possibilities Stop Making Sense", accessed February 17, 2020, <https://artillerymag.com/nicole-eisenmans-allegorical-possibilities/>

¹⁸⁶ Lewis, Tim, Ai Weiwei: 'An artist must be an activist', The Guardian, March 22, 2020, accessed March 22, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/mar/22/ai-weiwei-an-artist-must-be-an-activist>

tries", subsequently noting of society: "I began to see all of life really as a vast concentration camp. And everybody is numbed, you know."¹⁸⁷

Philip Guston has been a sort of guiding light for his rebellious past and tender consideration for humanity. Guston's sardonic undertones and comedic cartoon-like actors are particularly forceful influences. His late 1960s work marks a return to figuration, espousing biomorphic forms and symbols ambiguously onto the canvas with the warm embrace of humor. Yet, Guston's move was a maelstrom of courage within the rapid waters of conformist modernism. The thirty-three paintings presented in the 1970 Marlborough Gallery incensed cohorts and critics that sounded taps in this terminal body of work. The absurd and indeterminate imagery would liberate the artist and serve as a rebuke to Greenbergian critics. The ambiguous nature of Guston's work is both fascinating and confounding. Guston explains that his deconstruction and abandonment of a painting is part of a vital process, often reengaging the ideas years later with an evolved perspective, while recognizing a "mysterious process at work" that he did not want to understand.¹⁸⁸ Guston's return to figuration sought to provide his paintings with a "referential certitude" and sense of history in a time when modernist painting had languished in its ability to affect society.¹⁸⁹ Guston describes the transition in a lecture by summarizing: "It's taken me years to come to the conclusion, or to the belief, that probably the only thing one can really learn, the only technique to learn, is the capacity to be able to change."¹⁹⁰ And, change he did as the figurative used

¹⁸⁷ Coolidge, Clarke, "Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations," (Univ. of California Press, 2011), 81

¹⁸⁸ "Philip Guston: Mysteries of the working process," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, accessed May 24, 2017, <https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/philip-guston-mysteries-of-the-working-process/>

¹⁸⁹ Robert Slifkin, "Philip Guston's Return to Figuration and the '1930s Renaissance' of the 1960s," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 93, No. 2 (June 2011), 220

¹⁹⁰ Coolidge, Clarke, "Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations," (Univ. of California Press, 2011), 150

representation and symbols to replace the abstract marks of previous decades to embrace a multivalence in art ushered in with postmodernism.



Figure 68 Marc Bridger, Detail *Achomlishments* (2019). Cheese drips from the furniture that is upholstered with sesame seed buns.

But change is a gentle word that does not properly summarize the crisis of faith and ideology that coincided with my immersion into an artworld reality. Nevertheless, I latched onto change and Guston's sentiment, as it emerged in my own frenetic maelstrom that thundered forward as "Space Invaders" arrived as a focus. Guston's story, art, and rebellious figurative shift impacted my decisions and were a framework for referral in a period where I felt torn between formal

interests, figuration, and conceptualism. Guston's example was internalized and encouraging during periods where past derision sought to curtail certain emerging preferences, while fear and failure maintained their onerous grasp. The shifts he went through stylistically coupled with the critical disdain he received from the Marlborough Gallery, imparted a resonating confidence during my periods of adversity.



Figure 69 Philip Guston, *The Studio* (1969), oil on canvas, 71"x73", (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art)

In *Doppelgänger*, a sense of compressed space borrows from modernist and postmodernist periods, distanced from the anachronistic emphasis of mere illusionism, while these shallow spaces can be considered variously. Matisse used simplified figures while discarding spatial depth for an emphasis on form and material. Some cartoons employ compressed space

mechanisms yielding near claustrophobic atmospheres, while pushing the viewer into a closer interaction with the subjects; a strategy often employed by Guston in tandem with his playful use

of ambiguous imagery (Figure 67 and 69).^{191,192} A personal engagement is promoted by eliminating the feeling of standing from afar, peering through an illusionistic framed window. Instead, space acts as a confrontation as the piece pulls the viewer into a chaotic, cluttered, and compressed reality. This claustrophobic feel correlates with the cramped spaces with which we interact online via image saturated browsers in a domain of bombarding bits. Eisenman's *Progress Real and Imagined* (2006) is an excellent example of this disorder and disarray. Similarly, the first three paintings and some fragments throughout "Space Invaders" borrow from this compressed strategy. Formally, space compression can have interesting effects where the surface textures, background, and foreground oscillate in a complex array of perceptual shifts between painterly media and representational content. Eliminating illusionism as a stressed peripheral interest allows surface reticulations to gain emphasis. Guston's removal of some illusionary devices and spatial depth, yet maintaining representational tactics, permits a complex image to emerge that can be curiously confounding with an elevated intensity. Guston expertly employs these tactics, appropriating and expanding upon simplified forms, cartoons, and animation techniques for his late figurative work.

2.7. Personal Mark and Style

Surface reticulations through paint handling intertwine formal and conceptual concerns, forming allegorical constructs of alterity that mine messages from the fragmented digital spheres. Each painting surface is meticulously considered as a layered object not unlike the skins, personas, and aliases we conjure to sit atop our human layers. The paintings include crosshatching and Moiré

¹⁹¹ Guston, Philip, Museum of Modern Art, *City Limits* (1969), Accessed February 15, 2020
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79541>

¹⁹² Guston, Philip, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, *The Studio* (1969), Accessed April 19, 2020,
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/philip-guston-the-studio>

patterning at the micro level, while the alternating bands become metaphorical motifs of the metaverse at the macro level. The painting's surfaces are corollaries for the artificial identities



Figure 70 Marc Bridger, Detail *Achomlishments* (2019)

manufactured online and create perceptual shifts at varied distances, linking the viewing experience to the necessary scrutiny we must exert with information and perceptions, while making this concern an experiential component for the viewer.

2.7.1. Process

Numerous vacillating marks and bands unify into a style that supports the breadth of ideas herein. Due to the disruptive nature of the *Doppelganger* narrative and its impact on numerous lives as well as its rippling effect and how it relates to society and waves, I wanted the work's surface and mark making to mimic the lines and surface indictments made in the subjects. The visceral yet nuanced reticulations correlate to the underlying ideas that catalyzed the work's inception. Each

work begins with a monochrome painting using a reddish pigment relatable to blood. Atop this layer are marks that infuse the work with an imbricated surface and layered plexus reflective of humanity's intricacies, while drawing attention to the artform itself in a self-referential loop. Through interference patterns and marking style, I reflect on the artifice and apparatus embedded in the complex lure that ensnared Claudia, while examining our social responsibility rather than focusing on the specific incident itself. Afterall, the incident is a symptom of many other social conditions—alone it is tragically misrepresented through the narrow headline of yet another illegal



Figure 71 Marc Bridger, Detail *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019)

border crossing, while the patsy of a rogue border agent distracts us from the true villainy that creates a mirror of itself in the victim.



Figure 72 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Bandits*, oil on canvas, fragment: 48"x60", from *Run a Make Border the For!*

By overlaying of a fully rendered underpainting with paint and marks that are not fully encapsulating of the underlying surface, the reddish hues themselves are emphasized and emerge as signifiers for a shared substance between all humans. Similarly, the yellow-oranges emanating in higher key areas coat the surfaces in a color associative with consumerism—that orangey versicolor emanating from sesame-seed buns that cap so many “American” meals. Painting atop an underpainting and leaving various swaths and edges untouched not only unify the work, but also draw attention to the object’s artifice. Art’s recursive autoreferentiality is expressed in this action that draws attention to the artifice that can easily mask, edit, and alter underlying layers. Thus, the act of painting and its choices in emphasizing underlying swaths become figurative references to the signifiers and subjects represented in the accumulating layers.

Emphasizing the monochrome is also an act that dismisses a preoccupation with realism or representation to privilege the brushwork and painterly actions that encompass the activity. The



Figure 73 Marc Bridger, Detail Sobriquet: *Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia* from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

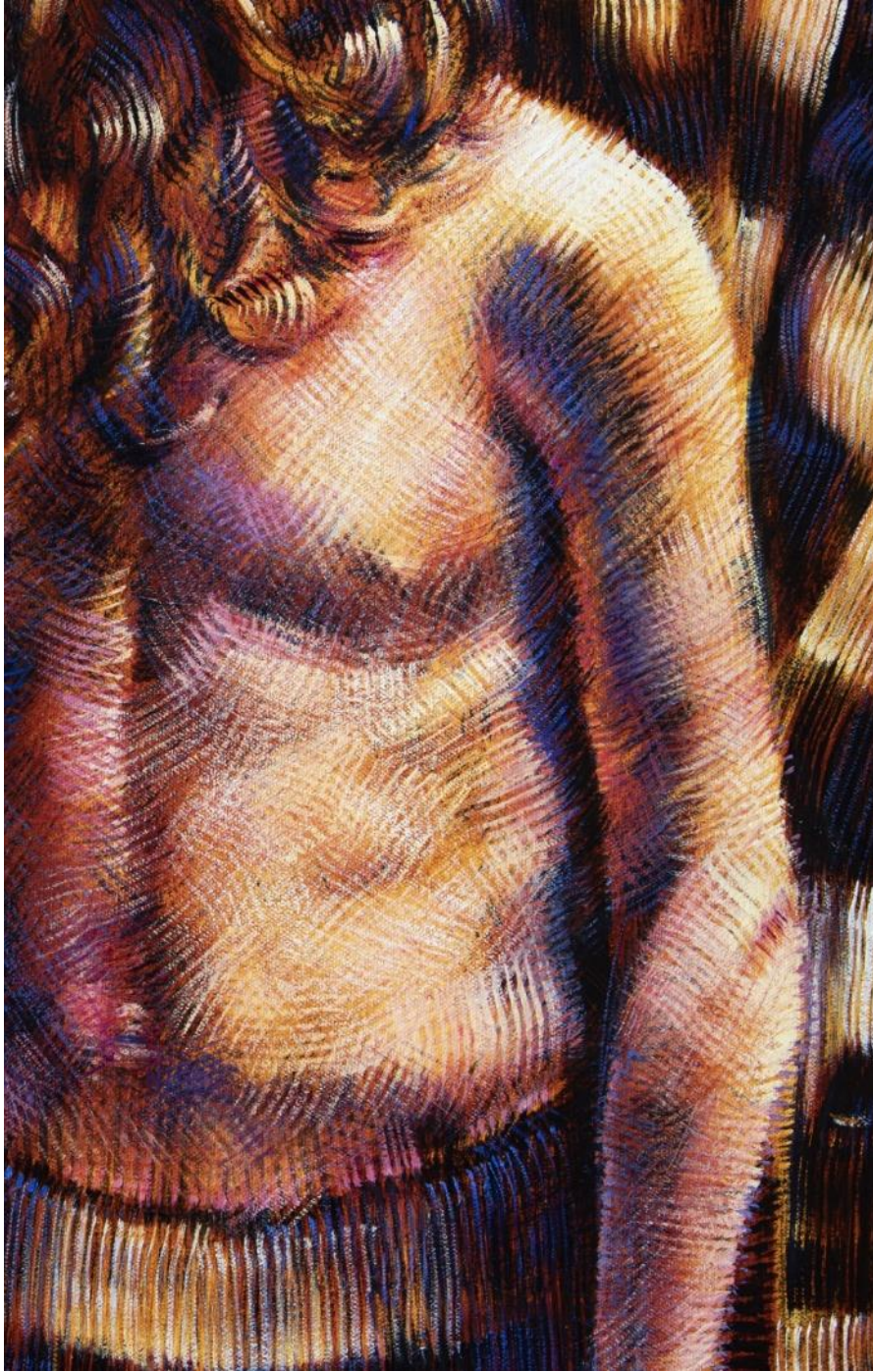


Figure 74 Marc Bridger, Detail Sobriquet: *Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia* from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

stylistic hatching paint lines explicitly communicate and become carriers of content.¹⁹³ Stressing the artifice of the object is a gesture of trust between viewer, artist, and art object. The action accentuates its human touch, while declaring itself as a form of dialog. And its propagandistic qualities are asserted with this gesture of transparency. At the end of the nineteenth century, the “brushstroke became visible, expressing the painting’s autonomy and magnifying the human hand in reaction to the

¹⁹³ Hoelscher, Jason, Site/Non-Site/Website, Presence, Absence and Interface in the Online Studio Critique, 2015, 4-5

industrialization of images and objects."¹⁹⁴ This early transition in art is a visual indicator of humanity's expressive mark that elevates the work in a way that separates it from the cold machinations that would occur over the next century. In a sphere of digital bits and mechanical reproduction, I believe making a work that connects to these impersonal constructions, in a very human method, bestows an authenticity to the rhythmic hearts behind our devices.

2.7.2. Monochrome & Layering

Richard Schmid's gestural mark-making in paint is one of many influences for the painting style I have developed for "Space Invaders". While Schmid is representational, a sustained investigation of his style reveals abstract swaths in a rich rete of edges, marks, and residues that titivate delicate surfaces—superseding a facile figurative assessment. This perceptual difference along with proximity is important in my work, where paint application and surface reticulations become an emphasis that requires the viewer to go deeper than what is represented. My nuanced cross-hatching and marks suffuse across the surfaces and are overlaid atop a fully rendered monochrome underpainting. This process derives from an imprimatura staining used in the Renaissance by artists such as Leonardo Da Vinci. However, over the years my underpainting had developed into a fully rendered and nearly finished painting that is key to my process and aesthetic. In *Run a Make Border the For!*, I experimented with leaving this underpainting as the final layer, while all other works build hatching layers of artifice atop the base monochrome.

My monochromes incorporate Transparent Earth Red (PR101) mixed with Indian Yellow (PY83), connecting to the historical use of similar earth tones throughout the history of art. Also, this

¹⁹⁴ Bouriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lukas & Sterberg, New York, 2009, 85

specific red pigment has a high iron content using PR101 (Synthetic Iron Oxide Red), thus the hue is equally relatable to blood.¹⁹⁵ While Indian Yellow (PY83) imparts an orangey-yellow hue that



Figure 75 Mark Tansey, *Veil* (1990) oil on canvas, 64" x 50.5" (Mark Tansey: Visions and Revisions)

¹⁹⁵ The Color of Art Pigment Database: Pigment Red PR (PR101, Synthetic Iron Oxide Red), accessed March 29, 2019, <http://www.artiscreation.com/red.html>

infuses the work with layers of consumerism, fast-food, and “Americanism.” Since my interests intersect with surface, artifice, and ethnic origin, it was fitting to undergird the work with a humanistic color shared beneath the versicolor which all other superficial layers diffuse.

A master of the monochromatic style along with gamesmanship is Mark Tansey. Tansey’s monochromes are ethereal, while evoking an old historic photograph sensibility that lends itself as a credible document—a sort of record. *The Veil* (1990) is especially influential to my series as it reflects upon reality and harks back to Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” which is about human perception and reality (Figure 75).¹⁹⁶ However, it is Tansey’s style that is important to note here as he uses the same reductive process that I employ in my painting process. In the 1980s and 90s Tansey relied heavily upon a large library of images he accumulated from magazines, photographs, and other sources. He then composed works using these appropriated references for figures and other content that supported his conceptual thesis. Similarly, I have historically relied upon Photoshop to construct compositions from my own library of images, personal photography, as well as appropriated text and images. Collaging in Photoshop permits a contrasting of images and their associated meanings to be visually edited, reworded, and structured for new meanings. By contrast, Tansey used the copy-machine in the 80s and 90s for similar reasons. His “process of grouping, categorizing, and comparing brings about the curatorial understanding of image types—of pictorial rhetoric’s and their related meanings” into the fray of compositional construction.¹⁹⁷

Typically, I brainstorm a set of ideas or concepts I want as part of my discourse and begin incorporating portions of images into a collage process that eventually becomes a visual reference

¹⁹⁶ Danto, Arthur. *Mark Tansey: Visions and Revisions, The Veil* (1990), New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992. 99

¹⁹⁷ Ibid 127-136

for the painting. Tansey works similarly and through the contrast of images along with the significations and connotations that emerge. A fascinating interplay in dialogue arises with affinities for pluralistic interpretations, while indeterminacy remains a liminal link. Tansey discusses that in his collaging process “there is enormous fluctuations of things that are coming into proximity, and it’s in the fluctuation, the actual playing with these pieces, the working, the interacting, that meaning appears and disappears and transforms itself. This is the dynamics of the pictorial dialogue, the dialogue between these elements that are coming together.”¹⁹⁸

Because surface, process, and paint layers are important to formal trajectories and the conceptual concerns of artifice, identity, and ethnicity, the impetus is to emphasize the painting’s role as a conclusionary compositional process. At times, the visual reference is left incomplete, permitting emergent, direct, and impromptu additions during the painting process. With “Space Invaders”, I began using a digital projector to expedite my process, broadcasting the image on a screen next to the canvas. Image compilation and composition of specific figures of my son, for example, may include the limbs, feet, hands, and torso from various other images to construct the version of him manifested within the painting. I find this process associative to identity manufacturing and image manipulations frequented with the device and social networking, forming a corollary to the artifice of knowledge emanating from the metaverse myth.

As discussed in “Mark Tansey: Visions and Revisions”, Tansey applies a single pigment coating that is then “removed by a variety of means” where “the wet paint is touched or removed the white ground shows through” like watercolor and the “color functions transparently.” My process

¹⁹⁸ Ibid



Figure 76 Marc Bridger, Process photo of *Couch Potatoes* (2019)

developed similarly, later discovering it mimics many of Tansey's techniques. The canvas is heavily coated in a thick layer of two transparent pigments (Transparent Earth Red and Indian Yellow) that are infused with stand oil and alkyd resin. Subsequently, I use reductive actions with sponges, brushes, and other implements that carve into the paint and remove it to reveal higher-key swaths. Tansey refers to these implements as an "extended brush" influenced by Max Ernst's frottage technique, where the "game is to invent

or find a tool that has a tactile resonance with the object it will be used to denote...like a knotted ball of string" is used for "direct tactile impressions that leave a visual result" and this is "the

indexical mode of signification, as opposed to the iconic mode."¹⁹⁹ Relatedly, I use cosmetic sponges to make marks and impressions, connecting to identity manufacturing and Tansey's "indexical mode of signification." However, my process becomes divergent from Tansey's smooth photographic style as mine begins to emphasize surface through the act of painting and mark making. I employ wide flat mongoose brushes dipped in mineral spirits that erase the paint, leaving behind residues of brushwork via reductive light marks that permit the gesso beneath to shine through. Additive marks are also applied with wide natural brushes. Figure 76 illustrates the



Figure 77 Marc Bridger, Detail *Couch Potatoes* (2019)

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 127-128

process phase of the monochrome underpainting, depicting the various reductive actions and additive marks that create the underlying layer.²⁰⁰

After the underpainting is complete, I paint dark-blue marks over the shadow areas. Subsequently, I begin to layer other hues, often painting white hatches and then wet-glazing them with transparent pigments. Professor Steve Knudsen's essay on the 4th dimension of color was influential in transitioning my painting palette to accommodate this style as transparent pigments facilitate its application and aesthetic.²⁰¹

I find resonance in the reductive style with its ability to sculpt, deduct, and then add again with mark and hatch. These actions are relatable to the fabrication of identity and its corollary the alias that we construct on our own surfaces of the metaverse. The manufacturing of identity is both a physical and digital world preoccupation and with verse convergence, this preoccupation in the painting process provides a corollary to the process of creating surfaces and artifice. Thus, the oscillating reductive revisions via cosmetic sponges coupled with overlaying the monochrome with hues and marks correlate to the subject concerns of reality and identity infused within the surface subjects.

With Tansey's work, as Arthur Danto put it, the monochromes "seem themselves dated and somewhat old-fashioned" while employing a "flat, descriptive, didactic style, suited to communicating visual information, like that used for medical illustrations, or the images of natural history"; however, Danto also notes that the style is "part of his cunning not to draw

²⁰⁰ Bridger, Marc, work-in-progress photographs of *Achomlishments* and *Couch Potatoes* (2019) monochrome phase

²⁰¹ Knudsen, Stephen, "The Fourth Dimension of Color & the Dual Color Wheel: New Theories Relevant to Artists", accessed February 19, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/36826139/The_4th_Dimension_of_Color_and_the_Dual_Wheel_by_Stephen_Knudsen

attention to his way of pictorially depicting things”.²⁰² Similarly, Mark Tansey “was using erasure as a primary method of making his conceptual Old Master-inspired paintings” that evoke an ethereal documentation type of aesthetic.²⁰³ Despite the painterly actions that occur over the top of my monochrome, the layer remains prevalent and referential to its fabricated form. Revealing the artifice—the ruse of layers beneath the layers while the distraction and lure are the obvious realism.



