

BLOOD WORK

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The visual portion of BLOOD WORK is a record of my reconciliations with its parts: description based on the photograph, memory, and my concerns for abstraction. I am interested in the nuances of gesture as they convey meaning and evoke memory response. Though non-specific, the space surrounding the figures is emptied to accentuate their psychology. By adumbrating one reality and effacing another I attempt to transform the mundane into what I perceive as the uncanny.

BLOOD WORK

The South is unshakable. Like so many people I know, it seems to be a part of me. I travel, sometimes overseas, but still it is unshakable. Every breath I take is born from the confusion of being a *Southerner*. The South is becoming homogeneous with the rest of the world, yet still I stumble on enduring qualities worthy of paint. The balance between glory and shame is very complicated, not unlike the weather here. So with mark-making tools I explore this mystery through the reconciliation of archetypes. The work I do begins with a family photograph, so the results of my exploration are naturally bound to me.

I suggest a new space between the mundane as captured by a candid photograph and the uncanny as described through gesture and design by my hand. Though I make considerable alterations in my transcription of the snapshot, I remain loyal to the gesture of the figures. Often I proceed regardless of any compositional missteps that occur, bringing together seemingly disparate elements. Spatial cues as they exist in the photograph are eliminated—the figures exist in an abstracted space marked by the time of its making and chance. Through this process, my work assumes the appearance of selective memory.

The result is a record of the reconciliations I made with its parts: description based on the photograph, memory, and my concerns for abstraction. To understand my “descriptions based on the photograph” we must first look at composition. Often the figures are framed by generous amounts of negative space. This is due in part to my first impression of the photograph. Generally, I sift through hundreds of pictures at a time. I do not concern myself with the original intentions of the photographer, so, often enough, my subjects await me at the

periphery of the photograph. The front-and-center types are invisible to me.

There is something strange about a smile that has been held far too long, or when people pose themselves, as if to say, "this is the way I want to be remembered," but my family is far too conventional. I had to pull from the back of the envelope where rejects are kept. All of us can be made to look a certain way. Tabloids are notorious for recontextualizing ungainly photographs of celebrities. So really, I am using family photographs as a starting point, but they result in something more in keeping with southern mythology.

As stated previously, I often leave things where I find them unless I am splicing together multiple photographs. This I do because I want the absence of contextual information to be noticed. If my peripheral-subjects were repositioned, so that they were filling the space, I believe the absence of contextual information would go unnoticed. More importantly, the psychology would collapse. This aspect will be discussed more as it pertains to gesture.

Gesture is the backbone of my work's psychology and of my "description based on the photograph." More than four hundred years ago Titian literally broke the mold. His paintings told us that figures could be in the round, that outlines were unnecessary. If you subscribe to this world as I do, you understand the logic of repainting a hand for weeks on end. You can observe this quality in the works of Rembrandt, Velazquez, or Courbet. Painters who emulate machines, like the one used to print this document, will never know what this is like. I believe that paintings in the guise of photographs should succeed as photographs. I make paintings that reach humbly for that state-of-grace.

Moreover, I rely on the nuance of gesture to convey meaning and evoke memory response. It is through gesture that my version of the past, my subjectivity, is most apparent.

Through it, you can see, in a way that I could not tell you, how elusive archetypes are. To approach my subjects with a slick, fussy, mechanical style would imply an erroneous confidence in my system of labels. It also seems inappropriate after studying Courbet and the effectiveness of guerilla painting tactics. Without straying from the earthiness of his people, he dignified them. My subjects were made filthy to locate them within Courbet's working class.

The height-to width ratio is certainly necessary for the viewer to make a leap between what I do in a painting and the snapshots I begin with. Most of the snapshots I worked with were 4"x6", so my larger paintings were constructed on 4'x6' panels. The smaller paintings were built on 2'x3' stretchers, etc. If the viewer makes *this* connection, the remainder should fall in place without prior knowledge of my work.

The overall scale is becoming more important than I could have imagined; large gestural paintings have a presence that I am after. They summon iconic qualities in a way that smaller paintings cannot. Jenny Saville's work is so commanding for this reason. She exalts her subjects, elevating virtual unknowns to a god-like status. The scale surrounds you like a Rothko, forcing us to confront her subjects right here, right now. It is altogether important now for a work to reproduce well; still her authority persists. I believe this is because of the way larger stretchers and panels drive us as painters to a certain kind of mark that, when successful, reads at any distance.

Like so many places where public education is gasping for air, *othering* rears its ugly head quite often around here. I think it is fair to say that ignorance begets fear begets hatred. Louisiana leads the entire nation, behind Nevada, for the worst public school system, so you can imagine how my environment has prompted me to work as I do. My work considers the

possibility of Americans, or more specifically southerners, as the other.

My family was used exclusively in this project. I used them because of how I thought they would look after I recontextualized them. Also I required amateur photography to suspend disbelief, and it was really important to me that the source of my work not appear staged. I will say that using family made me especially conscious of how we fit individually and as a whole within the context of my idea. It should be made clear that *othering* is a distinction that qualifies someone or something as categorically different than the accepted or affirmed standard. You can see this phenomenon clearly when a nation practices colonialism. To be fair, it can be argued that as a super-power, we would still be Americanizing other countries without setting foot on their soil. Some countries emulate us without being forced, for some reason.

Years ago Norman Rockwell offered us a perspective of what it means to be an American, but even then he admitted, "I paint life as I would like it to be." I think about his Middle-American enthusiasm in many cases, but almost mockingly. The air in my work is considerably more humid and sticky. The skin is hastily painted and ruddy in color. The faces are ungainly and the space is rudely pushed back. They clearly do not wish to be looked-over too much, yet there is no place to hide. These are the people I choose to *admire* as Southerners.

As Courbet would say, "The people have my sympathies."

IMAGES



Missing Trucker
Acrylic on Canvas
24"x36"
2004



Lena Casina
Acrylic on Canvas
24"x36"
2004



Laenger Sisters
Oil on Canvas
24"x36"
2004



Bookends
24"x36"
Oil on Canvas
2004



Rehearsal Dinner
Oil on Panel
48"x72"
2004



Heroes of Munich
Oil on Panel
48"x72"
2004



Pitch Pipe
Charcoal on Paper
48"x72"
2005



Like Father
Charcoal on Paper
36"x45"
2004



Flight into Egypt
Charcoal on Paper
28.5"x35.5"
2004



Rank
Charcoal on Paper
28.5"x35.5"
2004



Terminal
Oil on Panel
48"x72"
2004

VITA

Mack Gingles was born in Shreveport, Louisiana and raised just across the Red River in Bossier City. After graduating from high school, he enlisted in the Naval Reserve and enrolled in Louisiana Tech University's Graphic Design program. It was here that he was introduced to painting and afforded the opportunity to study masters abroad in Italy. After earning his BFA in Graphic Design in 1998, he worked for two years as an art director before returning to Louisiana Tech University for a BFA in Studio Art. Shortly after finishing his undergraduate work, he moved further south to Baton Rouge where he would earn his MFA from Louisiana State University. It was here that he discovered *Blood Work*, a series of paintings and drawings that explore the South, selective memory, and the uncanny events which often occur in the camera's periphery.