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Fabricated Perceptions

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FABRICATED PERCEPTIONS

By

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GRADUATE THESIS REPORT

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This thesis is a personal exploration through playful and childlike imagery. I draw on historical and contemporary artistic influences to the creation of my concepts. Themes of visual metaphor, trompe l’oeil, diorama, and contrasting spatial relationships of objects are explored. Each piece carries its own interpretation that is kept open ended for the viewer. My goal for this art series is to amuse, provoke imagination, and encourage individual interpretation.
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Thus the miniscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world. The details of a thing can be the sign of a new world, which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness. Miniature is one of the refuges of greatness.

(Bachelard, 1958, p. 155)

When I was a little girl I was painfully shy. I thoroughly enjoyed carving out my little place in our home where I could play with figurines and draw. That nook was my safe haven. It was a little area behind the couch next to an end table in the living room that my father later affectionately named my “rat hole.” In this place I found solitude and total creative freedom. I often played with small animal figurines creating homes for them on my bookshelf. In peaceful seclusion, I was at my highest level of creativity. Often our childhood patterns continue on into adulthood taking on a new and different appearance. I still enjoy drawing and dreaming in a quiet area of our home—in the basement—in an area that has become my art studio. It was here—tucked away from the outside world—I began to form the concept for Fabricated Perceptions.

I first became interested in photographing miniatures upon reading about the artist Grace Weston. Weston creates what she calls “staged vignettes” by constructing sets as well as using props and dolls (Fig.1). Sets transform into new worlds through lighting and photographic techniques. Weston explains, “My sets look completely different without the lighting and the camera focus I apply. Without that there is no magic at all.” (Valli & Dessanay, 2011, p. 132) Grace Weston’s achievement of depth within a two-dimensional plane using controlled lighting and depth of field techniques has strongly influenced the methodology of
my work. Weston preplans her scenes using a sketch as a guide. Upon reading about her methods and viewing her photography studio setup (Fig. 2), I felt compelled to create my own at-home lighting studio. I created my studio using a plastic container and various lights with bright halogen bulbs. White fabric draped over the container diffused the light while vellum paper was used as a reflective surface. The sets created and light studio became a stage where inanimate plastic objects come to life. I sketched several concepts before photography sessions. Different forms of lighting casts a variety of moods upon the same static subjects manipulated within the same location. I completed my creative process by adding an element of digital painting to my images in order to round out compositions pushing the imaginative boundaries of the atmospheres my toys are placed in.

Photographing miniatures became popular in the 1990s as a result of the feeling of a lack of control stemming from the rapid growth of the Information Age (Valli, 2011, p. 6). Where the world once appeared to shrink with the rise of skyscrapers, it is now dwarfed by the speed and vastness of the information highway (p. 7). According to Marc Valli, co-author of *Microworlds*,

The Internet is the greatest microscope of all. But determining scale and context is no simple matter when you are looking down such a powerful amplifying tool. Unless you were a scientist used to analyzing data and equating this varied input with reality, travelling through the Internet was a vastly new experience. As we surf, the world flows around us. We can see it with an unprecedented wealth of detail, but we cannot seize it. This new reality is made out of millions of atoms, of disparate figures, objects,
opinions, theories, stimuli – most of it highly unreliable. There are no set parameters: serious, unserious, high, low, big, small, galaxies, leaves buttons, historical figures and football scores… – all in the same soup (2011, p. 6-7).

Valli then continues to explain, “Human beings have never travelled so much, nor so fast, both physically and imaginatively, and miniaturization mirrors this transience.” (p.7) Miniaturization is a fabrication within a fabrication. Small scales of area are photographed to create the illusion of endless distance.