Figure 78 Marc Bridger, Detail Sobriquet: *Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia* from *Pair of Dice* (2020)

²⁰² Danto, Arthur. *Mark Tansey: Visions and Revisions*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992. 12

²⁰³ Freeman, Judi, *Mark Tansey*, Los Angeles Museum of Art, 1993, 14

An imprimatura underpainting has its roots in the Renaissance where the word derives from an initial staining of the canvas. Yet, my process of digital compositing that unfolds in a liminal transition between bits and brush has a push and pull between a definitive subject and a blurred indeterminacy that can be traced back to Polidoro da Caravaggio's technique of compositional invention. In the book "Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art", a related process is demonstrated as being an early compositional strategy by Polidoro as his work began emerging from a series of applications and dislodging pentimenti. As focus is attained and again lost, there still

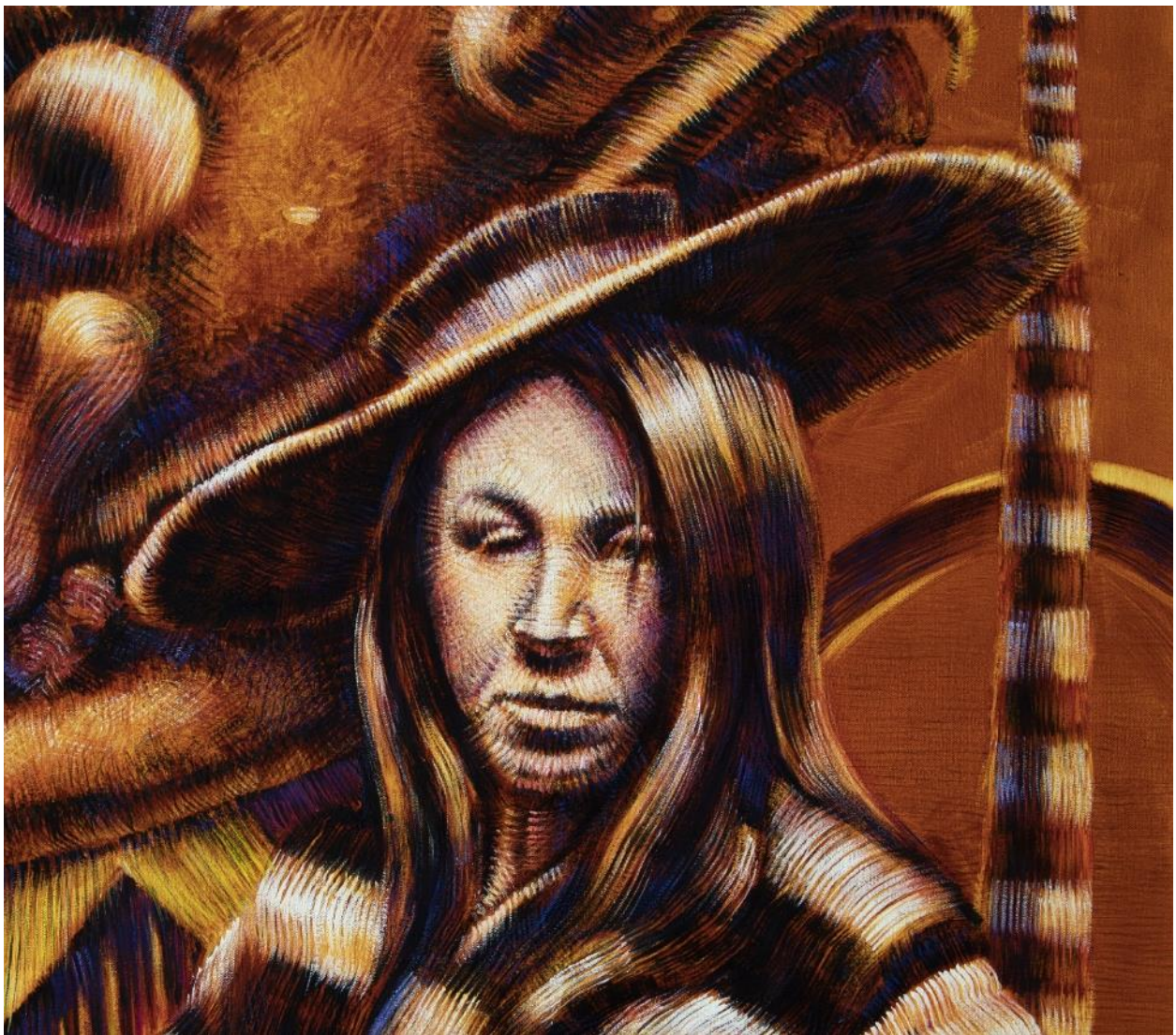


Figure 79 Marc Bridger, Detail Sobriquet: *Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia* from *Pair of Dice* (2020)

resides beneath a “final version of the drawing, albeit meticulously covered by the artist’s hatching.”²⁰⁴ His process, thus, was a similar investment of additive applications with repentance and revisions, while the surface reflects these “proto- and retro-formations” as the residues and indices of creation.²⁰⁵ Similar to my work, the book discusses a condition of bafflement and aporia beneath the surfaces in works such as Polidoro that “intentionally throw elements from different iconographic systems together” while combining elements from the “preparatory phase” that contribute to the indeterminacy and qualities of a sketch within the work.²⁰⁶ Thus, the aporetic sensibility in a work arises not only from its disjunctive iconographic strategies, but also through the layering process of drawing or painting that record various decisions and recantations by the artist as the work unfolds. These two situations enrich the work’s equivocality and permit the viewer enormous latitude in forming personal meaning. Thus, it is impossible for a single exposition to emerge “forcing the effort of interpretation to double back on its own procedures” producing “bafflement or aporia, that, according to Aristotle, serves as the initial impulse to philosophical inquiry.”²⁰⁷

2.7.3. Hatching Style and Perceptual Shifts

The painting's crosshatching, interference patterns, and surfaces are corollaries for the artificial identities manufactured online and create perceptual shifts at proximity, linking the viewing experience to the scrutiny we must exert on information and perceptions emanating from the metaverse. The painting method is a complex microcosm that contributes to several levels of

²⁰⁴ Nagel, Alexander and Lorenzo Pericolo, “Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art”, Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010, 1-3

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. 2-8

²⁰⁷ Ibid 2

conceptual complexity. My painting surface is a primary consideration formally and conceptually whereby the two initiatives exist in stylistic symbiosis. The conditions within our socio-political



Figure 80 Marc Bridger, Detail Sobriquet: *Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia* from *Pair of Dice* (2020)

metaverse along with Baudrillard's ideas of simulation, simulacra, and hyperrealities are partnered with the vacillating paint marks. The hatch's simple back-and-forth layering oscillates between "on and off" states, resulting in a vast array of value shifts and act like Moiré patterns. Coupled with color, this lattice work of surface reticulation becomes a corollary for the metaverse alias. The hatch itself is binary, alternating between sinusoidal on and off states similar to interlacing scan lines from early Cathode Ray Tubes (CRT) in monitors and televisions. These motifs become signifiers for a binary world, while the hatch's formal history in art exemplifies the commingling value diversity within all surface forms as evinced in each underpainting. Across the surfaces brushy hatches suffuse into microcosms of hue and value that appear seemingly monochromatic. Yet, perceptual shifts reveal glints of vibrant versicolor—the same luculent tones found within all people that exist in, on, and underneath the tissue thin layer associated with race. Thus, the formal and conceptual method of constructing the artificial painted object directly links to the artificial humanistic constructions of nationalism, racism, and ethnocentrism. Constructions altered in recent history that now jeopardize the egalitarian existences for families of diversity.

As my entry point into the arts, I developed an affinity for the mark and crosshatching through drawing. Subsequently, my formal development emphasized surface and paint application along with a study of John Singer Sargent, Sorolla, and Ilya Repin. Drawing interests were carried over to painting, while surface quality has remained a consistent concern. Of specific interest was how paint became artful in its bravura brushwork as explicated by Stapleton Kearns in an enlightening blog post from 2010. In the post, Kearns states these edifying words about Franz Hals and John Singer Sargent:

"Handling, at least bravura handling, is artful, it must be invented, or thought up. It calls for translation of the visible appearance into something else. Because of this intellectual effort,

this decision making, it is art. Mere transcription is not particularly artful, as skilled as it might be...Bravura work like this is technique, not empty but art laden. So bravura work is a way of adding art to a painting... there has been an ongoing tradition in painting that did emphasize bravura handling, running like a thread through the weave of our artistic tradition."²⁰⁸

While a great deal of my work is obviously oil painting, its boundaries with conceptual art are blurry and this is exacerbated with *Pair of Dice's* use of logos, text, fragmentation, and adjacency. In a 1967 issue of Artforum, Sol LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" were included where he wrote "the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes that art."²⁰⁹ While I agree that the idea is the machine, I completely disagree that the execution is a perfunctory affair. My cross-over into formalist concerns and passion for surface, paint application, and mark manifest over time. After the panels and spatial arrangements, I engage the work more deeply through the painting process and again in the writing phase. The processes amplify thoughts and ideas, providing a meditation on the conceptual space navigated by a work. Layering strokes,

²⁰⁸ Kearns, Stapleton, Sargent and the bravura brushstroke, November 7, 2010, accessed January 30, 2020 <http://stapletonkearns.blogspot.com/2010/11/sargent-and-bravura-brushstroke.html>

²⁰⁹ Archer, Michael. Art Since 1960. Second Edition ed. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2002, 68.

marks, and hues enrich the surface and deepen the layers literally and conceptually within the work's variegated stratum.

The perceptual shift is a fascinating experiential component of complex systems if employed by the artist, while the work's conceptual space can gain deeper meaning through this direct optical

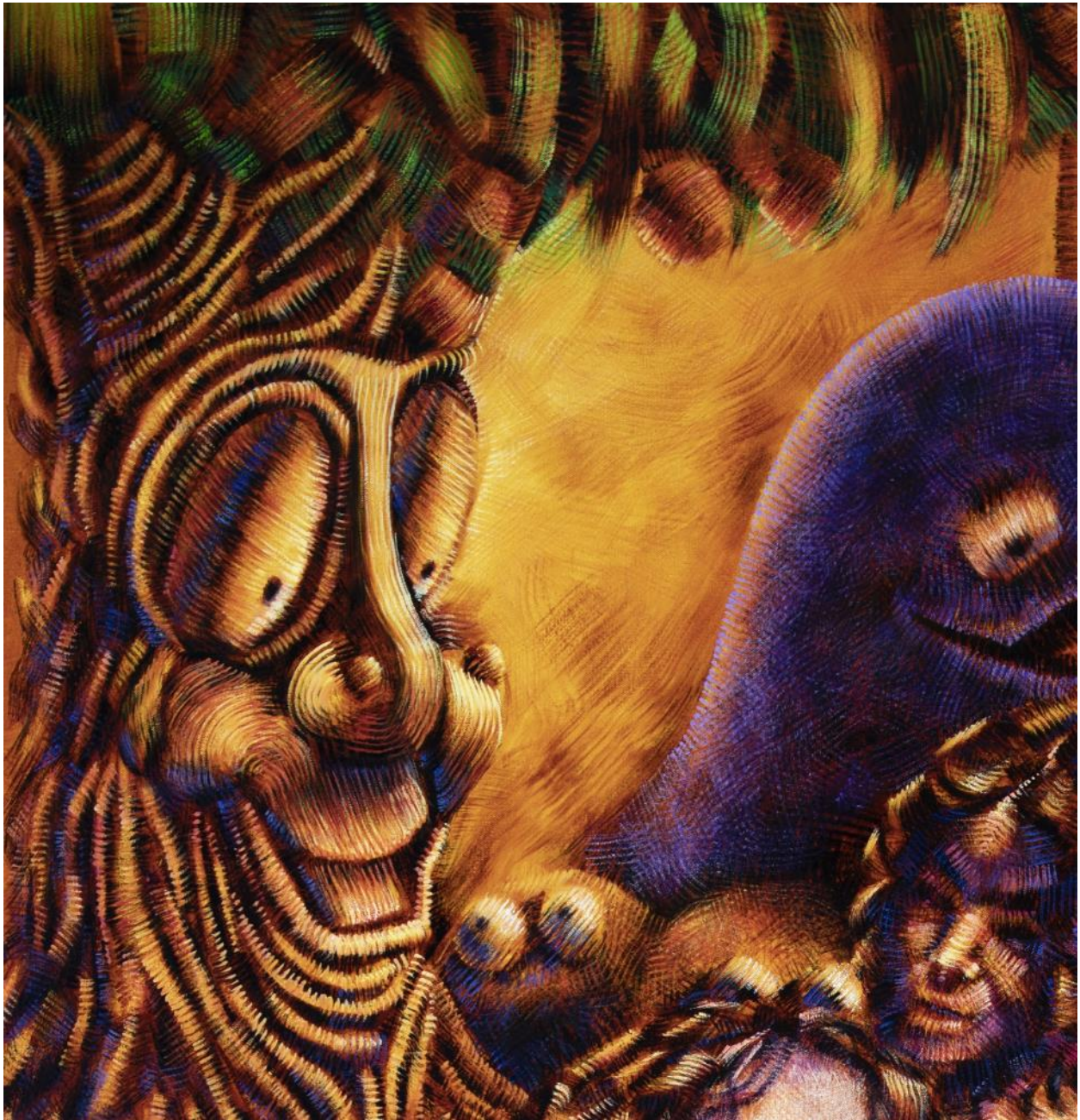


Figure 81 Marc Bridger, Detail Sobriquet: *Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia* from *Pair of Dice* (2020)

experience that also serves as an analogue to scrutiny. In a discussion of complicated vs. complex systems, Jason Hoelscher identifies their often mistaken interchangeable use, while a complicated system employs many components, “each individually understandable which leads to a predictable result”, while complex systems are not easily predictable—“comprising a number of components and inputs one he clarifies with numerous examples yield unpredictable results when combined.”²¹⁰ Hoelscher contrasts Van Gogh’s brushwork in *The Starry Night* as a complicated system, yet the perceptual shift of “seeing the brushstrokes in their relative positions yields a complex” system via an “emergent phenomenon when the viewer’s brain resolves the aggregate brushstroke inputs into a landscape and starry sky”—an effect illustrating “the innate appeal of emergence is the surprise it engenders on the part of the observer” as the “local behavior seems so entirely disconnected from the resulting aggregate as to have arisen by magic.”²¹¹ Thus, through scrutiny and intense observation the viewer is rewarded with an experiential interaction that is optically visceral in its tactility. Similarly, the act of looking, proximity, and distance become corollaries for the underlying subjects in the painting, while also connecting to second-order complexity arising from fragmentation. The complexity of the mark-making at the micro level is repeated with banding in larger swaths, while the fragmentation and the metaverse artform take the reins at the macro level for a nuanced and complete complex system (explained in Part 3).

²¹⁰ Hoelscher, *Complexity Aesthetics: Recursive Information and the Adjacent Possible*, 2014, p4, accessed March 24, 2020

²¹¹ *Ibid*, 5



Figure 82 Marc Bridger, Detail Sobriquet: *Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia* from *Pair of Dice* (2020)

Doppelganger broadened a personal mark through expressive hues, while incorporating drawing features such as lines and hatching. The use of lines, hatchings, and Moiré patterns emphasize perceptual phenomena and optics. The Moiré pattern emerges when viewing a set of lines or dots that are superimposed onto another set of lines or dots, creating optical deformations and fringes

from the blurred interaction of contrasting lights and darks.²¹² The Moiré patterns emerge in math and art, while manifesting as the dotted patterns we recognize when viewing printed images closely. Roy Lichtenstein's Pop Art motifs made significant use of the Moiré Patterns to signify the mechanical reproduction associated with comics. Moiré fringes and patterns are forms of interference patterns much like those found in the quantum physics double-slit experiment. Whenever a set of straight or curved lines are superimposed onto one another the optical and perceptual phenomena arises. Thus, the use of Moiré and interference patterns imbed proximity and scrutiny into the viewing experience. At a distance, an image is constituted of various swaths of value and hue. However, upon proximity the image deconstructs into its constituent parts—lines, dots, hatchings, and other methods used to fool the eye into seeing something else. Georges Seurat and Paul Signac were both French Neo-Impressionist painters that employed dot patterns of color called pointillism to create partitive optical mixing. Like the Moiré pattern, upon proximity, a swath of color deconstructs itself into dots of color that moments ago optically mixed into batches of something else.

Surface considerations undergird material decisions that conjoin with similar subject interests. The color relationships employ an intentional over-saturation and extended range of hues located in advertising realms. Originally appropriated from video editing's green-screen, the yellow-green I have employed makes connections to the edited, filtered, and modified existence we occupy online that is facilitated by the manipulation of devices and our information. Thus, the color relates to altered realities. This vivid yellow-green was more prevalent in earlier works such as *Eye to Eye*

²¹² Cloud, Gary. Optical Methods in Experimental Mechanics Part 18: Geometric Moiré Phenomena and Simulations. *Experimental Techniques*, [s. l.], v. 29, n. 4, p. 15–18, 2005. DOI 10.1111. Accessed March 13, 2020.

(2017) (Figure 83).²¹³ The hues are more subdued and sparse in *Doppelganger*, but exist nonetheless along the transformative portal. Vivid hue selections connect to these types of virtual existences, along with advertising and the numerous visual static that competes for our attention and persuasions. In the past and in this work hue selections informed subject considerations such as identity manufacturing and inauthentic projections facilitated by online facades. The yellow-green hue grew to be a signifier for our hyperreality before transitioning to depict metaverse happenings, while spectacle grounds the various marks we make upon the artifice of life.



Figure 83 Marc Bridger, *Eye to Eye* (2017), pastel on paper, 24"x18"

²¹³ Bridger, Marc, *Eye to Eye* (2017), pastel on paper

Glen Brown is a contemporary artist that emphasizes drawing features in his paintings. Brown's distinct hatching and lines create similar perceptual shifts as does my work when proximity is diminished, resulting in swaths of hue that simulate form. But upon closer scrutiny and inspection the revelation of nuanced lines and surfaces is realized. This investigation by the viewer is rewarded with a rich plexus of reticulation where the material is emphasized with meticulous affection. This hatching style correlates well with the underlying motive and reality



Figure 84 Glen Brown, *Nocturnal Children*, (2019), Oil and carylic on panel, 53 ½" x 41 3/8"

deconstructions
underpinning my work
as the artifice itself
reveals many varied
visual anomalies, not
unlike the
misinformation and
myths we must dissect
and deconstruct daily.
Brown's drawing
features are
"conceptually rooted to
art historical
references, he
stretches, combines,
distorts and layers
images to create subtle
yet complex line-based

works."²¹⁴ Many of my images derive from online sources. Brown, a British artist, also uses this contemporary method of appropriation, but the images are artfully transcended through his stylistic marks and painting as is depicted in Figures 84.²¹⁵

Similarly, the modern computer screen has historically employed similar methods to create images. In past decades the cathode ray tube (CRT) emerged in televisions and computer monitors, using a beam of light to partially mix red, green, or blue phosphors together into "pixels" that are then arranged together to create full images. Interlacing scan lines from CRTs are a parallel striping feature that correlates to both projections and the physical hatching style I employ in painting. These interlacing scan lines connote projection and fabrication, existing in the liminal space between reality and the other—the labyrinth of fantasy that is our hyperreal metaverse. The imbricated formal paint application connects to the ruse that fools the eye into seeing the material's verisimilitude—an existence that seems real but is buttressed by artificial information both in terms of persuasion and the technical facilities necessary to fabricate the perceptual image. This hatching connects to the tradition of painting and drawing along with its existence within the intermediary devices that facilitate our phantasmagoria.

By using Moiré patterns, hatching, and partitive color mixing, my work ties into a long history in art and technology that constitutes an image through an optical ruse. However, my work emphasizes and privileges these components, drawing attention to their existence rather than employing them for purely illusionistic aims. From the minute hatch of paint all the way to large

²¹⁴ Brown, Glen, Biography, Accessed February 17, 2020 <https://glenn-brown.co.uk/biography/>

²¹⁵ Brown, Glen, *Nocturnal Children*, (2019), Copyright 2020 Glenn Brown, accessed February 17, 2020

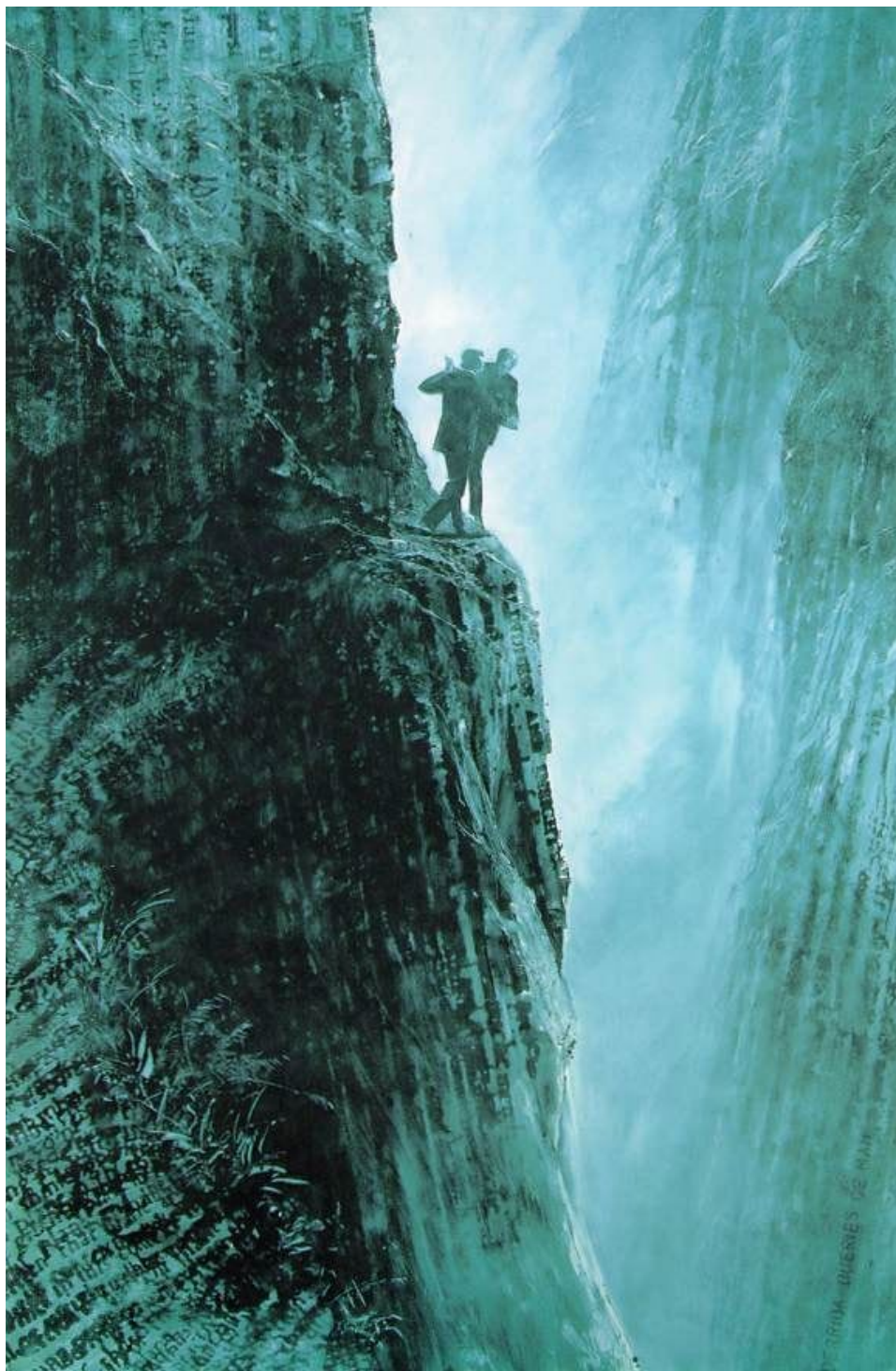


Figure 85 Mark Tansey, *Derrida Queries De Man* (1990), oil on canvas, 83 ¾" x 55"

scale patterns of alternating dark and light, these notions are ubiquitous in the viewing experience, while arising in another conceptual form via digital intrusion of space to yield fragmentation.

The intent is to merge the modern construction of documents and digital images with our most prolific form of propagandistic artifice—the oil painting—creating connections to these methods of image

construction. Thus, the formal construction of the painted object and its viewing experience ties

directly to the content within the subject of the paintings which often deals with and employs its own propaganda, misinformation, and perceptual manipulation. By emphasizing the ruse and these constituent parts, the formal viewing experience and artistic style creates a nuanced experience that merges the material with the conceptual and underscores the subject concerns. The “Space Invaders” body of work employs the same language tools that its surfaces seek to discuss via subjects. The tools of caricature and propaganda become useful language constructs and metaphors, but by revealing the constituent parts in the formal application of paint, the painterly process is privileged. I believe this builds trust and transparency while bringing attention to the artifice of the constructed dialog. And, it also humanizes our mechanical processes.

