

THIS IS WHAT I MEANT WHEN I TOLD YOU

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art

in

The School of Art

by
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B.F.A., University of South Dakota, 2002
August 2005

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee: Leslie Koptcho, Kimberly Arp, Kelli Scott Kelly, Michael Crespo, and Darius Spieth. A big thanks to Virginia Diaz, Josh Spahr, Chris Hutson, Lori Penn, Alison Frank, Kathryn Hunter, Lee Simmons, Matthew Bourgeois, and Kym Vantleven for bringing inspiration to the printshop; as well as John Norris, Mack Gingles, Todd Hines, Dave Smith and all of the other faculty, grads, undergrads, and students who have enriched my experience at LSU. A very special thanks to my family, my parents Cheryl and David, Mary Kay and Sumpter Davis, and all of the friends who made it to the show.

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ABSTRACT

THIS IS WHAT I MEANT WHEN I TOLD YOU is a quest to visually decipher the complexities of “self.” The goal is to form a relationship of honesty between my mind and my hand, the art and the viewer. The work investigates reoccurring ideas, threaded through each day, in order to create narratives based on the immediacy of emotion, and the struggle between self-realization and uncertainty.

Or as one commented during my show, “A celebration of the dark side of life.”

THIS IS WHAT I MEANT WHEN I TOLD YOU

The deafening sound felt between my ears was like black drum grinding oyster shells between their cobblestone teeth. An instant crush and a flash of blinding light, then all was weightless and blue as I raced spiraling oxygen and carbon dioxide pearls toward the glow above me. I staggered on weak knees from the hungry waves as they pulled back at my feet. My head bowed in awe and betrayal, stinging from the mixture of sand and blood on my busted crown. I turned my back on the ocean in disbelief, walked up on the shore and sat down cautiously; upright and rigid, staring vacantly at the sea like a porcelain statue. Twenty years without a single broken bone, now my neck hung limp as my vertebrae pushed together like cars on a derailed train. I told my friend to get help, he said the color drained from my skin, then the lifeguard, he told me to lie down. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, exhaling hopes that everything would be fine. Sirens in their bikinis watched, their whispers hushed in the spray of the surf. It was only the ambulance that wailed, from behind beach homes, combing its way toward the boardwalk. The veracity of injury truly appears when the wailing suddenly chokes. What remained was the resonance of air filling my lungs, heavy water rubbing up against the coast, and the hiss and click and beeps of approaching short-wave radio transmissions. My ears decompressed, and warm liquid trickled across my lobes. The mid-day sun burned red through my eyelids, salt dissolved on my tongue and cracked my lips. I felt many hands slide under my wet torso, gritty fingers around my ankles and wrists. My head was cradled like a newborn as I was lifted onto the spineboard and tied down by the straps. They carried me in quick steps across the scorched earth, stopping abruptly to rub and curse the blistering soles of their bare feet. As my defeated body was fed into the open mouth of the idling vehicle, the cool sea-smell was replaced by warm exhaust. I continued to breathe slowly and steadily as the men wished me luck. The doors slammed shut and I wondered if luck had anything to do with this at all.

All my life in the skin of a fish, suddenly chewed up and spit out of the water, just a skull and a spine. I was humbled and awed by the power of nature, and realized our fragility and helplessness against forces unseen. I couldn't believe I had broken my neck, but rather than feeling sorry for myself, I saw it as a starting point for something new. I was flung headfirst into art. The experience provided me with sketches of myself, but it was up to me to complete the drawings. Through drawing, I began to search for significance in everything around me, and make relationships between what I saw and what I felt, in order to put my thoughts into perspective.

It's difficult for me to talk about my art, especially when you're not sitting here in front of me. It must be described to an anonymous face. These ideas have been sweat from my skin; each word a drop of perspiration beading on my brow. My fingers act hesitantly, spending more time scratching my head than tapping keys. Anxiety weighs heavily on my neck, my muscles brace against my chair, and my jaw hurts from grinding

teeth in my sleep. Since I wrote this, my exhibition has been hung and taken down, with great success I can only hope. These paragraphs have made protocol, passed through a committee and editors. I wonder how many of these words remained true to mine, and how relevant they may be to a career? Until you found my writing, it had been floating in cyberspace as electricity, or collecting dust between dark brown bindings on a shelf in the LSU library. I'm somewhere else, and with any luck, still making art. But I must tell you about the things I've accomplished to this point. So I'll try to be direct with you, and choose words with total honesty, and hope they come close to what my work is meant to tell you.