I am drawn to the childlike innocence emanating from the toys I use in my images. I experiment with the scale of each subject within the composition to create a constant interplay of large and small. While the subjects used are in reality no taller than two inches, distance from the camera and focus create the illusion circumventing their true size. In *The Poetics of Space* (1958), French philosopher Gaston Bachelard explains the importance of miniaturization in imagination. He writes:

In other words, the tiny things we imagine simply take us back to childhood, to familiarity with toys and the reality of toys. But the imagination deserves better than that. In point of fact, imagination in miniature is natural imagination which appears at all ages in the daydreams of born dreamers (p. 149).

Jeff Koons is an artist known mostly for his sculptures of balloon animals and inflatables (Fig. 3). Koons’s work influences me because of its youthful appearance. Koons describes the creation process as being a metaphysical
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experience (Art21, Inc., 2009). The process must be motivated by a feeling. It cannot be overly planned. When I am photographing in my studio, I have initial plans that I keep loose and I often stray from them as I am moved to arrange and rearrange items in a scene. While each image I create has its own story, I expect viewers to bring their own interpretations to the narratives. I see my subjects as characters. Some may be fictional while others are representations of people in my life and myself. Jeff Koons’s philosophy in using pop culture objects as subjects has roused my inclination to use these toys as subjects instead of dolls or people. According to Koons (2009), “Objects are metaphors for people. It always turns out to be about others, it’s not about accepting that object—high/low culture—it’s about the acceptance of others.” My chosen miniatures enhance the surrealism of the surroundings displayed as well as welcome a wider range of interpretation by removing overtly human characteristics.

Acceptance is something an artist is always wrestling. If an artist creates work purely motivated by the acceptance of peers he/she risks abandoning self-expression. In my work, I want to above all accomplish originality and creativity. I seek to capture my own essence through these digital images. While the toys exist in the form of plastic, my imagination drives their placement in the environments I build and therefore they all, in part, personify me. My mind is a veritable forest of whimsy.

For my photographic scenes, I have produced settings representing rooms, outer space, doorways, and sky using a variety of patterned papers and other materials. These sets are classified as dioramas.
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defines a diorama as “a miniature three-dimensional scene, in which models of figures are seen against a background” (dictionary.reference.com/diorama).

J.M. Daguerre, inventor of the first photographic process, the Camera Obscura, also invented the first diorama in the 1800s (Kamps, 2000, p. 6.).

Daguerre’s diorama was created as an optical background for theatrical performances. Two sides of a transparent tapestry were painted so that when lit from the back or from the front a completely new visual would appear (Fig. 4-5).

According to Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art,

Like trompe l’oeil paintings, dioramas challenge our perceptual skills. They compel us to pore over their scenes, comparing their versions of reality to our own. This experience is uniquely visceral. Although almost always removed from us their diminutive scale, extreme fragility or physical barriers such as vitrines or observation windows, dioramas activate a physical response that flat images, isolated sculptures, and even holography cannot. They engage our sense of depth perception and, with it, a bodily awareness of space, which encourages us to make the imaginative leap into their constructs (Kamps, 2000, p. 7).

The meaning of the word “diorama” has evolved over decades. In the 1930s the term became a descriptor for “small-scale model groups constructed as advertisements or educational aids” and later became synonymous with “natural history habitat displays” (Kamps, 2000, p. 6).
Childlike perceptions in play are evident in my work. Toby Kamps (2000) describes artists’ psychological parallels to child’s play in Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art:

A child moving figures and furniture about in a tiny house gains stature and perspective not normally its own, becoming large and powerful. The child grasps—literally and figuratively—objects and ideas from the adult world while employing his or her prodigious powers of imaginative projection (p. 7-8)