Revealing these hatchings, Moiré patterns, and accentuating the construction methods involved in the propagandistic image emphasizes the perception involved in our reality—a reality of constructed images. The perceptual shift that occurs elevates the “fakeness” of the object and art into the dialog quietly and subtly. Mark Tansey used swaths of text as a formal object to construct his dialogs that stress Derrida and discourse, such as *Derrida Queries De Man* (1990) (Figure 85).²¹⁶

Similarly, I am emphasizing the material construction to reiterate the artifice of our reality which is based on the perceptions we form. Volatile perceptions and realities that can easily deteriorate depending on scrutiny—an act observable in the viewing experience. And, as discussed in earlier sections, it was scrutiny that started the unraveling of my reality and its subsequent tumultuous reconstruction that maintains chaos. Without that distance, the image deconstructs itself into hatches and paint chips—its constituent parts become seen. The ruse and phantasmagoria are

²¹⁶ Freeman, Judi, *Mark Tansey*, Los Angeles Museum of Art, 1993, 43

revealed. Thus, the information is now understood differently. We see beneath the surface. We have seen beyond the reality it is forming, right before our eyes. Not unlike the over-examination of any pixel-based image or scrutinizing a reality into a point of decomposition. Thus, the material hatching and partitive optical color mixing privileges the perceptive part of the viewing process to underscore our need for critical inquiry. Whether it is information, images, or ideology, the components that form our knowledge require a constant query, not unlike the participation that occurs when viewing a painting—the oscillating distance, proximity, and scanning that is involved in the viewing.

As such, the viewing experience is important as this perceptual shift in material correlates with the underlying concern in the work about the metaverse, metaverse gaze, and its ability to propagandize and indoctrinate our social condition. I am emphasizing what is typically considered an artifact and hidden through resolution and high-quality displays. I am bringing it to the forefront and making it part of the viewing experience. An experience that links the material with conceptual.

But, what if these components are subverted, compromised, and eliminated afterwards—what happens to the work? These are questions addressed in Part 3 with the emergence and expropriation of the metaverse artform.

2.8. Caricature, Nostalgia, and the Rhetoric of Painting

Nigel Cooke is a contemporary painter that uses dark and disturbing imagery coupled with a technical expertise that taps into realism. I believe realism broadens the audience for art, extending it to a demographic that I hope to reach in conversation. Considering my paintings skirt the boundaries of propaganda and political vicinities, I believe the use of realism and oil painting are appropriate mediums for commenting on artifice, while intentionally targeting both an



Figure 86 Marc Bridger, Detail *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019)

artistically educated viewer as well as those that see the field as a foreign language. Therefore, I believe the work can connect to a diverse audience by employing representational strategies. Caricatures are a humorous device that are often associated with kitschy low-brow art, thus its inclusion generally sets the discourse within a derisive framework. However, caricature belies the underlying complexity, masking and cloaking it by its bold absurdity—thus connecting once again to scrutiny and the surprise

that can be revealed by the investigative viewer. As such, a caricature strategy is intentional to not only reach a broader set of viewers but is inherently antagonistic and contemptuous—a seemingly vain attempt to traverse and translate varied cultures with simultaneity.

When examining humor within conceptual pieces, the essay "Anti-Photographers" considers a photograph's role in a conceptual space by examining various provocative visual commentaries. Discussing *Colored People* and *A Few Palm Trees*, the images "manage to convey an uncannily anthropomorphic sense of presence, which is very amusing; but as is often the case with humor, the easy access which it grants to the work is deceptive".²¹⁷ Similarly, the same applies to "John Baldessari and William Wegman, whose surface levity masks a more complex component."²¹⁸ Thus, the device of humor in "Space Invaders" provides an accessible gateway, while a prolonged engagement rewards complexity. The overtly political motifs are aimed at being subversively overt, interacting with the tendency toward facile assessments that do not penetrate the accessible surface levity. This surface levity provides an important gateway into the work, yielding access to those beyond an artworld reality. Similarly, nostalgia considers a generational audience, opening the work to a broader demographic beyond the artworld bubble.

2.8.1. Surface Identity

Surface considerations push the artful paint handling (*belle peinture*) and bravura brushwork that I admire, while building up patterning to create optical entanglements. Its theoretical underpinning is equally imbricated with intent, meaning, and theory to create a rich dialog, rewarding scrutiny and examination with surprise. Yet, the work has surprised me with its preponderance of dismissals. It is very much akin to appearances in people and their surface identity. We so often dismiss someone for their looks, rather than digging beneath the surface to find the broader beauties that intertwine their soul. As such, the literal style of the work and its

²¹⁷ Foote, Nancy, "The Anti-Photographers", *Artforum*, Vol 15, September 1976, 46-54

²¹⁸ *Ibid*

reception has direct connections to the underlying aliases, imposters, and duplicity we encounter in the metaverse. I have created a hideous beast that no bubble embraces. That is fine, but it again demonstrates my naivety and my unrefined grasp on the artworld and its city. And, my ineptitude at truly understanding the intricate realities that create barriers for discourse. Nevertheless, I do believe the work has more to offer some viewers than what appears on the surface. Which is precisely the point; but it is up to me to engage the viewer as a cultural producer, not up to the viewer to be persuaded into a second look. Nonetheless, it is fascinating to observe reactions, receptance, and dismissals as a sort of ecumenical gauge for scrutiny, while these reactions become various comments on representation, kitsch, and art in general.

Reality and the perception of what constitutes a reality along with the rhetorical linguistic dependencies that buttress the conception of reality are specific trajectories and interests engaged through allegory. Relatedly, despite Mark Tansey's use of realism, he explains that he is not a realist painter, but instead uses the *visual language* to support specific trajectories of ideas. As Tansey explains: "I'm searching for pictorial functions that are based on the idea that the painted picture knows itself to be metaphorical, rhetorical, transformational, fictional."²¹⁹

2.8.2. Concocted Conflict and Propaganda

Nicolas Bourriaud's words resonated with my concerns of capitalism, images, and art, stating: "the moment human groups lose all living contact with representation is the abstract moment by which capitalism consolidates its holdings" by seeking to "replace the representation of lived space-time with an entire apparatus of abstractions."²²⁰ Understanding art's various enunciations

²¹⁹ Danto, Arthur. *Mark Tansey: Visions and Revisions*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992. 132

²²⁰ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lukas & Sterberg, New York, 2009, 58

via stylistic choices, icon, imagery, or abstractions translates to a choice that I believe to be a political act.

Deep beneath my own layers of intent lies a concocted conflict driving motives stemming from the feeling of being an outcast and outsider. Perceptions ultimately leading to a twisted belief that the abstract marks of power require a rebuke. But perhaps my caricature and representational style is merely self-sabotage. Nevertheless, abstractions often transform into representation and the banal drippings of power's marketing paraphernalia. While that is fine, I want to recognize it for what it is and wield it appropriately. Waving it at power, rather than creating it for power. My work has often been labeled propaganda. Yes, it most certainly is propaganda. But what work is not propaganda? Has art's abstract commodification not become power's propaganda? Labeling it high-brow transcendence is problematic. And in ascribing to such an assertion power has succeeded. The entrenched institutional abstractionist is the propagandist for power. Perhaps real images become a potent retort and riposte to such declarations in the artworld or political world or whatever goddamn sphere wants to claim anything is bereft and free from propaganda's grip.

Bourriaud says it better—indicating that “these abstractions disguise the forced standardization of the world in generic images like the fence around a construction site; and that they legitimate this process by imposing against indigenous imaginations an abstract imaginary register that places the historical repertoire of modernist abstraction in the service of ersatz universalism tinged with ‘respect for cultures.’”²²¹ Similarly, the “political function of contemporary art lies in this confrontation with a reality that slips away” and appears in the form “of logos and unrepresentable

²²¹ Ibid

entities.”²²² Relatedly, as my work fragments it captures various iconographic snippets, logos, and advertising motifs to arrange an interplay of gamesmanship and corporate antagonism for both myself and the viewer’s contemplation—an ongoing dialog open to various interpretations, but one grounded in a realization that something is awry in our system.

Arthur Danto is a recurring influence philosophically. In “Mark Tansey: Visions and Revisions”, Danto begins the book with an intriguing essay that investigates Tansey’s formal style and compelling discourse. Speaking of Tansey, Danto’s words provided personal resonance as they address the rhetoric of our images and their ability to yield a propagandistic existence through persuasion:

Rhetoric of Painting: “The painting in this mode of historical enunciation operates in the manner of a certain kind of rhetoric. It is the rhetorician's skill to move the minds of his auditors to draw, through his insidious promptings, the conclusions he wishes them to reach—and because it is they who reach the conclusions, they are convinced in a way otherwise unattainable, say by simply furnishing them with information. The clever rhetorician, indeed, works his ends invisibly, using the energies of the auditor's own inferential propensities to attain the state of mind he wishes to put them in—though he can say, afterwards, that he said nothing, for his art lies in disguising itself.” –Arthur Danto²²³

²²² Ibid 58-59

²²³ Ibid 10-12

2.9. Formal Decisions

Compositionally, *Doppelganger* employs the rule of thirds to separate elements into segments, placing the critical figure of Claudia along the vertical right third's mark, while her head coincides with the top horizontal third. Complexity and unity are simultaneously addressed with the allegorical McDonald's motifs, burgers, and the border patrol's commingled realities. Complexity and intensity are further augmented in subject choices by using real uniforms and costumed caricatures' that are suggestive through contradiction. Several key forms and important props transect *Doppelganger's* sinister diagonal including Officer Big Mac's hat which symbolizes law enforcement, his eyes, the weapon, the burger in Claudia's hand, and finally her cultural dress which is in the clutches of a hideous Twitter buzzard.

While Claudia and Trump are clothed in the spectacle of McDonald's advertising, Officer Big Mac is an amalgamation of fantasy and actualized law enforcement. Thus, Big Mac represents the convoluted condition where our behavior and ideas are in a reality crisis. Where law enforcement concocts a model for behavior and action by synthesizing vilifying headlines coupled with movies and entertainment, internet snippets, and the barrage of rhetoric that influences perceptions in our metaverse; the intertwining sources of reality and hyperreality—a manufactured mélange derived from media and device. The various headlines about unarmed minorities gunned down in the U.S. or similarly unarmed refugees at the border, are disturbingly high. The deaths due to legal intervention, defined as “the killing of a person by a law enforcement officer or other peace officer with specific legal authority” has reached an all-time high in the Post-Civil Rights era.²²⁴ Speaking

²²⁴ Keon, Gilbert, and Reshawn Ray, “Why Police Kill Black Males with Impunity” *Journal of Urban Health*, December 10, 2015, accessed February 21, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4824696/>

with regard to Craig Atkinson's documentary about police militarization and the overly aggressive police force emerging since 9/11, Professor Justin Hansford notes it plainly that "When so many people are being killed you need to look at why so many people in law enforcement are imbued with fear and are trigger happy."²²⁵ While finalizing this thesis a new global protest for George Floyd serves as testament to systemic racism and police brutality. Thus, the images and underlying motivations in the painting are part of the conversation examining the atmosphere surrounding law enforcement, behavior, deadly force, and our tolerance of violence globally.

There are several phases of simultaneity represented with Claudia: before the portal and entry into the metaverse; the gazed upon and disentangled Hamburglar; and as a raiment, absent of a corporeal existence. In the latter manifestation, Claudia's cultural dress is below the Twitter buzzard, draped and cascading into the perimeter's hole. A depiction of Claudia's coffin is sandwiched between the slits and hole, foretelling the outcome.

Claudia is not only a victim of an overzealousness in law enforcement, but an externality of hyperbolic metaverse rhetoric that vilifies diversity and the calamities beyond our borders. The allegorical content creates a complexity in the work that elevates the intensity of the situation beyond that of a border crossing. Instead, we are bombarded with our own absurd reality that exists in hyperreal spaces along with its real casualties. These ideas are further emphasized through a personal mark and hatching painting style.

²²⁵ Miller, Stuart, "Do Not Resist: new film shows how US police have become an occupying army", accessed February 26, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/sep/30/do-not-resist-film-documentary-us-police-militarization>

2.10. Art's Gaze



Figure 87 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Snake Charmer* (1879), oil on canvas, 32.4" × 48"

Bourriaud writes of Victor Segalen who authored the "Essay of Exoticism", which was about cultural contamination via Western colonization resulting in an "aesthetics of diversity".²²⁶ While much has been said about Gauguin's exploitation of indigenous peoples, Segalen sees things differently after arriving to Tahiti shortly after Gauguin's death. Segalen wrote about how the artist *translated* the diversity, rather than exploiting Polynesians as Delacroix and other artists did through the "sensation of exoticism" with its recherche figures of harems and caliphs.²²⁷ This exoticism is a condition in art and culture that was beautifully articulated and titled by Edward

²²⁶ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lukas & Sterberg, New York, 2009, 63

²²⁷ Ibid 64

Said in the 1978 book "Orientalism"—and this condition is a contributing basis for the notions embedded within the *metaverse gaze*. Orientalism is a lens that "imagines, emphasizes, exaggerates, and distorts differences of Arab peoples and cultures" as compared to the West and often involves seeing that culture as "exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous."²²⁸ Similarly, Linda Nochlin navigates orientalism through works such as Gérôme's *The Snake Charmer* (1879).²²⁹ These paintings of a Western white colonial gaze depict black and brown people as "objects of picturesque delectation" intended to blend in with the performer, stand in contrast to the intricately detailed tile wall, and serve as a "resolutely alienated" group that huddles and fuses into the painting as mere form.²³⁰ Rather than independent and individualized people, they are stupefied and mystified, as is the viewer. As Nochlin points out, these fantasies fabricate a reality using elements intended to announce "we are the real" and lend credibility to the "realness" of the painting as a document.²³¹ But they are mere optical delights of luster that elevate the painting's ersatz realism, while assisting to create an "artless" work through heightened technical exactitude that immerses the viewer into the scene.²³²

Not unlike the virtual verisimilitude in digital realms we now create in MMO games such as *Star Citizen*. Where at one time the painting was an integral catalyst to the viewer's imaginative escapades, these spurious spheres are now replaced with online experiential worlds that tantalize every sense but smell. So meticulously crafted that minutes are mirages amongst interludes of

²²⁸ What is Orientalism?, Reclaiming Identity: Dismantling Arab Stereotypes, accessed February 13, 2020 <http://arabstereotypes.org/why-stereotypes/what-orientalism>

²²⁹ Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, Accessed February 17, 2020 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Snake_Charmer

²³⁰ Nochlin, Linda. *POLITICS OF VISION: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society*, "The Imaginary Orient", Westview Press, 1991, 33-59.

²³¹ Ibid

²³² Ibid

voyages where quantum travels allow us to tip toe across galaxies in Roberts Space Industries masterful deception of space-time. But, the mid-19th century objects of exoticism and orientalism were more sinister in their ploy to obfuscate reality and masquerade as its imposter. While an MMO is more easily discerned as fantasy, the works of orientalism were treated more like photographs—but those are also deceptively cunning. Interestingly, Nochlin notes that photographs were used as references for details at the time of Delacroix and Gérôme's masterworks of fraud when photography was a relatively newer medium. Relatedly, photography is an important element to my process of appropriating internet imagery along with personal camerawork. But photography is a process of secondary sources that is detached from reality as the image is a cropped rendition that does not fully encapsulate the periphery. This is especially true of secondary images where the painter was not present for the obscura's capture.

Segalen articulated Gauguin's different angle that broke with the "temporal linearity that is dominant in Western pictorial systems" along with its text-like reading of a left-to-right visual arrangement. Instead, Gauguin discarded traditions and classical compositional arrangements to consider the culture and its ways without these Western lenses. Mere immersion was inadequate as it was not a "matter of fading into the landscape one is traversing or of fusing with the other" as this would "constitute a new source of deceit and hypocrisy: the 'feeling of diversity'".²³³ Thus, instead of romanticized depictions of a *recherche* culture caught up in a colonial gaze, Segalen explains Gauguin was a translator of culture and became an *exote*.

²³³ Bouriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lukas & Sterberg, New York, 2009, 65

Similarly, I believe my work strives to examine life from a varied temporal ledge. We are to espouse a position—not hybridization; as Bourriaud indicates, “one cannot become Chinese, but one can gain the ability to articulate Chinese thought.” Thus, perhaps *Doppelganger* is an attempt to articulate metaverse culture and thought, and the collision of various cultures eradicating one another in both physical and binary forms. An attempt to interlace and interface with our shared culture and its finality in transcendent domains. Domains with goggles, lenses, myths, and masks. “Translation appears as the cornerstone of diversity as the central ethical act of the ‘born traveler’ capable of perceiving diversity in all its intensity” writes Bourriaud; and Segalen gives this figure a name, the *exote*: “one who manages to return to himself after having undergone the experience of diversity”—since, one “cannot claim as empathy what is merely a tourist’s clear conscience, but one can *translate*.”²³⁴

The progression of the “Space Invaders” series into fragmentation further supports the notions of translating and its inherent quality of appropriation yet embraces a hybridized sensibility. While I am not translating this incident into Claudia’s culture and language, that of Guatemalan, the attempt here is closer to “radicant” affinity with roots that span various cultures. The work attempts to capture her dilemma and flight for life—apprehending a fleeing sensibility and the transformation that occurs when Claudia leaves behind a violently razed culture for one that is mischievous, misleading, and malevolent in its depicted form—a culture of consumers and cons.

²³⁴ Ibid 65

2.11. Gaze Finality

The *Doppelgänger* narrative attempted to go beyond the singular incident of a refugee's death at the hand of a rogue border patrol agent. Her death and similar others merit more than an artist's illustrative errand exploiting their plight through a simple dilution of yet another image for consumption—prelude to the bellowing laughter we exert topic surfing; bemused by a recursion of entertaining sensory stimulations. Instead, the work indicts and comments on society's decadent preoccupation with spectacle and the disillusionment false narratives have produced through the vilification and subsequent death of people like Claudia. Much like Bourriaud, I am concerned with issues of "non-place", where artists and citizens "little by little seem to take control of the flaneur, a contemporary zombie threatened and unsettled by the metaphysical indifference of his environment."²³⁵

Bourriaud calls into question postmodernism's exaltation of the West and its collusion by maintaining the status quo, while calling for an *altermodernity*.²³⁶ A movement with radican artists not bound to a specific culture—instead embracing a transience and translation of cultures. Thus, perhaps the method I present herein and in my work is a form of translation. A metaphorical transfiguration and understanding of our own metaverse culture and its impact on other

²³⁵ Ibid, 97

²³⁶ Ibid 99



Figure 88 Marc Bridger, Detail *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019)

traditions. My work translates the cultural condition of verse convergence and its gaze along with the finality that phenomena produces. Rather than import indigenous motifs of Claudia's culture, I have imported those motifs associated by the vortex that captured her between two slits, covered her in stripes, and spat her out as a culture thief for border flies.



Figure 89 Marc Bridger, Detail Sobriquet: *Skull Burger*, from *Run a Make Border the For!* (2019)

3. Part 3 – Metaverse Artform

Overture

The bewildering aporias that arise in knowledge, reality, and understanding along with the recursive mimicry within digital spheres contributes to an aura of dissonance explored in my paintings. There's a doppelganger effect and metaphoric quality to words and images that coincide with the imposter—copying, simulation, simulacra, and the reiterating of information that concocts an appearance of validity yet is nothing but its shadow. That duplicitous condition that presses reality's datum through a sieve for a truth essence it uses as a stave;

upon which, it attaches a shrieking cacophony of nationalistic notes. This is our hymn. It is the theme song to my work.²³⁷

This overture swiftly captured my reaction to Jean Baudrillard's book "Fatal Strategies" in an email exchange sharing notes on its topics with Professor Steve Knudsen. The ideas in the book served as conceptual prompts for *Pair of Dise's* fragments. Our discussion unfolded upon the initiation of two new works following *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2018-19). I later salvaged the words as part of

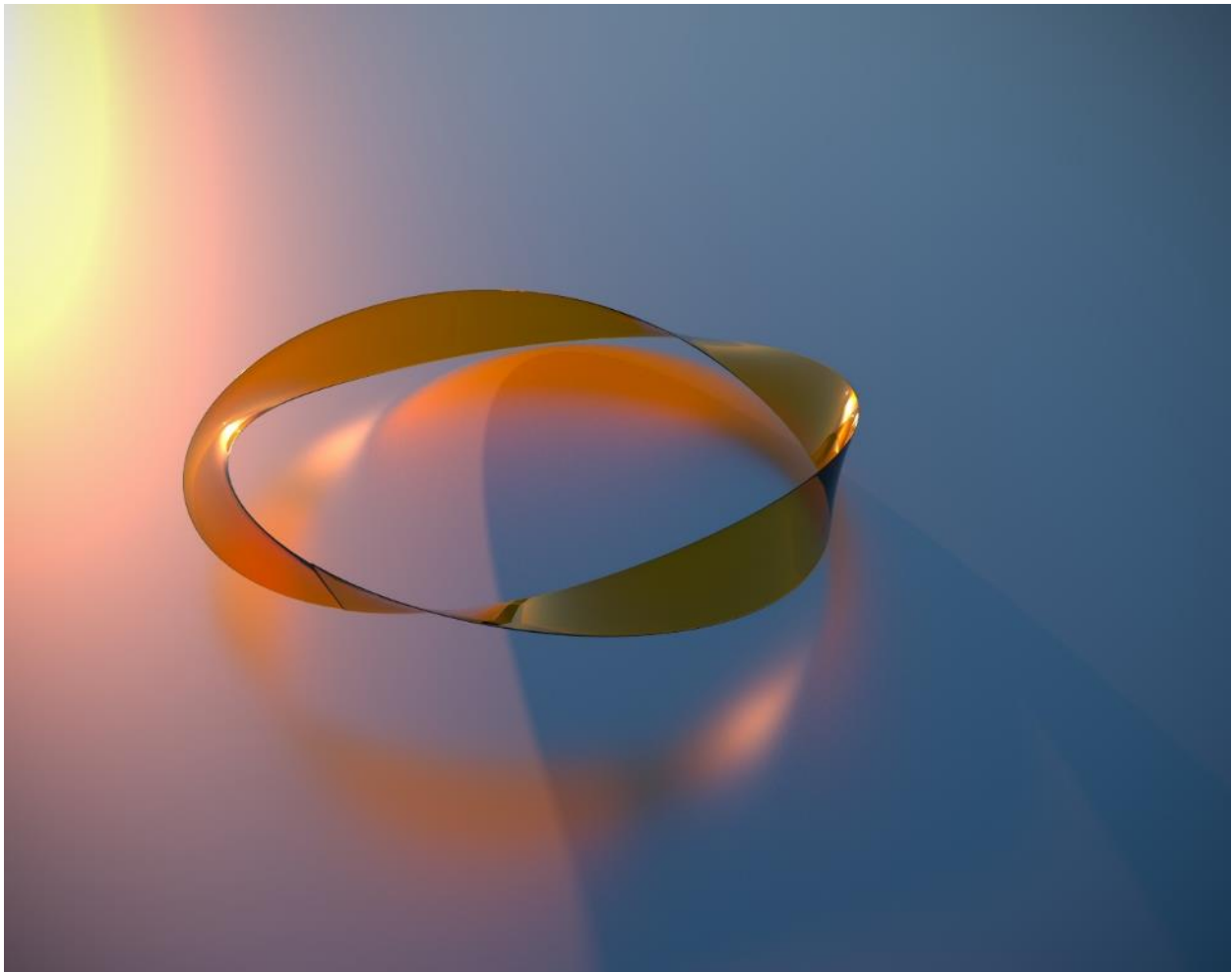


Figure 90 Marc Bridger, Möbius strip

²³⁷ Marc Bridger, partial artist statement originally derived from an email exchange with Professor Steve Knudsen in January 2019

my artist statement because they articulate and capture an embedded sensibility in both my work and Baudrillard's words—about the grimace and confounding expressions catalyzed by our cultural changes. They capture the sense of befuddlement that overcame me while interacting with contemporaneous society and its contextualization through Baudrillardian theories. A sort of blurred clarity in the abstruse words that left me invigorated—yet simultaneously estranged from a harmonious understanding as dissonance seems the veritable lens for the metaverse. I am sharing this overture now so that it can linger. Perhaps its opacity will dwindle as these additional ideas, spaces, and paintings reveal the discordant rhythms underlying the alterity within each construct.