My images went through a series of progressions finally reaching completion upon creating the appearance of being viewed through a window or peephole. The concept of a peephole causes the viewer to feel detached, as a mere spectator. It also allows viewers to imagine what is beyond the view of the window. What is left unseen is to be visually elaborated upon by the person peering in on the characters. Walls encompassing the window allow for the contemplation of who is truly being held captive. While the characters appear to be entrapped in their environments the onlooker is unknowingly encased in his own personal reality. Doors and barriers stimulate a sense of apprehension. The mystery of what may be lurking is ever present. A sense of bewilderment adds to the playfulness of the images. Gradients created from colors pulled within each image are painted and blurred to create the illusion of depth while maintaining consistency. Not all the windows are to be viewed as if standing upright looking straight through a common door. Camera angles in conjunction with the peepholes distort the visual experience. For example, in “Moving Forward into
the Unknown” (Fig. 6) the view is aerial to cause the viewer to feel as if peering down into the room from the ceiling. The figure is placed to the far left of the image just in view slightly obstructed by the rest of the door. The imbalance of the composition motivates the viewer to look ahead where the eyes of the figure are focused imagining where the figure is headed.

In my first series of images, I sought materials for backgrounds with a particular toy in mind. For “Vast Cosmos” (Fig. 7) I acquired the textured swirling teal parchment to use as a night sky. When photographing the toy, I discovered I needed it propped up in order to get equal amounts of sky and ground. I used a plastic bag as the ground. I then lit my light tent from the back so that the light shined through the parchment creating the desired effect (Fig. 8). The vastness of the universe is thus recreated through an artificial construction.

I created a set to look like a room in a house with a patterned paper resembling wall paper for “Teach Them to Fly” (Fig. 9). The brightness of the elephants contrasting with the set causes a feeling of elation. The background holds a humorous surprise as a smaller character soars unbeknownst to the character in the foreground. This image is a composite of two photos of the same character against the same background. Depth of field was achieved first with the main character and the same settings were used to photograph the background with the character attached to the patterned paper.

A recurring element in some of my images is the black and white checkered floor. Checkered flooring has appeared in art works for centuries. It is believed to have originated in the decoration of King Solomon’s Temple. The
black and white flooring is symbolic of a person’s life checkered with good and evil. The checkered flooring enhances the surreal qualities of my images. Surrealism, according to dictionary.com, is “a style of art and literature developed principally in the 20th century, stressing the subconscious or nonrational significance of imagery arrived at by automatism or the exploitation of chance effects, unexpected juxtapositions, etc.” Susan Sontag, renowned art critic, explains “Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision” (Hopkins, 2004, p. 84). The perception of infinite depth materializes as the checkered pattern blurs, fades, and diminishes. This result is best exemplified in figure 10.

For several images, I added digitally painted elements to enhance the narratives. The character in “Paranoia” was photographed using red and white lights in my macro lighting studio with a striped piece of paper. Because of the lack of light, a small tabletop tripod was used to steady the camera. The glow cast onto the figure caused a warm yellow glow in its iridescent eyes. The figure stands helpless on a cliff. The wall its back is against resembles a wall in a home. The home can often be a place of solace. Yet fear can creep into the mind in even the safest of places. The position of the figure against a wall coupled with the red light generates an impression of danger. The tightness of the space between the figure and the painted fire along with the steepness of the painted cliff fabricates a sense of urgency. Flames rise out of the corner of the room symbolizing a growing threat that is inescapable (Fig. 11). The mind can be a gate of liberation
or a place of ensnarement. The cliff, ledge, and fire were digitally painted on top of a scanned sketch superimposed with a photograph.

Contrasting with the foreboding imagery previously discussed, “Uprooted” emits mysterious cheerfulness with painted floating trees uprooted from the ground, levitating around the central character (Fig. 12). Noise has been added to the illustrations of the trees and they have been blurred in order to maintain an illusion of depth. This image portrays an illusionary world where anything can happen. It challenges viewers to visualize beyond realism. Digital art is limitless.