3.1. Introduction

We typically consider our physical presence as "real", dominant, and the master to the slave that is the digital. However, this origination point has become amorphous. The emergent innuendo and glare of the herd has come to dictate and exert a new determinism that alters culture, politics, and planetary happenings through hybridizations of verse convergence. Thus, we now exist as a metaverse—a Möbius strip of varied topology. Determining separate verse ambits is impossible as they now share one—occupying simultaneous sides of the same form (Figure 90).²³⁸ While both can be observed from different angles, we can no longer demarcate the two. And so, the metaverse and its gaze are the culmination of realms into an aporetic paradox where two realities occupy the same space, time, and form—a fused supplement; amalgamated and irreducible to its contributing constituents.

²³⁸ Bridger, Marc, Möbius Strip, Möbius strip illustration created for this thesis.

Certainly, most have felt the duality of being both form and reflection where the mirror seems boundless. Where our existence becomes a sort of *rereality*. A *rereality* where the gaze of the



Figure 91 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Rereality*, oil on canvas, fragment: 24" x 24", from *Pair of Dice* (2020)

metaverse dictates the corporeal as evinced in the first three “Space Invaders” works (Figure 1).²³⁹

Weaving the metaverse and its atmosphere into a Möbius Strip has been a central theme that will be reinforced and broadened herein. In the realm of art, the fictive translates and represents the metaverse as an “alternative editing bench for reality”, where it preserves “intact an image of reality as a fragile construction”.²⁴⁰ My paintings operate as a resultant form of this editing bench while occupying a varied form of site. An emergent site mirroring the duplicity and simultaneity of a phased metaverse reality.

Each fragmentary work is a gestural portrait of our hybridized life through the amnesia of a metaverse milieu. A portrait that is designed with a structural vitality, but one that is an open and unfinalizable collection of prompts—creating a collaboration with a viewer. These surface and subject preoccupations, however, are layered upon and mask a preoccupation with aporia. Existing as an autopoietic, autoreferential, recursively reciprocal instantiation of an artform and discourse that is itself a proposition; a discussion on the artform and discourse it fabricates. This looping paradox that is inherent in the metaverse and artworld culture will manifest in this artform as I attempt to test “the boundaries of what constitutes a painting in the first place, as aestheticized binary artifacts defined as ‘paintings’ are dispersed across a range of nontraditional viewing modes like touchscreens”²⁴¹

While the first half of the body is sensitive to a broader viewership, the second half is interested in the “learned perception” of an informed viewer that is aided by a “complex coding of the image that

²³⁹ Bridger, Marc, Gallery image of *Double-Slit Doppelganger* (2019) 92"x72", *Couch Potatoes* (2019) 60"x72", *Achomlishments* (60"x72"). Photograph by Marc Bridger (2019).

²⁴⁰ Bouriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lukas & Sterberg, New York, 2009, 99

²⁴¹ Hoelscher, Jason, *Painting in the Distributed Field*, February 15, 2014,3, accessed March 24, 2020

changes the role of the viewer from perciever to decoder."²⁴² Thus, *Pair of Dise* and *Run a Make Border the For!* work to assist the semionaut in apprehending and articulating present and future meanings emanating from our emerging sphere: the metaverse.

But, how to apprehend the material of the metaverse? The answer emerges in fragmentation—the contributor to a new hybridized form of site—embedded with its own exhibition. A compatible concept that embraces a globe in flux; enmeshed in bits and phased in space. By employing a nonexistent space as a form, one flattened and imaginative as spatial, my work takes on the duality of place and “non-place”.²⁴³ As Bourriaud notes, the non-place little by little takes control of the flaneur, through the “metaphysical indifference of his environment.” A form of exhibition that connects to artists such as Robert Smithson who wrote of an absence of site that permutes itself into an “endless doubling, so that you have non-site functioning as a mirror and the site doubling as a reflection.”²⁴⁴ And Baudrillard who said that we have “gone from aesthetics of appearance, stable forms, to aesthetics of disappearance, unstable forms.”²⁴⁵

Part 3 emphasizes a shift in the work’s reality collisions and sociopolitical convergence by traversing and translating the metaverse via an artworld culture. A collision causing an artwork identity crisis that proposes a varied final form for metaverse compatibility. In Parts 1 and 2 I invoked Bourriaud’s words about radican artists that traverse various cultures. However, from 1960s forward art became recursively auto-reflexive with Arthur Danto’s conception of the

²⁴² Hoelscher, Jason, *Complexity Aesthetics: Recursive Information and the Adjacent Possible*, 2014, 7

²⁴³ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lukas & Sterberg, New York, 2009, 97

²⁴⁴ Smithson, Robert, “Fragments of an Interview with P.A. Norvell”, 1969 in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Berkeley, CA.; University of California Press, 1996, 193

²⁴⁵ Alexander, Anna, Mark S. Roberts, *High Culture: Reflections on Addiction and Modernity*, 352, accessed April 13, 2020 <https://books.google.com/books?id=egTv0AgoOfIC>

artworld that Jason Hoelscher articulates as a “recursive reterritorialization of art discourse into art discourse”; “what we might call *art for art for art’s sake*—this autoreflexive density both undergirds and reflects the increasing specialization, pluralism and feedback loops of art practice” following 1960s conceptual art that have become an “art intersystem”.²⁴⁶ As Hoelscher further explains, the “observation and description of the phenomenon changed the phenomenon: no longer merely art constituted by theory, art would now be made by artists overtly conscious of the role of theory in the articulation and constitution of their work”, thus creating “discourse into discourse.”²⁴⁷ Similarly the fragmentation satisfies a recurring need in art to redefine its “area of competence by testing its limits”.²⁴⁸

Reconstructing my own reality around the metaverse coincided with a transience and education in this recursive artworld. Thus, the first half of “Space Invaders” acts as a sort of preamble—work cognizant of artworld culture, but one that held art activism, narrative, and painterly preoccupations as primary interests layered upon numerous conceptual and theoretical affinities. Where the monochrome and its surface layers were the extent of the body’s selfreflexivity. However, as the reality of exhibiting a gargantuan meme about absurdity demonstrated venue issues, coupled with a pandemic and the the need to operate in an artworld sphere, the self-referential artworld aided in reasserting the work as a hybridized metaverse artform.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 1-2

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 8

²⁴⁸ Steinberg, Leo, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art*, Chicago, IL, 2007

Robert Hughes wisely noted “as far as today's politics is concerned, most art aspires to the condition of Muzak. It provides the background hum for power.”²⁴⁹ And, I truly believe the abstract marks of power require some form of rebuke. But in this section, we will not find one. Instead, the following words help to contextualize and frame the body along with its transience into a “second-order complex” conceptual space where art is self-concerned and self-centered.²⁵⁰ Where perceptual shifts via paint giveaway to conceptual shifts via space. Where the recursive revisiting of styles form attractor basins allowing us to draw influence from one’s predecessors.²⁵¹ Therefore, the body



Figure 92 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *The Terror of Signs*, oil on canvas, fragment: 30" x 48" from *Pair of Dise* (2020). Throughout the “Space Invaders” series various logos, advertising slogans, and images are appropriated as language forms floating like balloons in our semiosphere.

²⁴⁹ Hughes, Robert, *The Shock of the New*, Episode 2, Accessed January 29, 2020, <https://youtu.be/3JEx6CDW6-o?t=3380>

²⁵⁰ Jason Hoelscher’s term for a complex artworld’s intersystem that creates a feedback loop of discursive discourses about art, giving rise to a second-order complexity.

²⁵¹ Hoelscher, Jason, *Complexity Aesthetics: Recursive Information and Adjacent Possible*, 2014

reflects my convoluted presence in a new reality—one concerned about humanity, adoring of figurative narrative and *belle peinture*, but intrigued by the discursive discourses that surround an adjacent artworld enmeshed in itself.

3.2. Contextualizing Historical Summary

To understand the upcoming arguments and assertions is to capture a sense of cultural transience into this artworld reality by way of conceptualism. The dialectical process of conceptualism de-aestheticizing modernism led to form being divorced from art, while thought became its new mistress. Rosalind Krauss identifies several tensions relating to what constitutes art and the elasticity surrounding works that remain orphaned from traditional views on the appropriateness of media and art. Krauss's essay *The Originality of the Avant Garde* introduces installation art as the container for complex site-specific, media, museum, and architecture based works.²⁵² The transition to installation departed acutely from Greenburg's formalist, flat, and self-contained paintings affixed to walls that served as optical experiences affixed to a flat picture plane.

Spatially, installation yields a compelling stage for contrasts where "meaning is no longer a given, residing in the object discerned by the perspective viewer, it is something made in the encounter."²⁵³ This quote is exemplified by Hans Haacke's art activist piece *Manhattan Real Estate Holdings* (1971), which contrasts sharply with modernism's traditional media. The work is bereft of paint, canvas, frame, and completely lacks an optical aesthetic appeal. Instead, the work resides in an installation with several documents and photographs, while juxtapositions subtly and

²⁵² Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant Garde," (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986)

²⁵³ Nicolas De Oliveira, Installation Art, " *Toward Installation*," (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994),

subversively paint an intellectual inquiry of investigation. Haacke's work employs typewritten data sheets and housing images as conceptual material to expose a notorious New York slumlord and the "network of organisations that acted as smokescreens for the actual owners of the buildings."²⁵⁴

Joseph Kosuth takes form out of conceptual art even further in *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)* 'meaning' (1967) by focusing on verbal assumptions with a photocopy enlargement of the word "meaning" and its definition which serves as the only physical, visual, and tangible element in the piece.²⁵⁵ Kosuth indicated that "I didn't consider the photostat a work of art; only the *idea* was art."²⁵⁶ To further expand upon the ideas that Duchamp's readymades initiated, Kosuth asserts:

"The 'value' of a particular artist after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they questioned the nature of art. Artists question the nature of art by presenting new propositions as to art's nature. And to do this one cannot concern oneself with the handed-down 'language' of traditional art."²⁵⁷

That passage became embedded in my psyche seven years ago, when I first encountered it—constantly gnawing away at my purpose. Acting as a sort of accusatory art consciousness that remained vigilant, critical, and derisive. An aura of autocritique with a single purpose. Constantly working to denigrate my efforts by embedding doubts in the embattled canvases. Always

²⁵⁴ Gill Perry and Paul Wood, *Themes in Contemporary Art*, 148.

²⁵⁵ Fineberg, " *Art Since 1940*" 324.

²⁵⁶ Gill Perry and Paul Wood, *Themes in Contemporary Art*, 70.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 71.



Figure 93 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Referential Integrity*, oil on canvas, fragment: 24" x 24", from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

questioning my intent and posing the question: You think this shit questions the nature of art? My disappointments were manifold.

Kosuth's challenge to art and modernism was a disjunctive, confounding, and bold philosophical debate that forces art's nature into question. Art's definition as a painting or sculpture, along with the "vivid sense of boundaries" typical of sixties artists, were both annihilated and subsequently

supplanted by the ability for any object to be *declared* art.²⁵⁸ Arthur Danto indicates that it is through works such as *Brillo Boxes* (1964) and Kosuth's *Art as Idea as Idea* (1967) that we are left with the question: "Why am I a work of art?" and then asserting that the very nature of the question meant "the history of modernism was over."²⁵⁹ Arthur Danto summarized Pop Art, Nouveaux Realisme, and the 1960s as "a paroxysm of styles" that signaled the "end of art".²⁶⁰ Danto stated: "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an *artworld*."²⁶¹

For Danto, modernism had become too inhibited by formalism and the Greenbergian material properties of color, form, flatness, and other constraining picture plane parameters that constitute a painting. These criteria had matured into a "local style" that could not accommodate the paroxysms of the 60s, 70s, and their redefining shouts.²⁶² What Jason Hoelscher articulates as a "recursive reterritorialization of art discourse into art discourse, catalyzed an emergent, self-organizational reconfiguration of art—from a complicated and teleologically-oriented framework to a complex adaptive system predicated on the exploration and expansion of conceptually contiguous possibility space."²⁶³ A space that embraces appropriation—a topic Roland Barthes took up through the concept of authorship, exemplified by the shaman whose "performance may be admired" "but not his genius" in an essay that elucidates how art and literature are diverse

²⁵⁸ Danto, Arthur C., *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale History*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 14

²⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 14

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 13

²⁶¹ Gill Perry and Paul Wood, *Themes in Contemporary Art*, (The Open University, 2004), 67

²⁶² Danto, *After the End of Art*, 14-16

²⁶³ Hoelscher, Jason, *Complexity Aesthetics: Recursive Information, the Adjacent Possible and Artistic Emergence*, 2014, accessed March 24, 2020



Figure 94 Marc Bridger, Detail *Pair of Dise* (2020)

amalgamations of appropriated thoughts and images.²⁶⁴ As this section unfolds, the opacity of its overture and its introductory declarations will hopefully become clear. Asserted and argued herein is a topologically twisted form of exhibition. A varied versioning that vaporizes institutional control via an autoexhibiting artform. One embedded with site that, much like art culture and the metaverse, ingrains within itself a material of self-orbiting in a recursive twisted strip of redefinability.

²⁶⁴ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 1967, 2

3.3. Aporias and Indeterminacy

As 60s and 70s artists dismantled the boundaries of Clement Greenburg's austere modernist temporality, indeterminacy underpinned new work including a revival of figuration and representation in painting. Ambiguity endows a work with the quality of multivalence, or polysemy—the ability for a work or sign to yield multiple meanings. Werner Hoffman noted the inability for an image to escape multivalence without written clarification, while Martine Joly points out that “polysemy is not specific to images, but is characteristic of any complex utterance ... it is the image's lack of assertiveness that is experienced as polysemic.”²⁶⁵ The dilemma of ambiguity remaining elusive to a systematic definition assists in elevating a work's enigmatic quality and relevance. Semiotics can describe the relationship of multiple signifiers, concepts, and referents, but it still lacks the complexity and precision necessary to decipher the relationship of intrigue created by an image's equivocality, openness, and interchangeability that leads to recurring surprises. However, a glint of understanding ambiguity is revealed through meaning derived by the spectator and deconstruction.

Embedded in my work's surface, form, and fragmentation is a fascination with indeterminacy, polysemy, and aporia along with its inherent quality of doubt. In “Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art” a contrast unfolds between the ageless Greek topics of *subject* and *aporia*. Subject is

²⁶⁵ *Ibid* 13



Figure 95 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Social Brow*, oil on canvas, fragment: 36" x 12", from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

"what lies beneath" and aporia is "a never-to-be traversed path" or "blind alley."²⁶⁶ Aporia is an ancient Greek transliterated term carrying many meanings including those of doubt, puzzlement, impasse, and bafflement; but "above all is a philosophical puzzle" in the pre-Socratic era with logical paradoxes that lead to an "intellectual estrangement".²⁶⁷ In art, aporias can arise in many forms including its painting processes where ghostly images are within the layers, along with general aporias aroused in meaning, icons, and interpretation (Figures 95-97).²⁶⁸ Aporias are influential in my process, style, and subjects. And they were fundamental in constructing the idea of fragmentation in my work, while an aporetic aura and paradoxical contention coats the final artform and assertions.

²⁶⁶ Nagel, Alexander and Lorenzo Pericolo, *Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art*, Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010, 3

²⁶⁷ Ibid 8-10

²⁶⁸ Bridger, Marc, *Pair of Dise* (2020)

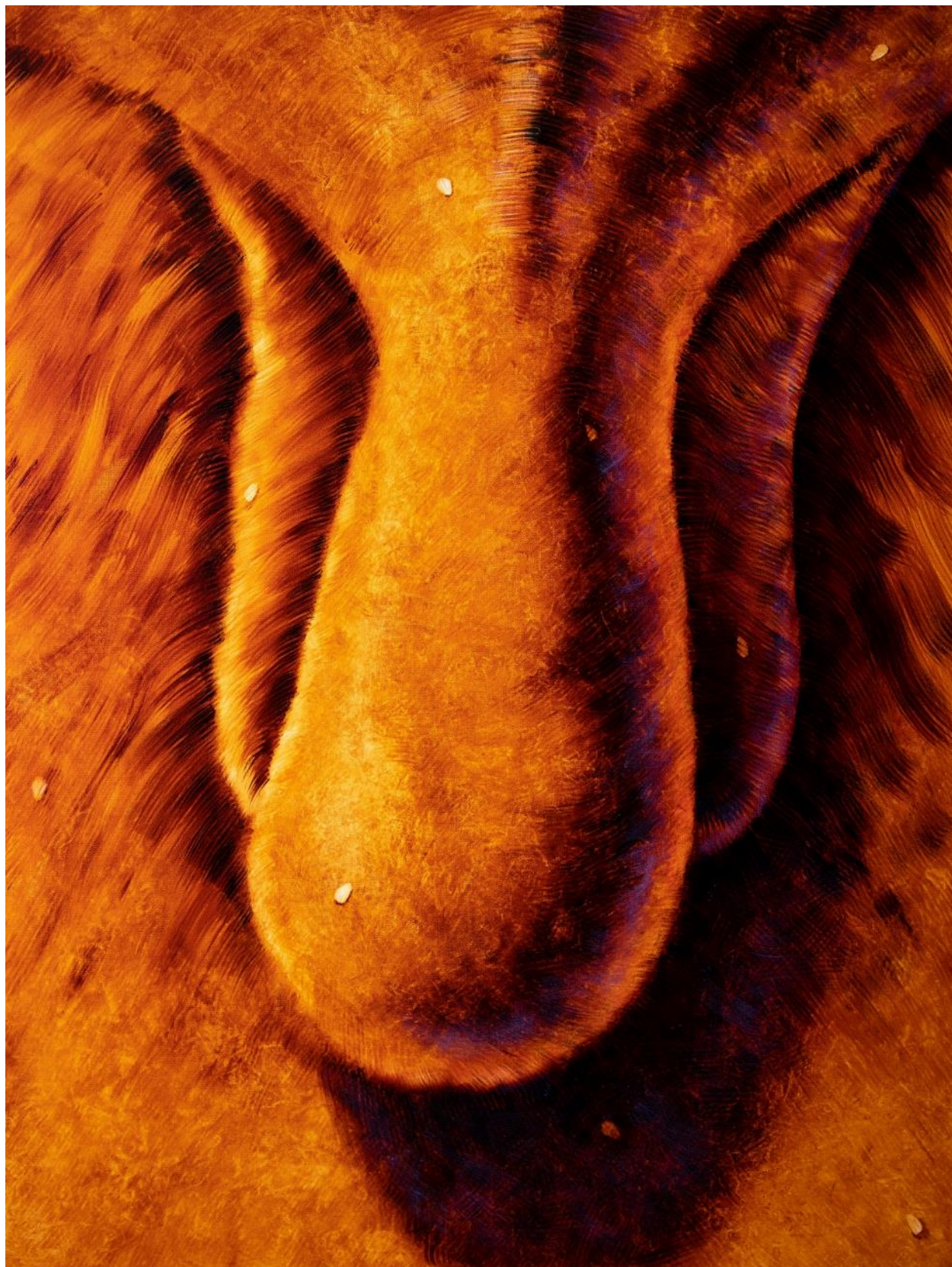


Figure 96 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Who Nose?*, oil on canvas, fragment: 36" x 48", from *Pair of Dise* (2020)



Figure 97 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Reciprocally Imply*, oil on canvas, fragment: 36" x 12", from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

Throughout numerous intertwining essays, Jason Hoelscher recontextualizes late modernist events that sought purification, instead seeing Kant's "purposiveness without purpose" via adjacent, complex, emergent biological systems that more closely match art's open teleology as autopoietic and autonomous.²⁶⁹ From this perspective, we underscore art's aporetic indeterminacy as its most vital component—"take away the indeterminacy created by the manipulation of information, material, and form and the 'art' disappears, leaving behind little but" its basic material.²⁷⁰ Umberto Eco adds that an artwork gains "its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood", providing it "a wealth of different resonances and echoes without impairing its original essence."²⁷¹ One of the more aporetic and indeterminate devices in "Space Invaders" arrives in its digital fragmentation of the physical picture plane. While the work is often seen as an installation, it is intended to be read as a single painting with spatial intrusions.

²⁶⁹ Hoelscher, Jason, Autopoietic Art Systems and Aesthetic Swarms: Notes on Artistic Emergence, *Eventual Aesthetics*, v2,n3, 2013, accessed March 24, 2020

²⁷⁰ Hoelscher, Jason, *The Poetics of Phase Space: The Open Artwork at the Edge of Chaos*, Spring 2014, accessed March 24, 2020

²⁷¹ Eco, Umberto, *The Open Artwork*, Translated by Anna Cancogni, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA

And, it is this premise and assertion that wields digital spatial intrusions as a metaverse material and fabricates alternate iterations and instantiations of the same work including its transcendent fusion and apogee: the metaverse artform—twisting the work’s subject and surface concerns into a complimentary form with metaverse properties. Thus, the work can exist as three forms: physical, digital, and the complex emergent amalgam. This aporetic device of versioning yields a “number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood”, thus iterating the artwork’s openness dimensionally and temporally via varied verse spaces.

3.4. Space or Spatial

Initially the fracture and fragmentation in “Space Invaders” began by viewing space metaphorically. A private domain invaded by online spheres facilitated by the device. Certainly, that remains a core theme where the space acts as a disruption that captures the decimating sensation occurring from reality fusions as the metaverse consumes, dissipates, and repurposes with simultaneity. The metaphor is extended to our most private space within the mind, where text and images conjoin to form ideas and knowledge. Ideas fusing peripheral disruptions that ensnare meaning and impede focus. The fragments also correlate to the dissemination of information via web browsing, while scale and scatter attempt to inject a familiar dissonance, where white space is commandeered with signs, innuendo, and icon. Fragmented webpages where tangency and juxtaposition form coercive snippets that seduce, infiltrate, and manipulate at moments of controlled necessity. In addition to its figurative use, space ultimately became literal through a simulated digital insertion that resulted in another verse convergence and variation on simultaneity via site.