A majority of my work is restricted to one or two figures in a scene. The simplicity of the compositions reflects a sense of control. However, “Family Portrait” is an image of all the characters used in Fabricated Perceptions. I desired to create one image bringing all the characters together. This image, in turn, is presented as a single portrait of the group resting on a wood floor. This photograph was taken using a wallpaper pattern backdrop and striped paper flooring (Fig. 13). The photo was then sepia-toned digitally in order to make it appear as an old photo and create cohesion between the characters. An illustration of wood floor was then painted in order for the photograph image to appear as something discarded and found. The image and flooring was skewed to create more visual depth (Fig. 14). A texture of metal scratches using blending modes was added to give the effect of aging on an antique photo.

The image “On Ice” (Fig. 15) was lit with a blue light underneath the subject. The toy was placed in the macro light studio on a bed of tulle causing the
light to soften and emit many shades of blue. Cracked ice and frost was painted onto the image to emphasize the chilled atmosphere. While the atmosphere is icy the character is unmoved by circumstances and moves forward. The saying “walking on thin ice” meaning to proceed with caution inspired this image.

The feeling of being carried away inspired the image “Float Away” (Fig. 16). The joyfulness of defying gravity and soaring into the sky is enhanced by the bright pink and blue colors of the balloons. This image represents the carefree invincible sensation of love. Nothing ties the pair of balloons down. They withstand all obstacles in the open air. I used 3D drawing techniques to create balloons from a photograph of two toy subjects.

In figures 17-19, the element of colored sand is introduced. Bright yellow sand contrasting with a hot orange sky provides a surrealistic broad desert setting. Fig. 16 was photographed on a tilted angle. The angle along with the intensity of the color resonate energy and play upon the psyche with amusing absurdity.

Figure 18 is shot straight on accentuating the shape of the owl’s wing. The character has its back to the window facing out to the empty reaches of the backdrop. The subject is looking out on what is to come. The viewer is forced to look beyond the composition into the horizon causing a desire to visualize what lies beyond view in the fabricated distance.

The inspiration for figure 19, “Denial” is based on the idiom “to bury one’s head in the sand.” The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms explains this idiom as “refusing to face something by pretending not to see it” (Ammer, 1997, Houghton Mifflin). The idiom is based on the head-burrowing behavior of
ostriches. The concept is that the ostrich believes it will not be seen if it buries its head when in reality it is only obstructing its own vision. It is essentially to ignore a problem instead of facing it. In essence, we refuse to believe what we see and hear if it is contrary to what we wish to be truth.

Ambient tranquility shrouds the subject of the piece titled “Buoyancy” (Fig. 20). The dreamy character floats peaceably bathed in a soft pink glowing pool set against an organic plantlike backdrop. This image was photographed using pink textured parchment lit from the back with a white light. The lower half of the diorama was made with purposefully waved fabric lit from the front with a red light positioned far away to soften intensity. It is a representation of peace of mind.

Doors are often metaphors for what is to come, paths, or opportunity. I made a door in a piece of striped paper folded so the door appears open. My attic door inspired the shape of the door seen here (Fig. 21). Attics are places of storage, where things are often kept that one chooses not to put out on display. The sharp points on the door create movement around the image. The figure in the background is out of focus drawn into the glowing crimson light through the open door. The figure in the foreground is facing away, out of the darkness. Some doors are meant to remain closed. This image was backlit behind the paper with a red light and lit from the front with a natural light bulb.

In figure 22, the concept of doors was created with two pieces of vellum paper photographed on a tilted angle. The characters are lit from the back and top diffused by the plastic container causing them to be bathed in white light. The
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figures look into the peephole as the viewer is looking in. The impossibility of the physical direction of the doors creates discomfort. The figure in the background is in focus yet it is partially hidden in the room. There is a demeanor of secrecy.

This image was created in black and white to create a classical dramatic appearance. Removing the colors also creates fellowship between the characters.

In conclusion, I have described personal experiences motivating a desire to create the aforementioned art pieces. I have comparatively researched as well as discussed historical and contemporary influences of my work. I have used miniature toys to paint a metaphorical picture of human perceptions through playful imagery using originally constructed dioramas digitally composited into circular window shapes in order to encourage the interpretations of others.
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