Material diversity in the contemporary art-space can be overwhelming, as everything is open to conceptual use for art’s discourse. Certainly, this speaks to the diversity of culture, our images, and our image saturated metaverse. It is quite easy to identify, apprehend, and perceive a contemporary

art-object today, much like we can easily identify a “painting” whether it is online or physically in our presence. Hoelscher explains this is because of our “synthesis of intuition and imagination that collapses the manifold possibilities into a particular instance.”²⁷² Furthermore, Hoelscher contrasts this phenomenon with how we identify a “painting” by deferring to Kant who indicated:

“The first thing that is given to us is appearance, which, if it is combined with consciousness, is called perception. ... But since every appearance contains a manifold, thus different perceptions are encountered dispersed and separate in the mind, a combination of them, which they cannot have in sense itself, is therefore necessary. There is thus an active faculty of the synthesis of this manifold in us, which we call imagination, and whose action exercised immediately upon perceptions I call apprehension. For the imagination is to bring the manifold of intuition into an image; it must therefore antecedently take up the impressions into its activity, i.e., apprehend them.”²⁷³

Thus, the appearance, signs, and imagination are central to the formation of an apprehension by the mind and classification of an object as painting, installation, or cereal bowl—often relying on context as well. Hoelscher indicates, artistic movements are seen as *attractor basins* that are open, unfinalizable, and constantly invite revisiting, rereading, and redefinition; an act exacted with the fragmentary detour through metaverse space. My work returns to the “attractor-basin” of the figurative painting using a limited selection of materials that draw from numerous Greenbergian tangential discourses and the picture plane to simplify the dialog and take it back to its antecedent

²⁷² Hoelscher, Jason, *Site/Non-Site/Website*, February 15, 2015, 3

²⁷³ Ibid

roots. This simplification assists in underscoring the fragmentary portion of the work that manifests as a digital spatial insertion into a traditional painting's picture plane.



Figure 98 Marc Bridger, Detail *Pair of Dice* (2020)

The attractor basin of the picture plane also has a deviating branch that in the 1960s led to Minimalism. The idea of the digital as final form was an inuring process that occurred over my four years at SCAD as a distance-learner and artist that employs digital composition in process and serves as its final translated form for online critique. The digital spatial form began as mere convenience—I simply did not have adequate studio space to take on the absurdity in size that I wanted to capture. As such, the 1960s discourse of space and form emerging from Minimalism was an influential period for considering an experiential construct that harnessed simulated space. The digital realm was emancipatory in this sense of expanding the studio, generously providing the space necessary through 3D modeling. The notion is not foreign to our consumption of art contemporaneously where the student, critic, and artist must rely on the compressed two-dimensional picture plane of bits and bytes. Where spatial works become mere pixels, and nuanced marks vaporize under the pressure exerted by JPEG algorithms and resolution reductions.

And digital consumption of physical art is far more ubiquitous presently as I finalize this writing in April 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. While the physical painting fragments exist as canvas panels, only the metaverse manifestation is presently feasible. The transition to a hybridized physical painting with digital spatial intrusion has roots in the dilemma faced in earning a master's level art degree where spatial art experiences were simulated through a two-dimensional device. The consternation and frustration of "faking the art experience" assists in understanding my frame of mind and the doubts that led to spatial intrusions. And ultimately the acceptance of the metaverse artform as contextualized in the following subsection.

3.4.1. The Real Irony

Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism challenged the boundaries of their respective art identities, granting elasticity to art's defining periphery and range of representation. Where Abstract Expressionism primarily challenged what can be in a painting, Minimalism sought a new kind of art that questioned art's shape and borders. Nevertheless, in an online classroom or gallery, simulacra are requisite for contrasting work that is prostituted by photography's flattened, cropped frame, imploring the question: Did I compare two works at all, or simulate their contrast?

Donald Judd's Minimalist piece, *Untitled* (1966/68), consists of six rectangular forms affixed to a wall (Figure 99).²⁷⁴ The forms are constructed of stainless steel and plexiglass, relying on the serialization of machined parts. However, the sides separating the forms along with the outer edges remain clear, exposing the inner spaces and hollowness within. Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and other Minimalist artists intended for their works to encompass the surrounding area along

²⁷⁴ Judd, Donald, *Untitled* (1966/68) side view, Milwaukee Art Museum

with the beholder in a fusion of self, form, and space as theatre. While six individual parts existed in *Untitled*, they were not meant to be experienced separately, instead encompassing, and considered relative to, other non-art objects in the space along with their overall shape.²⁷⁵ Donald Judd in a 1965 essay 'Specific Objects' stated that the art was a negation and rejection of the "standard premises, the fixed terms, of painting and sculpture" by not adhering to formal criteria of either.²⁷⁶



Figure 99 Donald Judd, *Untitled* (1966/68) - Side View

Clement Greenburg and Michael Fried formulated High-Modernist painting through Pollock by focusing on medium specificity, the optical, and the departure of easel painting as a vehicle for the ambitious

artist. Greenburg's "The Crisis of the Easel Picture" (1948) described how then recent artists departed from the easel painting's boxlike cavity that is filled and lighted with forms using

²⁷⁵ Fried, Michael, "Art and Objecthood (1967)," Accessed April 19, 2020, <http://atc.berkeley.edu/201/readings/FriedObjcthd.pdf>, 2

²⁷⁶ Paul Wood, *Varieties of Modernism* (The Open University, 2004), 226

illusionism.²⁷⁷ The illusionism of forms was abandoned as abstraction transcended the tactile, addressing the eye with color, flatness, and a line emancipated from its role as ancillary contour to a decorative object. The optical supplanted touch through subversion—the eye was singularly addressed in painting via abstract textures that dissolved the picture into sheer texture and sensation. Art was liberated from its dependence on the tactile. Greenburg wrote of the tendency in painters to (my emphasis added):

“render every element, every part of the *canvas equivalent* ... [and to] weave the work of art into a tight mesh whose principle of formal unity is contained and recapitulated in each thread, so that ***we find the essence of the whole work in every one*** of its *parts*”²⁷⁸

High Modernism, along with Jackson Pollock, eliminated contrived spaces and considered the period terminated. Perspective, illusionistic renderings, and the imitation of form were replaced with non-objective intents. Where classical paintings had a center of attention, modernist paintings rendered everything equally. However, contrived space as an *attractor basin* has a longevity and varied angle of interpretation when considering the metaverse.

Jackson Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm* is a self-contained painting where its drips, staccato spots, splatters, and other parts are optically engaged in their individual tactile arrangements, contrasts, and fusions (Figure 100).²⁷⁹ The parts harmoniously interact and coalesce into middle values and mists to create a whole painting—a historically relevant and expected activity in the viewing process. However, the painting is self-contained, existing autonomously without the beholder as

²⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 132

²⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 132

²⁷⁹ Pollock, Jackson, *Autumn Rhythm*: Number 30 (1950), oil on canvas, 9ft x 17ft, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

part of the work. The painting's essence is found in its parts, Greenburg asserted, and what mattered most was the purely aesthetic experience.²⁸⁰

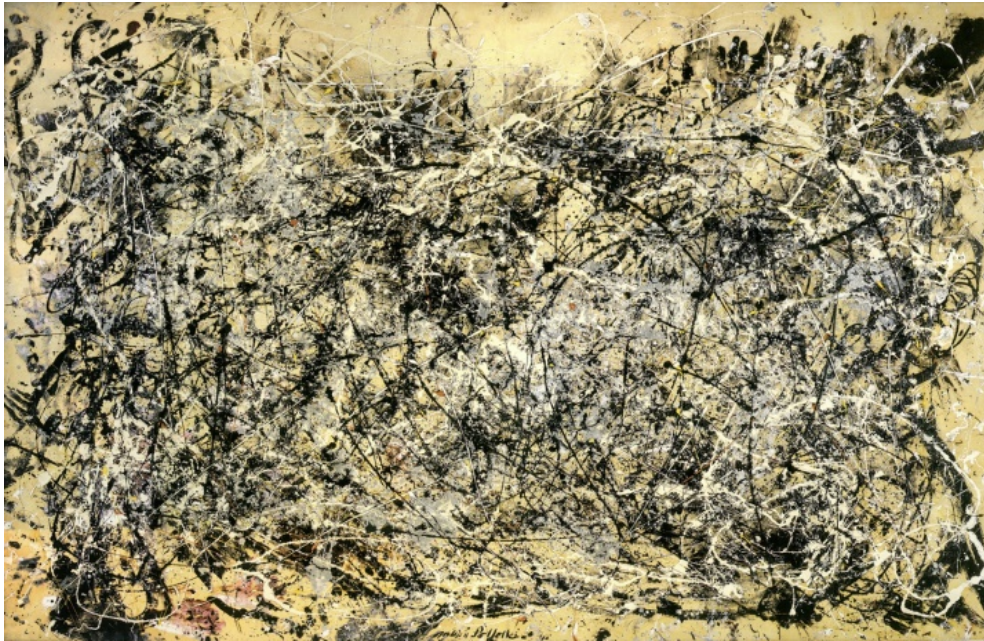


Figure 100 Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm: Number 30* (1950), oil on canvas, 9ft x 17ft

By contrast, the forms, colors, and individual elements within a Minimalist work form a shape to be experienced as a gestalt. Cognately, *Pair of Dice* presents physical panels with a

spatial insertion along with an exhibition space that is to be considered as a transcendent gestalt. The contrived conceptual space that infiltrates the picture plane simultaneously spreads into the surrounding simulated space that is itself housed within a two-dimensional RGB monitor, phone, or similar device depending on the specific viewer. As, each beholder (viewer) frames their viewing both literally and figuratively via their portable device. Thus, in essence each viewer carries with them a personal portable gallery space. One that facilitates the experiential fusion of art, site, and presence.

²⁸⁰ Greenburg, Clement, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture" (1948), in O'Brian, *Clement Greenburg*, vol.2, p221

The “beholder” discussed in Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” essay is important in a postmodernist work that relies on the viewer as co-author and co-creator—the adjuvant that brings meaning to the viewing experience. Roland Barthes “writerly/readerly” text, Derrida’s Post-structuralism and supplement, along with more recent articulations by Hoelscher and Bourriaud connect to the viewer and artist as coauthoring semionauts operating in a semiosphere. As such, the beholder is vital to the work’s ability to be open, revisited, and reread by remaining unfinalizable. Thus, experience is important in that the beholder is not only considered, but a necessary part of the meaning and theatrical experience that occurs during relational assessments between space, shape, and the external non-art objects—including the device facilitating this experience. Minimalism excluded the artist’s expression completely from the equation, instead focusing on the beholder’s experience. Donald Judd’s antipathy toward existing painting and sculpture led him to insist his Minimalist objects “lacked any significance beyond what was literally there.”²⁸¹

The identity of art-objects and *objecthood* is another consideration in that an overall shape is attributable to a type of work. Despite some canvases dismissing the typical square and rectangular shape, “a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture”, wrote Clement Greenburg, conveying both shape and presence as attributable to painting and its exclusion as a non-art object.²⁸² Essentially, through time and tradition Western culture came to accept a criterion in shape, form, and surface as the identifiable components for paintings. Whereas, Minimal art could be read as a “door, a table, or blank sheet of paper”, creating a dilemma for its distinction as

²⁸¹ Fineberg, Jonathan David, *Art Since 1940*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011), 284.

²⁸² Fried, Michael, “Art and Objecthood (1967),” Accessed April 19, 2020, <http://atc.berkeley.edu/201/readings/FriedObjcthd.pdf>, 3

art along with an interpretative issue of whether it had “the condition of non-art”—or *objecthood*.²⁸³

Therefore, in terms of the time period these movements and works occurred, another contrast exists in their *identity* as art—or rather, easily identifiable art versus fringe works operating on the margins of art’s boundaries.

Certainly, we have come a long way in what we instantly observe, accept, and tolerate as an artform. Abstract Expressionism challenged art’s idea of painting through non-objective content and an absence of form, yet generally was not in jeopardy of being non-art—at best, it challenged what can exist as a painting. Whereas Minimalism’s critics began their assault at the underpinnings of art’s *identity*. Abstract Expressionism inherited art status simply by employing a canvas and frame and its relative shape, where Minimalism’s embrace of *experience*, while rejecting painting and sculpture, invited scrutiny in its ability to exist within the sphere of what can be art. In this sense, Minimalism pierced the bubble and the shape of art itself lost all form to experience.

As antecedents in an attractor basin, *Pair of Dice* draws from both of these past competing artforms to embrace the openness that both extend as well as their experiential exhibition components that are *located in the device*. The spatial experience is adjusted to a contemporaneous form of space that is portable and accessible from a pocket or purse—the new picture plane and window into the world’s three dimensions. And, into the pixelated mirror refracting the gaze into a reconstituted reflection.

²⁸³ *Ibid*, 3

My work's physical existence has nearly always been experienced through this device window and its bits. Its picture plane and glossy hues flattened—devoid of tactile and optical nuance. Thus, any critical direction, reaction, or similar feedback is in the device context and through its window. Therefore, tailoring the work to embrace such a lens seems sensible. The intricate Moiré and interference patterns, cross hatching, and imbricated layering embedded as intended perceptual shifts are subverted by pixels. In a paper discussing Kolmogorov complexity and Shannon entropy as ways to understand the “edge of chaos” art straddles to remain equivocal and open, but maintain its informational capacity and structural vitality, Hoelscher explains that the translation of a painting to pixels can obliterate various elements of its aura, essence, and information:

“The only way even to begin to ‘get’ a Rothko painting, for example, is to experience one firsthand: even the highest-resolution photograph compresses it in a way that alters its character due to information loss—in terms of its scale, aura, or tactile qualities, for example. This violates a basic notion of Kolmogorov complexity, because Rothko paintings and photographs of Rothko paintings are too informationally different to allow for like-to-like comparisons of their compressibility.”²⁸⁴

The dilemma has an abrasive antagonism and the recurring realization that my work would always have this lens led to a search for a solution. Nevertheless, I also understood the translation a device forces on a work, along with its compression to pixels can insert new meanings through the aberrations and signs associated with the digital image and simulated space. Proprioception is lost to a monitor's flattening transformations of art into a fixed viewing angle, fixed size, fixed

²⁸⁴ Hoelscher, Jason, *The Poetics of Phase Space: The Open Artwork at the Edge of Chaos*, Spring 2014, 7-8, accessed March 24, 2020

distance, and fixed ratio. Yet, other new elements and artifacts may accompany the work to yield additional meanings, readings, and heighten the interchangeable entropy within a work. In flux are its size relative to your own, the odors, along with other sensory qualities that Walter Benjamin deemed an artwork's aura. Gone are many of the experiences of its aura, or rather, an alternate aura exists, but it must be snared. As such, whether it is a Rothko or a Bridger, reducing it to bits and pixels is a dilution. Yet, that dilution creates *atranslation* —one with its own unique attributes, angles, and aura. One unique to each viewer, her device, and the meaning she creates. Nevertheless, my peers, professors, or patrons of my website have not truly experienced the Rothko in my work unless I intervene and alter the premise and conditions for its viewing.

This subsection's double entendre in title labors to emphasize a point of irony in discussing the theories and debates surrounding art and non-art through digital reproductions; while contrasting work such as Judd's Minimalist cubes or a Pollok oil painting. The contrast necessitates its experience through another form of art and reproduction: the photograph. The integrity of this comparison requires an authentic experience unattainable in the context of a reproduction alone. The process requires imagination, facilitated by visual prompts. Thus, fabricating an experience ostensibly unique and incongruous to an authentic encounter. But in a metaverse of phased verse convergence, what is an authentic encounter?

The example provides an opportunity to flank the comparison from an oblique angle. My specific point of consternation relates to experiencing art online, seeing my own work reduced to these pixelated miniaturizations, and the ubiquitous condition of obtaining an art education underpinned by these reductions. Coincidentally, small two-dimensional photographs of a painting *and* Judd's Minimalism are typically used by most students to learn about Michael Fried and Clement Greenburg's contrasting arguments on Minimalism's validity. Thus, the student and professor are

to understand and make similar contrasts via an experience that is biased by, and uses, two-dimensional reductions to simulate a 3D experience via a 2D simulacrum. As such, the Minimalist simulacrum (photograph) is in direct conflict with an experience requiring space, time, and the beholder's physical presence.²⁸⁵

There is an interesting irony in learning about a 3D spatial art experience, while relying on miniaturized digital photographs. Generally, we are asked to make assessments and to essentially simulate a three-dimensionally oriented response for Judd's work, while imagining ourselves at a Pollock canvas for a contrast—both experiences require the imagination to literally fill in the spaces and brushstrokes. Is my experience and subsequent response valid or, rather, is it only valid in the context of this simulacrum? Rather more to the point, did I have a real experience at all? Are the contrasts dependent upon these experiences subverted by the simulacrum? Also, interesting is the impact this simulated experience has on our learning processes and memory of that experience informing a future transmittal of knowledge to students. Since, all my memories of encountering and contrasting these works derive from a simulated experience.

The irony is compounded in the theory we are exposed to through Fried and the delineation between painting and Minimalist works relying upon space, the placement of the beholder, and shape. Space, form, experience, and the gestalt of a Minimalist work is flattened and cropped into the constraints of photographic frame; an inherent and contrasting feature of a modernist painting and its shape. We are now experiencing Minimalism via a rectangular picture frame—is it still a Minimalist work? The work now conforms to the same shape that differentiates Minimalism from

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 4

the very shape that gives it *objecthood*, bounded only by its space—which we have flattened into a framed two-dimensional image within the pictorial bounding shape of a modernist painting.²⁸⁶

The beholder is also removed from the *space* and the *necessary* physical participation eliminated.²⁸⁷ The demand for the spectator to engage the work in relation to its setting, along with the comparative encounter to other non-art objects experienced via time as the beholder moves around the work, and its subsequent open-ended “negativity”, results in a subverted inversion by inserting the work into the self-sufficient wholly-manifest “positive” experience of a 2D format.²⁸⁸

Compound these issues of experience with a comparison forced through the lens of another artform: photography. We compare, contrast, and experience these works through an appropriation of sorts. An interpretation and translation via documentation. Photography is art. If we experience a work of art through another form of art, have we experienced the art of photography, Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism, or perhaps we have only experienced the art of illusionism all over again via its simulacrum. Duped into seeing something besides the obvious re-representation. Or, perhaps we have merely experienced them through a translation and versioning?

These exercises yield a demonstrable credence to the validity of photography’s ability to simulate and construct not only pictorial illusion, but the illusion of experience, the illusion of knowledge, and the illusion of illusion. As, the real irony is we are not even looking at a photograph. We are looking at the reproduced image of a photograph bounded by the frame of a device. We are staring

²⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 2-4

²⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 4

²⁸⁸ Paul Wood, *Varieties of Modernism* (The Open University, 2004), 231

into metaverse hyperreality and attempting to experience something real, while everything real about it exists in the periphery. Therefore, I am left considering: does the improvisation of experience and knowledge gained through its simulacrum discredit the comparisons by others that experienced the work through digital “versions” and reduce them to mere regurgitation?

Clement Greenburg commented that Minimalism “was exclusively preoccupied with the boundary between art and non-art”, providing “too little aesthetic interest.”²⁸⁹ While Arthur Danto established an artworld reality by examining *Brillo Boxes* (1964) and asserting that the gallery space creates the appropriate viewing construct to contextualize an object differently. Perhaps I am too preoccupied with this same *boundary* via the device. Nevertheless, the words demonstrate a repetition in dilemma and how the device participates in the contemporaneous *experience* and *exhibition* of art. Inserting itself between art and non-art—site and non-site. Inserting not only itself, but simulating art and its experience, yielding a simulacrum that facilitates exhibition. A simulacrum that “threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false’, the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’”²⁹⁰ Unless, that becomes the intent.

3.4.2. Process

My images derive from the physical world, are captured digitally, and then transposed to physical forms via the oil painting before once again going through this oscillatory process for compositing, documentation, and an emergent amalgam. Photoshop permitted a digital insertion of space between images throughout the compositional and painting process and was initially only a means to an end. However, as the work progressed and my initiatives in 3D Modeling emerged in

²⁸⁹ Wood, *Varieties of Modernism*, 215

²⁹⁰ Baudrillard, Jean *Simulacra and Simulation* (The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 3

tandem, the realization arose that the work could ultimately exist digitally. In addition, the digital realm was liberating—providing the only means to realize the work due to its size. Through a melding of spheres coupled with spatial fragmentation, the series moved closer to the radiant—translating metaverse culture, while inserting digital spatial insertions into the picture plane. The arising artform authentically hybridized the paintings into a physical and digital amalgamation of metaverse temporality.

While physical space perhaps yields objecthood, I viewed the paintings more as two dimensional planes with the intrusion of space—and that intrusion was relatable to the ideological invasion that was occurring in the subjects, thus extending the invasion to the conceptual notions undergirding the lines and hatched paint material. But the spatial material where these ideas promulgated and existed happened to be in the digital realm—or more specifically, its complex emergent amalgam via the metaverse. As such, a digital spatial insertion seemed necessary and appropriate to ensnare the metaverse material. To me, the paintings are infused with deeper meaning since its subject and material expressed the idea of an ideological invasion into our spaces, but this was carried over into the spatial material of the metaverse. Similarly, the work is concerned with the art historical realm of influence with its conceptual space examining the ontology of a metaverse artform. Relatedly, it empowers the co-authoring viewer in another way via their device and its facility for exhibition while liberating art and viewer from the institution.

Numerous objects and forms can capture the sensibility of our socio-political spectacle. But since the internet returns us back to a two-dimensional plane where devices compress our perception into a flattened space, this seemed an appropriate arena for focus since this domain is also the plane where history's most prolific form of propagandistic artifice emerged—oil painting. Fusing the antecedent with the digital along with a process that sees the work iteratively oscillate

between digital and physical results in a complex emergent form created in the same way our complex internet lexicon arises. As such, the metaverse, art culture, and my work are similarly self-referential in their material, image, and process; especially when fused with the device's exhibition.

With the metaverse material of spatial fragmentation, the work's emphasis deviates from subject concerns, moving closer to a "second-order complexity" by "abstracting up a level", thus "being influenced by an awareness of art's controlling narratives and discourses" that "marks a stage altogether more complex, akin to the difference between the condition of being aware and the condition of being aware of one's awareness".²⁹¹ While I was aware of art's controlling narratives and discourses, its underlying utterance was less pronounced in the first half of "Space Invaders", where in the second half the body embraces a second-order complexity, participating in an arena where art's boundaries and definitions are questioned, interrogated, and scrutinized. Thus, scrutiny reemerges again, but in a varied, more art-specific and complex way that involves art's concern with art's discourse.

The intriguing debate of what constitutes a metaverse artform could unfold in my own little conceptual sphere, questioning whether my work's final forms constituted a painting, or some digital installation documentation. I intended each full multi-panel work to be a single polysemic portrait, without the distinction of installation or polyptych—words used more for the convenience of communicating expected nomenclature and to assist the imagination when referring to the work. Nevertheless, this intent yields deeper insight into spatial fragmentation's initial

²⁹¹ Hoelscher, Jason, *Complexity Aesthetics: Recursive Information and Adjacent Possible*, 2014

motivations and my interest in participating in conceptualism's concern with what Kosuth articulated as the "handed down 'language' of traditional art", while the efforts are a reimagining of the expected form that "traditional art" arrives in.²⁹² Some assertions in this section are perhaps audacious or ridiculous. However, to simplify its receptiveness requires a sensitivity and reduction in the broadness of material use. As such, I participated in this debate within the confines of what a "traditional painting" can be without slipping into the realm of installation. Jason Hoelscher takes on this issue tangentially in two essays: *Painting in the Distributed Field*, and *Site/Non-Site/Website*, the latter of which addresses students in a distance learning program that use online platforms to display their work via JPEGs. The essay underscores numerous conceptual issues with the translation into a JPEG or PDF, while both essays employ the use of a *skeuomorph* as a stand-in to supplant a traditional painting.

A skeuomorph is a visual metaphor that uses a common and simplified form, such as the "computer desktop" in Windows, to obfuscate "complex binary processes."²⁹³ However, the paper makes an argument for a more digitally inclined transposition of a painting—a digital manifestation that can be data-points or something completely unlike a painting, but uses the nomenclature of "painting" and its two-dimensional plane to invoke the "painting's" conceptual space and discourse, while framing the work's viewing and discussion. This transposition of a digital form falling under the umbrella of painting discourse is certainly fascinating; however, by keeping my work tied to a physical oil painting in its process, my assertions herein are more like "baby-steps" toward Hoelscher's classification. As such, while asserting similar linguistic

²⁹² Gill Perry and Paul Wood, *Themes in Contemporary Art*, 71

²⁹³ Hoelscher, Jason, *Painting in the Distributed Field*, February 15, 2014,3, accessed March 24, 2020

distinctions to help articulate and clarify the metaverse artform, the fragmentary paintings employ different methods and do not strictly rely on allusions to a “painting” since they have “traditional” canvas-based paintings embedded in the picture plane. However, ultimately these flip to representations of canvas-based paintings.



Figure 101 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Friend*, oil on canvas, fragment: 12" x 12" from *Pair of Dice* (2020)

In the metaverse artform's auto-exhibition capacity, the form does rely on a viewer's allusion to the recognizable gallery space. My work's process includes digital references transposed to traditional canvas using oil paint that commingles into a fabricated object that is then digitized (again). While Hoelscher discusses purely digital work and my paintings are different, I believe they still operate in the spirit of his discourse and share numerous distinctions and connections to skeuomorphic painting in their deployment of autoexhibition. As such, I do believe the ideas presented here assist in buttressing the conceptual space he has boldly shaped in his numerous essays that account for a "painting" in pixels. Finally, I subscribe to the notion that the works can be experiential simultaneously in three forms: physical, digital, and their amalgamated gestalt, the metaverse artform. Thus, expanding upon the earlier notions of simultaneity that exist in the body's first three works.

3.5. Document, Digital Image, or Painting

When "Space Invaders" fragments, it wields its conceptual space for redefinition—a feature spatially defining it as a form of "painting" that embraces a metaverse hybridity. The distinction and declaration that the digital image in Figures 3 and 4 is not a form of documentation, but is the art itself, requires reasoning.

Digital images are prolific and often associative with photography's history. In online environments, the "screenshot photographer/artist" captures the device screen that depicts a gaming environment or other computer-generated imagery as a virtual photograph of sorts. In addition, with CMOS sensors photography is mostly digital, further blurring the boundaries of screenshot, photo, digital art, and digital documentation. Therefore, it is a minor leap to consider the digital image space and screenshot as a form of photography. Photography has had to articulate the delineation between art and documentation in the past, and this consideration

serves as a starting point for framing the interpretation of a digital image. The 1976 Artforum article "The Anti-Photographers" takes on the distinction between documentation, art, and photography's role in conceptual art by clarifying differences. While conceptual art employs the photograph as a container for delivering an idea, the photograph itself as art is a different proposition. The article gets right to the pith of the problem, stating: "the distinction between art and photography, historically fraught with anxieties, has ceased to be one of definition; nevertheless, it continues to bug us." And bugged is what I was, as I began to articulate the conceptual space that my work operated in, simultaneously realizing that its form became amorphous once categorization was attempted.

Photography becomes an arena for considering a work through its documentation capabilities, with conceptual art providing numerous varied instances. As the article indicates "conceptual art's Duchampian underpinnings strip the photograph of its artistic pretensions, changing it from a mirror into a window. What it reveals becomes important, not what it is."²⁹⁴ On the topic of photography in conceptual art, Amanda du Preez indicates that it is a "perceptual prosthetic" that "testifies (through its own materiality) to the materiality of something once present, now swamped, devoured and irrevocably lost."²⁹⁵ Relatedly, Jacques Derrida discussed a *supplement* which is a replacement and stand-in of sorts. A photograph as stand-in for a final form for works that are not themselves photographs comes to this distinction by Seth Siegelaub:

"When art does not any longer depend upon its physical presence, when it becomes an abstraction, it is not distorted and altered by its reproduction in books. It becomes

²⁹⁴ Foote, Nancy, "The Anti-Photographers", Artforum, Vol 15, September 1976, 46-54

²⁹⁵ Preez, Amanda du, "(Im)Materiality: on the matter of art", Image & Text, January 2008, accessed June 5, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/241262/_Im_materiality_on_the_matter_of_art

PRIMARY information, while the reproduction of conventional art in books and catalogues is necessarily (distorted) 'SECONDARY' information. When information is PRIMARY, the catalogue can become the exhibition."²⁹⁶

Cognately, the hybridized version of *Pair of Dise* with its digital spatial insertions, simulated space, and exhibition does not depend on a physical space, nor is it distorted or altered in this form since the digital rendering is a versioned instantiation of its final form. As such, *Pair of Dise* is the PRIMARY iteration of the digital's metaverse manifestation (See Figure 4).²⁹⁷ Because the metaverse can transition to physical, the work's existence in a gallery space would constitute another instance of its PRIMARY iteration in physical form. Robert Smithson's "Mirror Displacements" were intentionally placed in various "locations, photographed, then packed up and moved to the next place", while the photographs published in Artforum, "along with extensive commentary" became the "completed work".²⁹⁸ The article goes on to assert the distinction of the work's residue in photographs being the only tangible form for the work:

The "Mirror Displacements" cannot exist as a unit except in photos, since their enabling rationale was that each should occur in a different location. Thus, it can be argued that the work's final structure is photos, unlike an Earthwork in a single location which, though dependent on photos as a record, could (though won't by most people) be seen "in the flesh."²⁹⁹

²⁹⁶ Foote "The Anti-Photographers", 46-54

²⁹⁷ Bridger, Marc, *Pair of Dise* (2020) ²⁹⁸ Ibid

²⁹⁹ Foote "The Anti-Photographers", 46-54

The same article asserts that art “that does not depend, as Siegelau says, on its physical presence relies heavily on photography for its credibility.” A hybridized metaverse artwork that has both a physical and digital existence along with its emergent amalgam, however, is a newer conceptual dilemma along with its third-order simulacrum via the metaverse artform. While a fully digital work may be translated to projection screens or even printed, it is met with little resistance to its



Figure 102 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Fox*, oil on canvas, fragment: 12" x 12" from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

transposition when the goal is exhibition. Speaking of a more performative types of work or Earthworks, photographs begin as documentation, but for ephemeral works such as artist Christo and Jeanne-Claude, when the “act is over” the photograph acquires “eyewitness status, becoming in a sense, the art itself.”³⁰⁰

Certainly, my fragmentary paintings and the images presented in this thesis are not “photographs” but the assertion the images with the embedded gallery space *are the art*, is probably incongruous with typified assumptive conclusions that Figure 3 and 4 are some form of documentation of a painting or installation. The assumption, then, is that the figures are operating much like a photograph—a form of documentation. And, I am asserting that the figures are not documentation but are fully rendered autoexhibiting hybridized amalgams—metaverse artforms.

Therefore, photography’s use is not to fabricate art, but to document idea-art. Today’s screenshot and digital renderings operate like the way photography has served a documentarian use. A photograph has a lens and digital sensor, whereas the screenshot has merely eliminated the need for an intermediary apparatus, allowing the optical data to be captured directly by the device. As such, the screenshot and digital image can be considered a sort of photograph for the purposes of this discussion and its relatability to similar classification dilemmas that have arisen in past discourse.

Accordingly, my digital screen capture is documenting the instantiation of an idea that manifested through a metaverse convergence of physical forms and digital spatial insertions. The process required a camera, translating the work to digital representations of the physical image. These

³⁰⁰ Ibid

images were composited in an image editor, then further digitally transposed through another compositing method that inserted simulated space via a 3D-modeling application. The resultant composite painting and its spatial insertion between fragments, and the surrounding exhibition space, become a multi-layered prompting sign that signifies “digital”, “art”, “painting”, “exhibition”, and “installation” all in one image—in one artform. The modeling of the forms in a virtual 3D space includes all the signifiers associated with a gallery presence, including lighting, walls, directional track-lighting, and the benches for the viewer. This simulation then places a camera at a point where the viewer may ideally stand, subsequently capturing a final rendering. The viewer then brings the gallery to the work via the device. Thus, the final rendered metaverse artform acts as a self-referential, auto-exhibiting, self-contained gallery experience for the viewer and their device. As such, the work is operating in the same “space” as all language forms on the internet. Whereas, a pure gallery presence without this conceptual component lacks something of the spatial metaverse material it is concerned with.

This final form becomes contentious as it represents one of three valid existences for my work, yielding a compatible presence of simultaneity. As mentioned earlier, these signs commingle imaginatively to create what Kant and Hoelscher called *allusions*, so that we can *synthesize* a perception and its appropriate categorization—the same ingredients for fabricating a reality. The metaverse convergence and hybridization along with the two sides of the mirror can exist in simultaneity in our world today, thus yielding a work that is appropriately self-referential by capturing an essence of the verse convergence that makes its autonomy possible. A similar doubling and simultaneity is observed by Rosalind Krauss in “Tracing Nadar” where she considers photography and the camera obscura as a “double metaphor for both recording mechanism and

mind” and if the trace can “double as both subject and object of its own recording, it can begin to function as an intelligible sign.”³⁰¹

While my fragmentary paintings have been labeled “installations” or “polyptychs” they were very much always intended to exist as a single painting with a space intrusion—almost sculptural, but rather: a single two-dimensional plane with gaps. Certainly, the ideas of the expanded field and installation were instrumental in this imaginative articulation. The series name “Space Invaders” connotes the idea of space, despite it being a double entendre that correlates to 80s video game nostalgia. As mentioned, the idea of participating in the intriguing challenge to art’s elastic definition is an underlying interest and influence in the decision to keep the work on traditional canvases, rather than experiment with other forms and objects. Thus, the work operates on an attractor basin connected to modernist painting, picture planes, and the purity that surrounds that repeated reemergence, corralling the work’s discourse into the confines of a “traditional painting”—yet one in an identity crisis, brought on by technological transpositioning.

By using its traditional materials such as oil paint, canvas, and stretchers, I believed this kept the work within the confines of a Greenbergian definition of a “painting” in both appearance and material; but skirted the liminal area between installation and painting. Flattening the work into pixels displayed on a screen, and then inserting a simulated 3D space into 2D pixels to suggest a 3D-like photograph of the work, invokes numerous forms of the imposter—thus, the work even in digital form is hard to decipher as a simulation, simulacrum, documentation, or a “mere rendering” from a 3D program. Is it a painting? Does the surrounding “fake” space annihilate its legitimacy as

³⁰¹ Krauss, Rosalind. “Tracing Nadar.” October 5 (1978): 29-47. Accessed April 10, 2020. doi:10.2307/778643.

a digital work and force it into the funnel of documentation? Jason Hoelscher articulates our contemporaneous conundrum well by stating:

“when it comes to spatial signification, whether the object of critique is a realist painting, a hard-edge abstract painting, or something else altogether, the picture space of the artworks is leveled out: aesthetico-ideological pictorial distinctions are smoothed out in the backlit, RGB glow of the monitor or touchscreen. Whether Renaissance perspectival space or late-modernist opticality, it no longer matters: it’s all screen-space. The online critique must also negotiate issues of artistic aura and authenticity.”³⁰²

Nevertheless, this thesis asserts that given the appropriate spatial signifiers and relatable allusions, along with simultaneity and a viewer’s device, a complex *emergent space* can arise that supplements and transcends pure “screen-space”, embracing a mirrored existence by consuming its twisted reflection to become a bona fide third-order simulacrum.

3.5.1. Versioning

The perceptual shifts, stylistic painting marks, and numerous other formal qualities are lost in the digital compression of an image into a small two-dimensional lossy JPEG. Certainly, the size and *Pair of Dice’s* gargantuan absurdity are mitigated as well. These losses are underscored by transitioning the work to a hybridized digital space. Rather than bemoan the loss of brushwork and the rich layering that exists in the physical form, these features are *paused* by the reduction—resumed in a future encounter with the physical version of the work. As such, the versions

³⁰² Hoelscher, Jason, *Site/Non-Site/Website, Presence, Absence and Interface in the Online Studio Critique*, 2015

embrace an instantiated coexistence with a reflection that also seems to comment on society and art's recurring preoccupation with vanity.

Nevertheless, it celebrates difference by placing on pause the physical experience while emancipating art, viewer, artist, and gallery in a digital experience that yields an essence of the work, that also yields a variance—a variance that is equally important to meaning construction as it wields the spatial material of the metaverse. While digital and online artworks can be considered "unburdened by the boundary conditions of materiality", a hybridized work discards this concern of burden and embraces the duality of verse convergence by beginning to compose itself through a residue of both spheres that emerge as a transcendent metaverse material.³⁰³

3.6. Autopoietic Artworld

Jason Hoelscher presents biology's autopoiesis autonomy as a varied view on understanding the artworld. Autopoiesis is a neologism formed by biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela describing "a biological machine that regenerates" and "specifies its own organization through its operation as a system of production of its own components", resulting in one similar to Kant's articulation.³⁰³ Autopoietic combines auto- (Greek for "self") and -poietic (Greek for "create"), thus equating to autocreation—referring to the artworld's recursive feedback loop of art about art, created by the reality bubble of artists, gallerists, critics, and other ancillary parts in a complex emergent system.³⁰⁴ In contrasting the prevalent modernist narrative of a closed self-purifying system, Hoelscher proposes an alternate viewpoint, not unlike Nicolas Bourriaud's

³⁰³ Hoelscher, Jason, Autopoietic Art Systems and Aesthetic Swarms: Notes on Artistic Emergence, *Eventual Aesthetics*, v2,n3, 2013, 20-22

³⁰⁴ Goosseff, K. (2010), "Autopoeisis and meaning: a biological approach to Bakhtin's superaddressee", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 145-151. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09534811011031319>

“altermodernity” analogue to a biological *radicant*. Hoelscher sees art and the modernist period as an autopoietic autonomous system that is not closed, but open, not final, but unfinalizable—thus art is open teleologically, both before and after Greenberg.³⁰⁵

These ideas are illustrated with a beautiful analogy by Hoelscher, where the closed system that is the metanarrative of modernism can be considered as a heterogenous bowl of water, while the open system is a bowl of ice cubes—both with the same substance. However, both with different internal boundaries, not unlike biological cells that work independently, but “contribute to the formation of a larger organism.”³⁰⁶ Yet, the ice cubes permit “discrete units” and interaction “is facilitated more effectively” than “the undifferentiated, ostensibly ‘purer’ liquid form.”³⁰⁷ The liquid water is the typical modernist narrative—an analytic autonomous boundary *keeping impure elements out*, while the “autopoietic autonomous boundaries facilitate interaction and hybridization between aesthetic and mimetic units”, thus promoting interplay between styles, movements, and forms.³⁰⁸

“Space Invaders” spatial fragmentation can be seen as a digital construct that literally hybridizes the work between two realms, elevating the work beyond its social or political conversations into an auto-reflexive circuit where it arises as an instance of art’s autopoietic discourse. Through this lens the fragments in “Space Invaders” act similar to “ice cubes” where they exist with spatial autonomy, yielding an openness in meaning creation via adjacency. Their hybridization and autonomy, however, is entirely dependent on the digital space for which they emerged out of

³⁰⁵ Hoelscher, Jason, Autopoietic Art Systems and Aesthetic Swarms: Notes on Artistic Emergence, Eventual Aesthetics, v2,n3, 2013, accessed March 24, 2020

³⁰⁶ Ibid

³⁰⁷ Ibid

³⁰⁸ Ibid

necessity. Thus, their convergence of the physical and digital yield residues that catalyze the metaverse artform—sort of emergent externalities of a metaverse confluence. Yet, to spatially segment the painting's picture plane with an authentic metaverse material required the usurping of physical space with conceptual space.

3.7. Spurious Space and Faking Fragmentation

Fragmentation distributes the painting across both metaverse realms to cover all instances of the Möbius Strip topology. Speaking on the topic of a painting converted to a JPEG for online art courses, Hoelscher discusses a digital work as a “distributed painting” that “can exist in a multiplicity of forms and conditions simultaneously.”³⁰⁹ Recall simultaneity is a recurrent theme in “Space Invaders” along with being a property of quantum physics and our metaverse reality. The notion reemerges here through conceptual and visual insertions and as a property of the final metaverse artform. While Hoelscher indicates a “more active example would be a work that either originates in or is intended to be realized in digital form”, my fragmentary paintings ultimately embrace a hybridized digital form emanating from an earlier digital composite that exists as one of their three duplicitous existences, yet traces and embraces their radicant traversal of form.³¹⁰

Therefore, I am asserting a varied form of simultaneity to infuse the work further with a feature common in the metaverse. A digital iteration (composite) of the work requires photographing each piece and assembling them in Photoshop as artboards—meticulously placed with an accurate physical to digital scale. Thus, the process unfolds in a fashion resembling this chain: the fragment

³⁰⁹ Hoelscher, Jason, *Painting in the Distributed Field*, February 15, 2014

³¹⁰ Ibid

references began as physical world instances, became digital internet references or digital photographs, were painted physically, and once again became digital as a composite. Subsequently, the fragments are imported into an artificial simulated space via a 3D modeling and animation program where they ultimately emerge as the metaverse amalgam via a viewer's device.

Beyond the final hybridized form, the digital and physical iterations provide additional potentialities in the viewing experience and creation of meaning. A work existing merely as physical, only accounts for a portion of the metaverse phenomenon. Similarly, while a purely digital rendering would account for another segment, it would risk becoming documentation. For it to be presented in a gallery space, requires some form of digital to physical transformation; thus, a translation. Alone, these forms are missing the emergent complexity that arises with simulated space, artworld signifiers, along with the device and its viewer. The emerging complexity of the hybridized artform transcends the digital and physical manifestations and arrives as a twisted form that captures the amalgamated convergence of a gestalt radiating from its Mobius strip topology, while manifesting through device exhibition. As such, the artform accounts for both verse realities, while phasing to crystallize the material and emanating aura. An artform that twists the device and viewer into autoexhibition, where all components are emancipated from the institutional gallery space.

3.7.1. Emancipatory Optics and Space

While the physical fragments have never been assembled in the physical plane, they remain extant and readily available for a more traditional viewing, opening the horizon for varied perspectives, readings, and coauthoring of meanings by the sojourning viewer. Nevertheless, their existence as a unified and realized form only exists via the digital spatial insertion amongst the fragments. Thus, yielding an interesting credence to the validity of the metaverse artform—when its physical counterpart has itself become the conceptual imaginary form, versus the realized

transcendent digital iteration presented in this paper. Because, neither fragmentary work has ever been constructed or assembled *outside* of the idea-space for which the metaverse artform permitted an optical emancipatory experience. Thus, they share a connection to Smithson's "Mirror Displacements" versus the Earthwork's use of the image as a record of the artwork form. Like "Mirror Displacements", the finalized auto-exhibiting residue was wielded as a digital amalgam in the metaverse artform that cannot be visited in the physical sense, like the Earthwork. Since, it only exists as idea-space manifested in the metaverse.

Thus, the transcendence captures an aporetic condition by hybridizing two existences into a hyperreal auto-exhibiting amalgam. The physical studio space was inadequate for the *imagined* physical form that is beyond the means of an impecunious emerging artist. Similarly, a lack of local galleries coupled with silent replies for exhibition led to alternatives. Thus, this imagined form was coupled with the emancipatory space that a digital sphere provided in the compositional process, documentation phase, and final exhibition of the work through its online iteration. The resultant hybridized metaverse amalgam liberates work, viewer, and artist through a realized auto-exhibiting instantiation of the artform.

3.8. Supplemental Third-Order Simulacra

In essence, the metaverse artform is a skeuomorph. Appropriately, the manifested instantiation of the idea through the composite digital is a charade. A visual skeuomorph that is a supplemental stand-in for the digital, while simultaneously existing as the metaverse composite. Paradoxically and aporetically, much like the perception of a mirror and the notion of reality in the midst of a mirror, reality sees reality which sees itself. Reality could not "see" itself without a reflection, thus reality would not exist as an image. To capture this sensibility the digital manifestation is both reality and reality's reflection in the same form. The composite presentation in Figure 4 exists both

as a digital manifestation of *Pair of Dice* and *simultaneously* as the metaverse hybridized form, thus creating a self-referential loop and raising, again, an awareness of its own viewing space for viewer contemplation. The work as a sort of skeuomorph is "linguistically and visually subsuming under the skeuomorphic word 'painting'", while simultaneously doing so through the insertion of a visually recognizable space that mimics the art gallery. Thus, the work captures an "awareness of the simultaneous tangibility and intangibility" of its own varied realities.³¹¹ Hoelscher recalls Kant in regard to our recognition of a digital JPEG as a category of "painting" and how that perception relies on a "synthesis of intuition and imagination that collapses the manifold possibilities into a particular instance."³¹²

Hoelscher methodically navigates numerous previous thinkers to provide his own complex emerging utterance that brings us to the enlightened side of seeing the digital image, space, and its powerful ability to replace its original. Hoelscher explains that "an online artwork"..."is quite complicated", as its "painting's interface is a complex aggregate of picture plane, painted surface and semiotic content" and the "smooth glass surface and ostensible invisible interface"..."creates an interesting conceptual friction."³¹³ Hoelscher goes on to say that "in words applicable to the ontological ambiguity of the online artwork itself, Derrida wrote of the *supplement* that its 'addition comes to make up for the deficiency, it comes to compensate for a primordial nonself-presence" and the "virtual art" supplement is "always ambiguous, existing in an in-between state of undecidability and reflexivity."³¹⁴ Furthermore, the online artwork:

³¹¹ Hoelscher, Jason, *Site/Non-Site/Website, Presence, Absence and Interface in the Online Studio Critique*, 2015

³¹² *Ibid*

³¹³ *Ibid*, 4-6

³¹⁴ *Ibid* 6

“occupies an intermediate position: while created and structured as the static interface of an individual painting, it also exists as a dynamic, skeuomorphically subsumed, readily transmittable form of digital communication” ... “over time the supplement becomes the primary referent itself, while the original comes to be overlooked due to its inaccessibility and situational space/time specificity.”³¹⁵

The emerging artist may lack the social, financial, or professional currency to realize their work. Adversity participated in my own utterance of the artform. Limited studio space, geographic handicaps, and the challenges of showing “controversial” work in a conservative atmosphere created the opportunity to reexamine its liberty—censored by an institutional system of politics and power.

At times, I have wondered if my use of caricature, politics, and representation was some form of self-destructive act to elicit dismissals, so that I had a reason to bitch. When examining humor within conceptual pieces, the 1976 essay “Anti-Photographers” considers a photograph’s role in a conceptual space by examining various provocative visual commentaries. Recall in the earlier Part 2 discussion on caricature that *Colored People* and *A Few Palm Trees* managed “to convey an uncannily anthropomorphic sense of presence which is very amusing; but as is often the case with humor, the easy access which it grants to the work is deceptive”.³¹⁶ Similarly, Baldessari and Wegman’s surface levity masked a more complex underlying conceptual component.³¹⁷ As such, the device of humor provides an accessible gateway to a more complex engagement, but the caricatures and compositional strategies seemed to have been so overwhelming that the

³¹⁵ Ibid

³¹⁶ Foote, Nancy, “The Anti-Photographers”, *Artforum*, Vol 15, September 1976, 46-54

³¹⁷ Ibid



Figure 103 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Token Friend*, oil on canvas, fragment: 12" x 12" from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

inclination to dig beneath these accessible surfaces to discover what lies beneath went either unexplored or was too politically incendiary for consideration.

The metaverse artform is emancipatory as it encompasses an alternative exhibition space that embraces individual viewing arenas, while being sensitive to humanistic calamities such as pandemics. Difficulties in presenting work that is controversial, political, or perhaps incompatible

with a commodity scheme that will attract a gallery may be mitigated by the autoexhibition portion of the metaverse artform. Cognately, by existing liminally in the metaverse as a digital work with an alternate physical reading, the painting is able to comment about the art gallery system and freedoms of artists to show their work, while existing as a residue and index of a point in history when the discourse of an emergent metaverse provided the only means for exhibition.

3.8.1. Back to Baudrillard

The object becomes a *primary* thing itself and a *secondary* reference to *something else*, and that *something else* is *itself*. The supplement is more "than a secondary record of something else: it stands in for, enhances, is informed by, and eventually comes to replace that to which it refers."³¹⁸

The supplement "makes up for the spatiotemporal limitations of "a speech or painting that cannot be experienced first-hand"; and, as Hoelscher indicates "the supplement becomes the primary referent itself", thus operating as what Baudrillard would have considered second-order simulacra.^{319,320} As such, paradoxically, a product of the metaverse can have three phases, the digital, the physical, and the supplemental second-order simulacrum of its auto-exhibited self-referential instantiation. Thus, it occupies the signifier, signified, referent and sign all in one paradoxical loop that mirrors art's self-reflexivity.

Jean Baudrillard recognized three orders of simulacra where the first is imaginary and utopian, distancing itself from the real, and tends to "abolish itself, to be reabsorbed on behalf of the real."³²⁰ Baudrillard speaks of projections, copies, and doppelgangers that convincingly imitate the real in

³¹⁸ Hoelscher, Jason, Site/Non-Site/Website

³¹⁹ Ibid

³²⁰ Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation*, The University of Michigan Press, 1994, 121

second-order simulacra, where the distinctions between representation and reality breakdown.³²¹

While in third-order simulacra there is no longer a real to imitate, as the “simulation is not an imitation but a replacement.”³²² As such, a third-order simulacrum fully replicates and then replaces the object giving rise to its own simulation, so to speak—thus, the “distinction between reality and representation vanishes.”³²³

Therefore, *Pair of Dise* and *Run a Make Border the For!* are second-order simulacra. But because they incorporate their own exhibition as the digital space too, they twist their reflection by transcending this designation to become third-order simulacra—full replacements. A designation impossible without the consumed second-order, inserting an appropriate aporetic quality into their existence. Ironically fitting for a work with intertextual links to the author that coined the notion and term, while also writing the work that served as prompts for its fragments.

“Originality becomes a meaningless concept” and this is exemplified in the assertion that a work of art in the metaverse has three versions: physical, digital, and its second-order simulacrum that *simultaneously* becomes its third-order simulacrum that mostly replaces all three versions.³²⁴

However, the residues remain traceable, readable, and experiential. Certainly, they may be on pause or never referenced at all, but they do remain as primary sources that contribute to the primary supplemental third-order simulacra that has come to transcend its contributing constituents via the viewer’s device.

³²¹ Ibid 121-128

³²² Hagerty, Paul, “Simulation and the Decay of the Real”, Jean Baudrillard: Live Theory, 49-50, accessed April 4, 2020 <https://archive.org/details/jeanbaudrillardl0000hega/page/50>

³²³ Simulacra and Simulation, accessed April 4, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simulacra_and_Simulation#cite_note-PH-10

³²⁴ Hagerty, Paul, “Simulation and the Decay of the Real”, 49-50

With three versions of a work, a deeper unfinalizability and broader openness is instilled beyond a partial traversal of the Möbius strip. While our digital and physical spheres have become symbiotic and converged, their origins remain distinct iterations and mirrors. A simple example is in our outward physical persona versus an online projection that is a concatenation and culmination of images, posts, and snippets. Generally, to fully understand someone in 2020 is to traverse both cultures in a *synthesis* that maintains a distinction between the two origins, but nonetheless operates as a simulacrum—a complete replacement without a true path back to an original. Thus, our understanding of a person in 2020 is a perception that amalgamates two forms, while a complex replacement emerges—a familiar replicant that cannot be fully retraced to its constituent bits.

3.9. Artform Dematerialization

My work is a probe—a series of inquiries and curiosities questioning society and art culture. Nevertheless, this thesis makes certain assertions, despite those tacitly offered as suggestions rather than answers. In “Site/Non-Site/Website” Hoelscher asks: “Do referent and reference combine into a sort of systemic, transmedial diptych, a fusion of painting + record of painting?”³²⁵ I assert that they certainly must, in order to fully embrace the residues and essences that together form a metaverse gestalt that captures the realities and qualities of both, replaces them, and operates in a conceptual space unobtainable by one version alone. A form that mimics the transformation occurring by mixing the two, resulting in a heterogenous gestalt that is a simulacrum—irreducible to its contributing constituents.

³²⁵ Hoelscher, Jason, Site/Non-Site/Website, Presence, Absence and Interface in the Online Studio Critique, 2015, 3

According to Danto, Duchamp, Kosuth, and the remaining artworld, I can declare any idea as art, and the idea I conjured has a residue in the artforms presented herein. As Sol LeWitt said “the idea becomes a machine that makes art”.³²⁶ Thanks to Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, in 1961 Robert Rauschenberg sent a telegram to the Clert Gallery that stated: “THIS IS A PORTRAIT OF IRIS CLERT IF I SAY SO” and this instantaneously imbued the piece of paper with art’s status.³²⁷ I am saying something similar: THIS IS AN AUTO-EXHIBITING METAVERSE ARTFORM, IF I SAY SO. A hybridized container subsuming a painting, verse convergence, exhibition, and its reflections into third-order simulacrum. But, one that maintains three realities via its forms—digital, physical, and the complex emergent amalgam that is the metaverse artform. Thus, doppelganger meets doppelganger in a product of the metaverse. When speaking about space and time Nicolas Bourriaud indicated:

“by introducing figures from the realm of spatial displacement into the composition” ...

“today’s art seems to negotiate the creation of new types of space by resorting to a geometry

of translation: topology.” ... “it refers to movement, to the dynamism of forms, and

characterizes reality as a conglomeration of transitory surfaces and forms that are potentially

moveable. In this sense, it goes hand in hand with translation as well as precariousness.”³²⁸

In 1968, Jack Burnam discussed art’s aesthetic traversal into new territories with a concern for the unobject’s boundaries, while discussing the “emerging major paradigm in art” as a “novel way of

³²⁶ LeWitt, Sol, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”, *Artforum*, V/10, 1967

³²⁷ Rauschenberg, Robert, *This is a Portrait of Iris Clert If I Say So* (1961), accessed April 22, 2020 <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/artwork/portrait-iris-clert-if-i-say-so>

³²⁸ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *The Radicant*, Lukas & Sterberg, New York, 2009, 79

rearranging surfaces and spaces” that are “fundamentally concerned with the implementation of the art impulse in an advanced technological society.”³²⁹

In a digital work, or even one of hybridity, reproduction and the lack of an original is considered, embraced, and infused into the artform and its material. If the artwork is merely a visual residue of ideas, then the idea has little regard for how it is propagated. Certainly, an original tangible object can lead to a tactile and visceral experience. One that is coveted and valued. But in a capitalist society where ownership, wealth, and power control this experience, the work’s liberation through the copy, digital, or hybrid artform seems sensibly egalitarian. This action fuses contemporaneous cultural conditions such as appropriation, device exhibition, and “copying” with the artwork’s spiritual existence which is a refraction from the pixelated metaverse mirror. Walter Benjamin, when speaking of an artwork’s loss of aura due to reproduction said that:

“Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.” ... “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.”³³⁰

Yet, a work that considers our contemporaneous digital culture of devices, simulacra, and skewed sense of simultaneous reality must encompass a material and exhibition space that discards an original to genuinely embrace our time when space has multiple metaverse dimensions. Thus, the

³²⁹ Burnam, Jack, Systems Esthetics, Artforum, 1968, accessed April 02, 2020, <https://www.artforum.com/print/196807/systems-esthetics-32466>

³³⁰ Benjamin, Walter, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, accessed June 25, 2020, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>

artform is shrouded in its unique place where it happens to be—the device—a condition authenticating its purpose and aura.

Lucy Lippard and John Chandler in 1968 wrote that the “object becomes merely the end product” and “such a trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object’s becoming wholly obsolete.”³³¹ Lippard and Chandler go onto discuss an art that is reductive and simple, forcing an aloofness in the viewer that must strain to focus since there are no details to buttress meaning. This strain extends the experiential since “more time must be spent in experience of a detail-less work” as a viewer is accustomed to “focusing on details” to absorb a work’s impression.³³² Relatedly, by eliminating detail, surface, and an intimate engagement with the canvases in *Pair of Dise*, the gestalt emerging artform simplifies the work. Perceptual shifts, brushwork, and detail are discarded, redirecting attention to significations, adjacency, and ideas. Not unlike the related experiences online where details and nuance are sacrificed to retweets, reshares, and redirecting actions that skew meaning construction. A phenomenon highlighted by The Guardian and recent action by Twitter to curb resharing without first reading.³³³ Quoting Joseph Schillinger, Lippard and Chandler discuss five evolutionary zones of art with the final fifth being “characterized by a fusion of the art forms and materials, and finally, a ‘disintegration of art,’ the ‘abstraction and liberation of the idea.’”³³⁴

³³¹ Lippard, LR & Chandler, J. 1968. The dematerialization of art. *Art International* 12:22 (February 1968) 31-36.

³³² *Ibid*

³³³ Hern, Alex, “Twitter aims to limit people sharing articles they have not read”, *The Guardian*, accessed June 27, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jun/11/twitter-aims-to-limit-people-sharing-articles-they-have-not-read>

³³⁴ *Ibid*

In the digital manifestation, the work embraces an autotelic sensibility by incorporating a new kind of flatness through a simulation of space only accomplished by bits. Thus, this spatial insertion helps to create the boundaries between physical form and digital space, while the juxtaposition unifies the two forms into a metaverse hybridization. In a complex emergent system, qualities can emerge that are not present in their independent existences. Hoelscher uses the property of “wetness” to demonstrate this phenomenon in nature versus the presence of H₂O molecules that alone do not exhibit the wetness property.³³⁵ Relatedly, the metaverse artform has a wetness—an emergent property that is tangible and transcends its mere molecules of physicality and bits that give rise to its existence. Yet, the digital space is invisible, operating as a layer of independence that emancipates the work in several ways. By simulating the gallery space simultaneously, the work envelops its own exhibition. As such, the digital is an instantiation of art, exhibition, and performance; resulting in a reduction and purity of the symbiotic entities. Therefore, it is an autonomously autopoietic autotelic autoexhibiting hyperreal third-order simulacrum—or, a metaverse artform.

3.10. Strategies & Influences

Art as a prompt, whether a set of significations or colors invoking other types of thought processes, can also work as “materialized metadata” or a mnemonic device through a *discourse activation prompt* that helps an “informed viewing subject locate and retrieve specific idea complexes by and about the artworld.”³³⁶ Conceptual space and digital spatial inclusions that constitute the metaverse are similar prompts that invoke a range of spatial considerations in art theory and

³³⁵ Hoelscher, Jason, *The Poetics of Phase Space: The Open Artwork at the Edge of Chaos*, Spring 2014, accessed March 24, 2020

³³⁶ Hoelscher, Jason, *Complexity Aesthetics: Recursive Information and Adjacent Possible*, 2014, p6

external tangential disciplines with analogous theories. Similarly, *Pair of Dise* is concerned with the constructs that create our discourse, whether that is adjacent space on a website, or the spatial buffers between information, advertisement, and the slippery slope that information slides across in the sphere of misinformation. As mentioned earlier, *Pair of Dise* employs memes, chumboxes, skewed advertising slogans, and snippets that connote online experiences. Thus, the work uses the cultural language of the metaverse to discuss the language of the metaverse. A sort of translation that uses “language to describe language itself” which “marks an altogether different kind of recursive complexity”, or second-order complexity, as Hoelscher explains when referring to Heinz von Foerster’s book: *Understanding Understanding*.³³⁷ This preoccupation with the language snippets of the metaverse manifests in the fragments and adjacency like those in Figures 95-97, and the spatial adjacency of contrasting erectile disfunction with a phallic-like image—a common insinuation “language” employed by advertisers within online digital spheres.³³⁸

Pair of Dise’s hybridization appropriates an ersatz spatial form from pixels, while the physical fragments offer open interpretations and a pluralistic approach to meaning construction. Artists such as Craig Drennen, Katherina Grosse, Adam Cvijanovic, and Mike Cloud are concerned with the painting’s boundaries, employing the surrounding space beyond the frame. In addition to spatial structure as form, meaning is bolstered with fracture, connecting to Roland Barthes’ idea of “writerly texts” that remain open interpretively.

Painting rhetoric and stylistic choices refer again to Danto and Mark Tansey’s body of work along with his use of the monochrome. While the ethereal quality of the monochrome is maintained in

³³⁷ Ibid, p5

³³⁸ Bridger, Marc, fragments from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

Pair of Dise, the additional light surface layers of paint were added to many fragments, inserting a rich plexus of darker shadows and nuanced hues that maintain a monochrome-like appearance, but yield a complex microcosm of artifice that harnesses the inner eldritch of the work. This is especially evident in the *Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia* from *Pair of Dise* (2020) (Figure 56).³³⁹

The second half of “Space Invaders” underscores the self-reflexive qualities with a sensitivity to art’s concern with boundaries. The fragments express this via spatial independence and during



Figure 104 Mike Cloud, *Reyes Portrait* (2018), oil on canvas, 34" x 34"

creation were impelled by Joe Fyfe’s words when he stated:

“paintings are social structures, which is why their inherited authority needs to be short-circuited as part of the artistic process. That is our job as cultural producers. Remarkably, most paintings that appear on the walls of the best galleries (and also the striving ones) aren’t interested in doing

³³⁹ Bridger, Marc, Sobriquet: *Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia* from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

Fyfe aptly illustrates these concerns by presenting the fascinating work of Mike Cloud, an artist that demonstrates a belief in the “acts of rearrangement” “risking incoherence, his work is discontinuous, open-ended,” and “internally contradictory”—demonstrating “there is still much left for painting to do” (Figure 104).^{341,342} Cloud himself states that

[a phonetic translation of the sum of all amicable conjectures
Hissing of hope,

14,316
19,116
31,704
47,616
83,328
177,792
295,488

CRAVE¹
(but ration. the spirit!)

1 2 4 8
 1 6
 3 2
 6 4
 1 2 8
 2 5 6
 5 1 2
 ...
1 2 4 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 ...

³⁴⁰ Fyfe, Joe, *Painting Outside the Safe Zone*, October 26, 2019, accessed March 28, 2020 <https://hyperallergic.com/524290/painting-outside-the-safe-zone/>

³⁴² Mike Cloud, *Reyes Portrait* (2018), oil on canvas, 34" x 34", accessed March 28, 2020 <https://hyperallergic.com/524290/painting-outside-the-safe-zone/>

relationships, and all sorts of things to make your work.”³⁴³ Cloud rethinks and reconsiders the easel picture where the stretcher bars themselves become compositional elements; thus, in a sense, fragmenting the painting by placing the paint, wood structure, and various other elements in unanticipated locations.

Similar resonance within my work’s fragmentary and textural components were discovered in Kameelah Rasheed’s recent “Lazy Equation” that uses a “Xerox machine to tell fragmentary narratives” that navigate the intersections of multiculturalism by combining and recombining “linguistic and visual registers” from scholarly writing that is “heavy with numbered footnotes”, speech fragments, and colloquial English (Figure 105).^{344,345} However, one strong attraction to this work is its resistance to the “gaze of collectors”, a sensibility embedded in my fractured paintings that liminally emerge as physical fragments—appearing as individual “collectable” canvases, but fragments that operate as a single large work with its final public form being a hybridized digital image that slips from the collectors grasp and returns their gaze.³⁴⁶ In effect, discarding the physical form for a conglomerate image, yet maintaining the physical existence is an alternate reflection worth encountering for heightened experiential meaning construction.

Fragmentation permits the viewer to consider each panel individually and assemble them into polysemic narratives. Taking these “fragments” and housing them within one frame forces an issue of tangency with adjacent ideas and images. The typical painting rectangle imposes

³⁴³ Ibid

³⁴⁴ Feldman, Max, Artists Who Resist the Gaze of Collectors, Hyperallergic, accessed November 16, 2019 <https://hyperallergic.com/526350/expo-chicago-2019/>

³⁴⁵ Kameelah Janan Rasheed, “Long Division, I” (2018), archival inkjet print, 30 x 20 inches, accessed November 16, 2019 <https://hyperallergic.com/526350/expo-chicago-2019/>

³⁴⁶ Feldman, Max, Artists Who Resist the Gaze of Collectors, Hyperallergic, accessed November 16, 2019 <https://hyperallergic.com/526350/expo-chicago-2019/>



Figure 106 John Baldessari, *Heel* (1986) Los Angeles County Museum of Art
 photomontage *Heel* (1986) by using images as open signifiers that could be reorganized and shuffled by the viewer into varied narratives or interpretations, while each image relates to the word heel via literal and metaphorical representations (Figure 106).^{347,348}

proximity of neighbor notions. Neighbors that have connections but become amorphous when space is annihilated. On the same canvas, ideas can lose their spatial ability to shift in the mind. And since the fragments deal with fluid subjects it is important that they float spatially—emancipated from the crowded frame where meaning construction is fostered through the painting's openness. John Baldessari used a similar strategy in the

³⁴⁷ Baldessari, John *Heel* (1986), Black-and-white photographs with oil tint, oil stick, and acrylic, Overall: 106 1/2 x 87 in. (270.51 x 220.98 cm); a) 73 1/4 x 45 5/8 in. (186.1 x 115.89 cm); b) 28 3/4 x 20 3/4 in. (73.03 x 52.71 cm); c) 76 x 20 3/4 in. (193.04 x 52.71 cm); d) 33 1/2 x 45 5/8 in. (85.09 x 115.89 cm), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, <https://collections.lacma.org/node/170230>

³⁴⁸ Heartney, Eleanor. Postmodernism. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 35.

3.11. Pair of Dise

Scale is naturally imparted through fragments that harmonize the notions of spectacle, disorientation, and monstrosity frequently expounded upon by Debord and Baudrillard. Absurdity's undercurrent is exemplified by a flagrant scale that dwarfs the viewer and creates a neck-bending experience, while requiring a great deal of spatial depth to bring the fragments within a single view. Ironically, a depth that required a virtual fabrication of the metaverse spatial material with its amalgam acting as a conduit to the imagined idea. Relatedly, the need to move around in space to experience each work correlates to the fragmentary model of web browsing and the knowledge imparted by that activity. Zoomed out, the details are lost, and the notions converge into a *mélange* of indeterminacy—a similar phenomenon that can occur while scrolling and clicking through sites. Actions such as moving around in the space while examining the finer details of a panel are corollaries to scrutiny and the energy necessary to investigate the forms and juxtapositions that sculpt knowledge fragments within our minds—often with dubious permission. Thus, *Pair of Dise* is inquisitive of our most private space—our intellect. And the furtively latent effects that can adjust perceptions via our image saturated metaverse that now adjusts elections as evinced in 2016 via Facebook, YouTube, and Cambridge Analytica. A new form of propaganda derived from psychological warfare once reserved for counterintelligence agencies. Techniques that underpin text and image within digital spheres that are now domain to dungeon masters of rereality. And, rereality seems a fitting word for a realm of repackaged realism generating ersatz forms of celebrities, followers, and hybridizations of both.

In postmodernist fashion, much of Baudrillard's writings are metaphorical and open to interpretation. Ironically, *Pair of Dise* connects to the indeterminacy that can arise from interacting with Baudrillard and his cultural assessments—the convoluted conditions described have similarly

convoluted prose—or hyperprose as Dennis Dutton called it.³⁴⁹ Robert Hughes castigation emerges in “Jean Baudrillard: America”, an enlightening and contrasting essay criticizing the adoption of Baudrillardian jargon. Hughes indicates that “jargon, native or imported, is always with us, and in America, both academe and the art world prefer the French kind, a thick prophylactic against understanding.”³⁵⁰ Yet, Baudrillard’s words create eerily accurate ambiguities in sentence form for the conditions that exist within digital spheres—often a conglomeration of text, image, and concept into a new type of sign and lexicon. Thus, *Pair of Dise* is as ambiguous as Baudrillard and as paradoxical in definition.

Baudrillard’s use of the word hypertely is often recondite. One definition of this word from Merriam-Webster states: “an extreme degree of imitative coloration or ornamentation not explainable on the ground of utility.”³⁵¹ This can be applicable to many conditions contemporaneously, but one influencing the decisions in *Pair of Dise* derives from our culture’s obsession with celebrity. And within the sphere of celebrity an ideal example arises in plastic surgery’s superfluous bodily rearrangements that go well beyond the utility of the base human form. Kim Kardashian and the surrounding fetishizations of her celebrity, body, and related objectifications are literal examples, while pixels enable digital cultures to simulate the megastar (Figure 107).³⁵²

3.11.1. What’s in a Name?

Of the numerous thinkers and artists influencing my work, Philip Guston’s playful and rebellious sensibilities are valued and sought along with his wise words including this quote: “Paint what

³⁴⁹ Dutton, Denis, Jean Baudrillard, 1990, accessed April 4, 2020 http://www.denisdutton.com/ baudrillard_review.htm

³⁵⁰ Hughes, Robert, “Jean Baudrillard: America”, *Nothing if Not Critical*, (Alfred A Knoph: New York, 1990), 377

³⁵¹ Hypertely, Merriam-Webster, accessed April 9, 2020 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hypertely>

³⁵² Bridger, Marc, Sobriquet: *Recelebrity* from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

disgusts you... I am not saying paint disgusting things. Paint True. If you're disgusted, paint your disgust." Certainly, in the case of *Pair of Dise*, I felt compelled to do both.

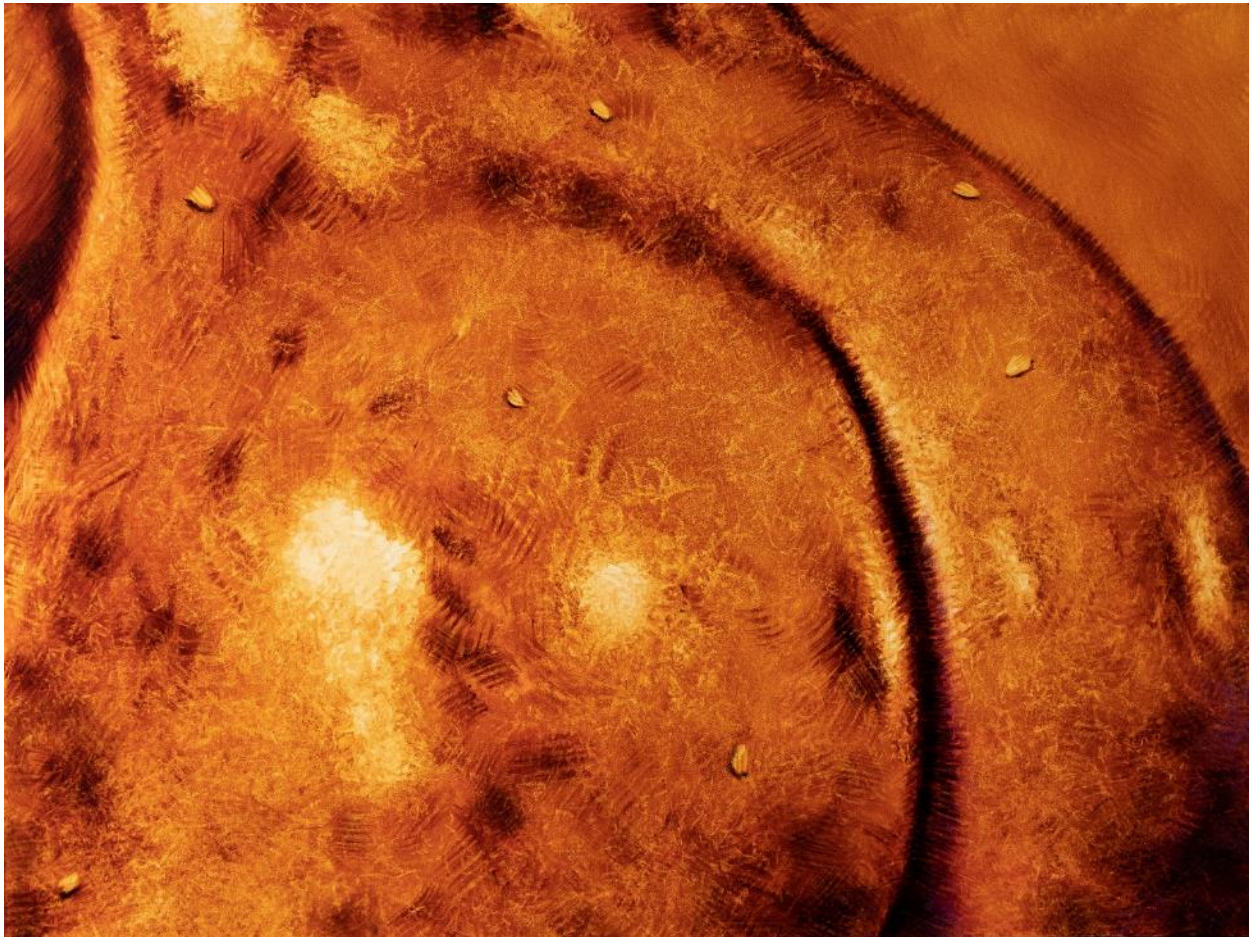


Figure 107 Marc Bridger, Sobriquet: *Recelebrity*, oil on canvas, fragment: 40" x 30" from *Pair of Dise* (2020)

Pair of Dise employs reflections and replication as a strategy along with a reading reversal—the right-to-left spiral is an inversion of typified Western left-to-right engagement, disturbing anticipated readings while offering an alternative entry point and trajectory through the work. Typoglycemia along with memes and chumbox indeterminacy are strategies that link to our skewed sense of reality. A reality shaped by cropped data, advertising, and images that fuse into models of mutated information. Baudrillard's writing style and hyper-wordforms connect to his games-of-chance metaphors, while dice are fitting surrogates for strategies, hyperdeterminacy,

and the aleatory conditions he associates with our social condition. A condition he expressed sardonically: “Too Bad. We’re in Paradise.” Thus, the confounding conundrums elicited on the web or through this work entangle our sense of continuity via dissonance and the strategies within are extended to the baffling title: Pair of Dise; a mutated form of double entendre, bemusing the senses.

Closing

My final works are hybridized by declaring themselves to have an embedded reflection—a physical form that contributes to the work’s openness and unfinalizability, imbued by a simultaneity that permits a diverse viewing experience, reading, exhibition, and formation of meaning via the viewer’s device. Similarly, the hybridization is self-reflexive, exerting pressure upon the elasticity of painting’s perimeter by declaring the various iterations as a single work—infusing metaverse liminality in a Mobius-strip convergence. Thus, the artform is a sojourner of the alias, embracing a cultural transience across social, artistic, and temporal planes. A complex emerging utterance and amalgam of discourse that has become its own recursive conversation and substrate beneath its subject—arising as a third-order simulacrum. As an iteration of self-referential simultaneity, the metaverse artform ascends as a transcendent reflective residue of verse convergence in a time when a pandemic is further blurring perceptions of reality and experience.

For five years, I have peered into this device and seen your world framed—understood through pixels and experienced in bits. I rarely ever travel and no longer fly. This digital device is my only gateway to an artworld, its city, and its culture—my window into reality’s picture plane. My entire graduate education has unfolded online with only a rare opportunity to see art physically. I live in a perpetual state of simulation and digital translation. While my work is physical, it is shown, transmitted, and critiqued digitally. When I write about my work, I glance at JPEGs.

It seems fitting, then, that my work reflects the solitude of that experience. Reflects the isolation and translation that occurs when seeing, understanding, and learning about a physical world through its transposed pixels.

Ironically, *Pair of Dise* grew out of fear. On the cusp of an M.F.A. candidacy review that could have ended my entire degree with only two classes remaining, fear catalyzed a chain of reactions and overreactions—concocting something so absurd and gargantuan that it appropriately captured the breadth of my terror and the notion that I may, like so many other things in life, fail once again.

Thus, I dipped my brush in fear and began to paint. Paint this absurd construct of alterity that loops through my realities, their fears, and the various narratives they have concocted for this outcast.

Adversity is such a powerful motivator. Twelve years ago, the financial catastrophe disrupted my quiet, indoctrinated life and aroused a suspicion. A suspicion that led to college. A suspicion that led to art. A suspicion that usurped my religion and my reality. A skepticism that saturates my canvases, words, and marks. Truth is, I could not get my work exhibited for my M.F.A. thesis. Over twenty-five denials and silent replies, including two from my own institution—even before the corona virus hit. Its monstrous caricatures and low-brow heckles were heckled back at and dismissed. Thus, the artworld's rejection and that adversity catalyzed the writing in this thesis.

Things that were there all along, but that I did not intend to fully articulate. The denials and adversity made me see my work differently. It made me write about it differently. And, it made me scrutinize it differently.

I could not get the work hung on a wall. I have never seen it as it was originally intended. But, the metaverse artform allowed me to see it. To talk about it. And to show it to you. If it had been hung on a traditional wall, perhaps I would not have written so many of these words. Are these words failures too? Perhaps they are. But the adversity, failure, and fear that aroused the disturbance

creating this work led to its final form. A radicant articulation that traverses and translates my transmogrified reality and paintings into a pixelated reflection—refracted fragments and externalities of the metaverse gaze.

Appendix

In February 2020, I began building a gallery space for my M.F.A. Exhibition titled: Metaverse Gaze. The space was completed in late March, shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic arrived. The show went forward as planned, observing local social distancing recommendations with an opening reception on May 1st, 2020 and closing on May 7th, 2020. A screen presented a work in progress process video documenting *Pair of Dise* as well as being accessible via the website. The following images and information document the M.F.A exhibition, while *Pair of Dise* (2020) and *Run a Make Border the For!* (2020) remain on exhibition via your device.

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May 1 thru May 7, 2020
Opening Reception:
Friday, May 1st, 6:00pm

METaverse GAZE

Marc Bridger
MFA PAINTING CANDIDATE

Painting M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition,
Savannah College of Art and Design

7201 Royal Oak Dr.
Weeki Wachee, Florida 34607
(352) 325-1251
marcbridger.com

Exhibit 1 Marc Bridger, Gallery Card (Front/Back) advertisement for M.F.A. Exhibition

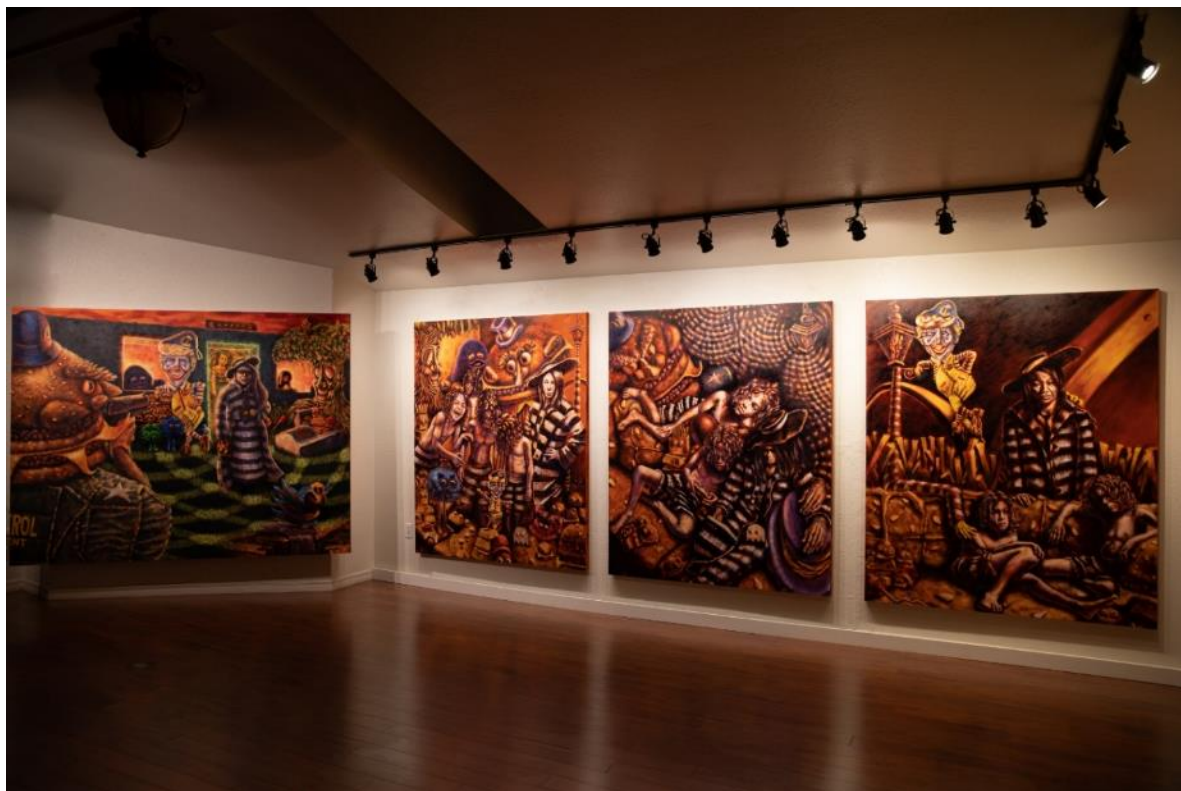


Exhibit 2 Marc Bridger, Metaverse Gaze image 1



Exhibit 3 Marc Bridger, Metaverse Gaze image 2



Exhibit 5 Marc Bridger, Metaverse Gaze image 4



Exhibit 7 Marc Bridger, Metaverse Gaze, reception image 1



Exhibit 6 Marc Bridger, Metaverse Gaze, reception image 2



Exhibit 8 Marc Bridger, Metaverse Gaze, reception image 3

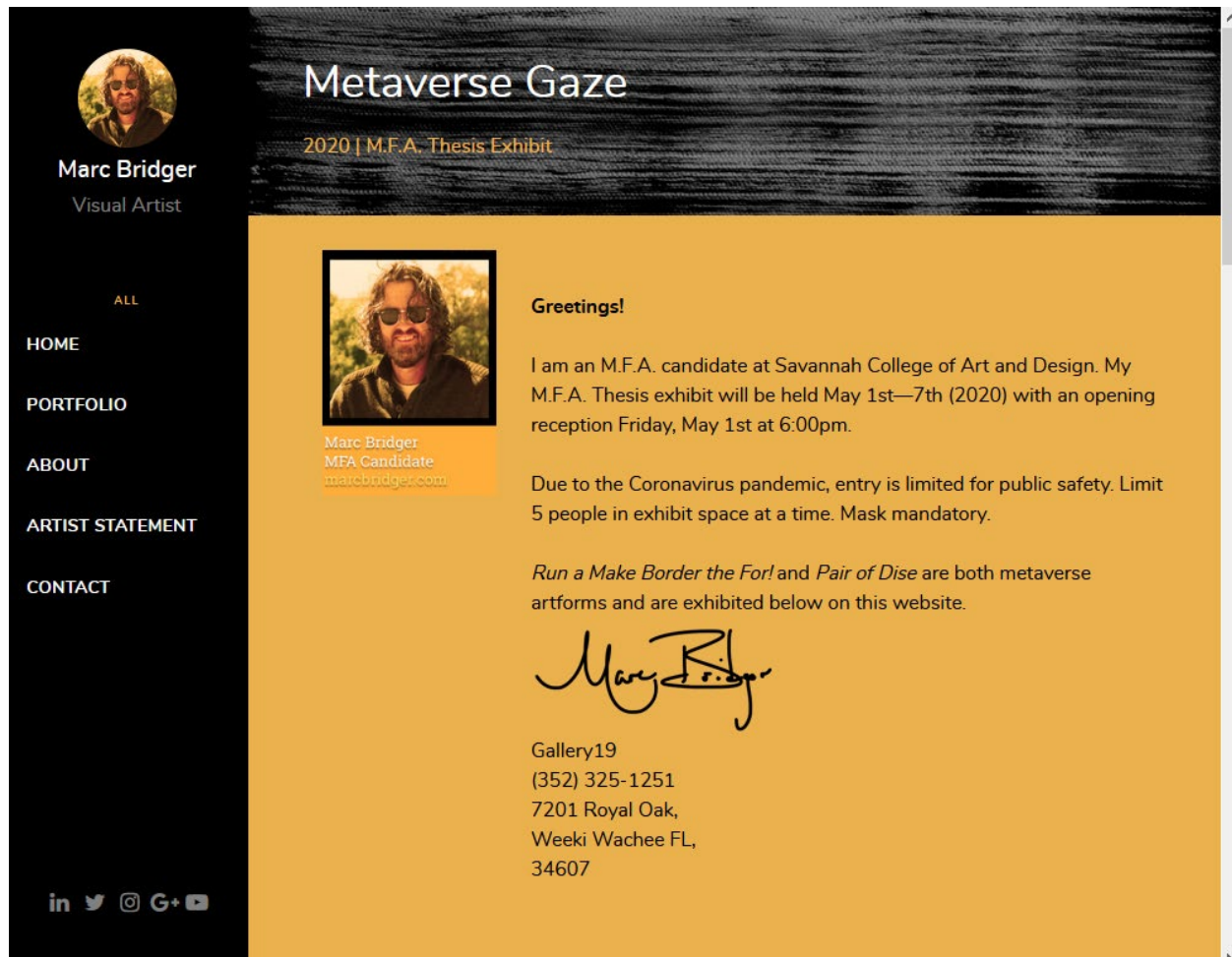



Exhibit 9 Marc Bridger, M.F.A. Website Announcement Screenshot 1, <http://marchbridger.com/mfa-thesis>



Marc Bridger
Visual Artist

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CONTACT


METAVVERSE GAZE




Pair of Dise (2020)
31 Fragments (Oil on Canvas) | 50ft x 20ft




Run a Make Border the For! (2019)
11 Fragments (Oil on Canvas) | 30ft x 15ft




Sobriquet: Metaverse: The Catastrophe of Nostalgia
60" x 72" (Oil on Canvas) | Pair of Dise Fragment



Couch Potatoes (2019)
Oil on Canvas | 60" x 72"



Achomlishments (2019)
Oil on Canvas | 60" x 72"



Double-Slit Doppelganger (2018-19)
Oil on Canvas | 92" x 72"

in











Exhibit 10 Marc Bridger, M.F.A. Website Announcement Screenshot 2, <http://marcbridger.com/mfa-thesis>



Marc Bridger
Visual Artist

ALL

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ARTIST STATEMENT

CONTACT

M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition

May 1st - May 7th

M.F.A Thesis Exhibition

Daily 12:00pm - 4:00pm

Closing

May 7th - 4:00pm

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Florida Stretchers Site

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Written Statements & Essays

Biography & CV

Artist Statement

My Child Could Have Painted That!

What Are YOU Looking At?

in    

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Exhibit 11 Marc Bridger, M.F.A. Website Announcement Screenshot 3, <http://marcbridger.com/mfa-thesis>

Video Resource

Pair of Dise (2020) video presentation that included artist statements and a discussion along with images and animation was available via a television at the exhibit and on my website

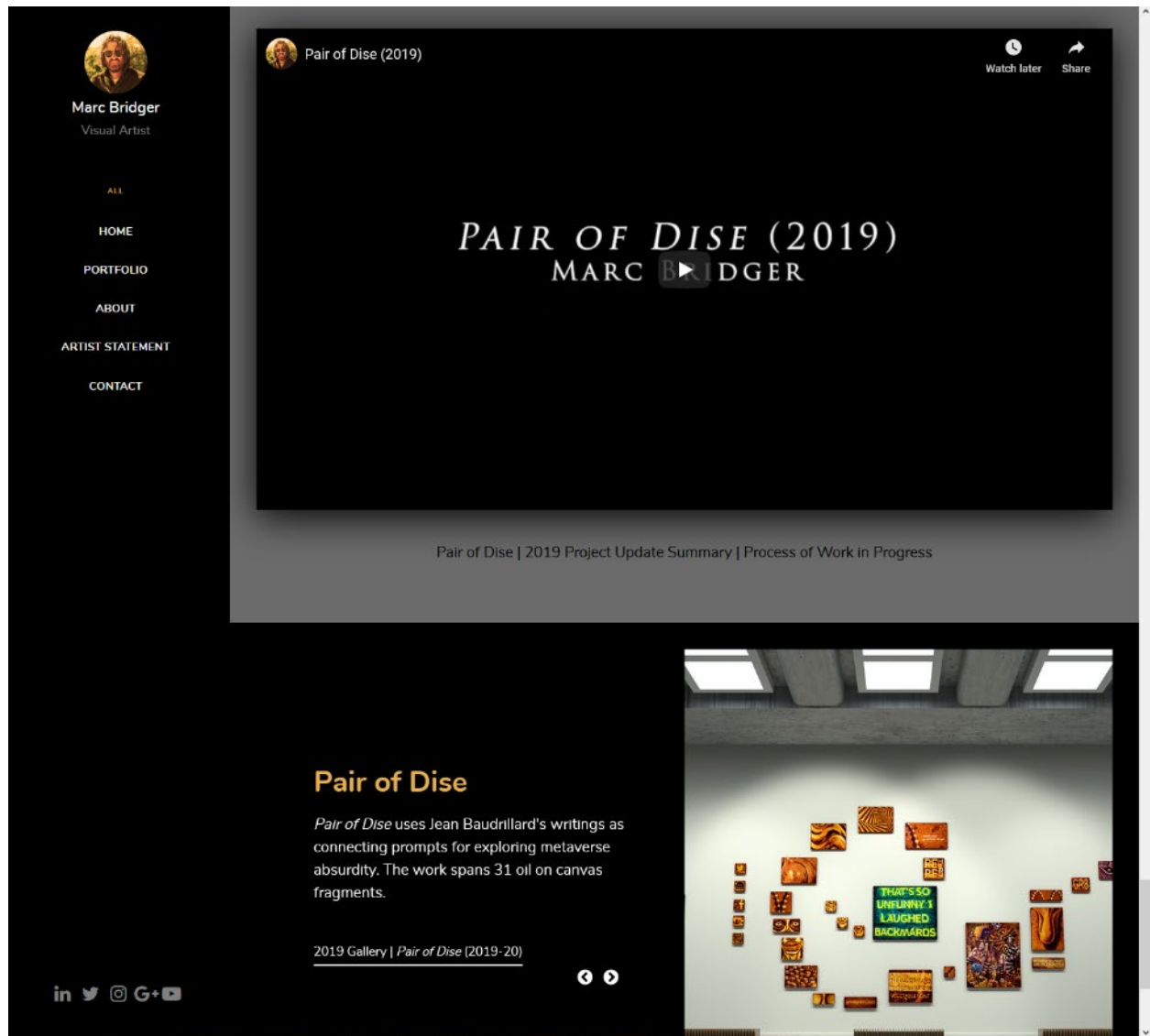


Exhibit 12 Marc Bridger, M.F.A. Exhibit, Video Supplement, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Me438wS3W0>

Additional Background

Often, I will have discursive hypothetical narratives stream through my mind that I would never write down or include with an artist statement. Yet, these paroxysms relate to the inner and outer conflicts surrounding the events and are appropriate for understanding the war waged both physically and ideologically against minorities and refugees. During an assignment and for the sake of context, I recorded one of my tirades in a notebook at the time of *Achomlishments* and *Couch Potatoes* inception. The words related to my concern and transitory position of working with the memory of a young refugee, while embracing what she represents as a symbol for the arising xenophobic conflicts. The words are somewhat eccentric and enigmatic—and, somewhat embarrassing. However, perhaps the vulnerability of sharing a few lines aids in connecting to the work:

Dead Claudia becomes a discarded and unremembered carcass. Political buzzards will wield her as rhetoric and from their mouths will spray the villainy that shoots down her sisters with bullets from her bones. Or will they? Propaganda is ours too. And so, let her rise in myth as a martyr with our wits she will be remembered, thought of, and her death will not become vain ramblings by the vain. She rises and is memorialized within her kindred sister through blood and symbology. The paths to her past are there, but disrupted by the oscillating lines and interference patterns that infuse it with the hyperreal. A hyperreal that has gazed upon her. A hyperreal that has observed her. Thus, a hyperreal that has forever changed her quanta and given rise to a doppelganger. Spirit, myth, or story? She is.... a heroine borne from paradox's bastardized bozo and standard bearer—gaslighting a nationalist torch. So, she will wield the stripes that sent her other to the grave and obliterate their gaze.³⁵³

³⁵³ Bridger, Marc, notebook journal entry about Claudia just before the next "Space Invaders" works were started.

In addition, the following paragraph accompanied the free-writing exercise as I began painting:

These thoughts contribute to the capacity for conflict within the series. Where the vilification and attack of immigrants creates frictions that affect my multicultural and multiracial family. Where politics has rung the doorbell and the weapon it wields is ambiguous. And so, the work is shifting to tensions that tangle up the dialogues below our roof and has personalized the extant issues and their potentialities. As such, the concern has proximity and a sense of the tactile. The neighbor's gaze has been adjusted. We see the stares along the periphery. The headlines are violence. Blood knows no border, but the gaze nods to one.³⁵⁴

³⁵⁴ Ibid

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