When I finally become still at night, I reflect on the events of the day, and my thoughts follow into my dreams. The surface of my mind contains all the interactions I had with people— instructors and peers, relatives and friends back home, and various other encounters, planned or random. They are the distractions I face when trying to make art, and the people I am constantly trying to please. But they are also the voices that influence my work. They echo between my ears, overlapping one another, and conversations continue beyond physical presence. I try to concentrate past their faces, and peer into the recesses of my thoughts. It's here I search for sagacity; mining through the superficial layers, with hopes to strike the core of my emotions. But again I hit water. The view is washed over and I'm standing in a murky pool, trying to see what lies below the surface. Something appears as the hand sweeps through, only to be hidden by swirling sediment. As it passes once more, a different piece is uncovered, but the entire image is never revealed.

Careful observation and introspection began with collecting. Collected objects are simply physical manifestations of a memory; they serve no purpose until we bestow them with meaning. Like shells from a beach in the Keys that remind us of the sound of the ocean, or a shotglass from a bar in Austin still rimmed with the taste of the drink, we hold on to these things so we can remember. Anything can become symbolic if we look at it the right way.

When I was little I had boxes full of bones and rocks gathered on camping trips, or from behind my house in Wyoming. People would often poach animals and leave them in the fields. I could always find them by trailing the sweet stench of rotting carcasses. As a child I associated bones with mortality, but after breaking my neck, their meaning began to change. They have many functions in my work – as *memento mori*, illustrating in life, the inevitability of death, and as a reminder of the space between. They also provide support as well as protection. Many of the fish bones that shape the characters in my drawings were gathered at Grand Isle exactly five years after my accident. The very necklace clasped across my throat was made from black drum teeth found that day. The necklace reminds me that I'm still alive.

Flies serve a similar purpose with more negative connotations. Two summers ago I was sitting on the bank along the South Dakota stretch of the Missouri River. The water and air temperature, the sand between my toes, the breeze, the girl – they all seemed perfect, but the flies started biting. Our bodies were vulnerable, the flies wouldn't cease, my heart was exposed, and yet it was hard to believe that anything could develop from our tryst. I was reminded by their relentlessness that things are never as they seem.

Just as I would pocket a smooth stone from that place, I would also collect a memory of the flies – they came to represent incessant insecurities and nagging imperfections. These two emotions are among the most powerful invasions and influences of my art.

Thumbtacks show up in a few works. Each composition has been created in response to a particular event or emotion that I was feeling at a given time. Many were developed out of frustration with that which I have no control. Art has always been an outlet for my dissatisfaction with things. When I've finished working through an idea on paper, I tack it up on the wall to reflect on the process and enjoy its completion. The same can be said for working through aggravations.

My thoughts and my actions are one and the same. Both sort through the debris of daily life – hopes, frustrations, insecurities – all of which reflect back on the choices, and art, that I make at any given moment. I'm simply trying to make sense of the things I don't understand. My work represents a gray area, a space between self-realization and uncertainty. It's based on personal experience and created in response to the many changes that have occurred over the last few years. The compositions are filled with visual metaphors gathered from my immediate surroundings – influenced by those making art around me, pictures appropriated from the internet, drawn from words that have been spoken, and pulled from my memories, thoughts, and actions. The elements serve as a bridge between my mind and the tangible world. They are arranged in a way that make formal sense, but emit an ambiguousness that leaves room for the viewer to question the meaning. I could tell you that some pieces are about relationships that turned sour; some depict dreams, while others represent times when I had to make major decisions. I've turned more corners than in a carnival funhouse of mirrors, examining myself from many angles, yet I still end up feeling disoriented and confused.

I can't expect everyone to understand my associations with bones or flies, or any of the other various icons that appear in my art, as long as they can make associations between the images they see and the entire body of work. I don't have any answers; I prefer to offer possibilities or potential. The meaning of a piece continues to develop even after completion – just as the significance of bones after my accident. Like hieroglyphics, many of the individual symbols illustrate things familiar to daily life, but have connotations of greater importance. Egyptians referred to hieroglyphics as *medu netjer* or divine words. I believe the things that happen around us can offer insight into our own lives if we look carefully. The images incorporated into my work become an individual language based on what I see around me. The symbols alone are representative of words or feelings, but together they become narratives. By examining the repetition of elements, we may begin to understand the whole story.

The mezzotint process became an attractive means of exploring these narratives. This branch of intaglio has particular appeal toward my technical and conceptual aesthetics. A tool called a “rocker” roughens the surface of a plate so that it will print a rich, velvet black. An image is then drawn reductively by scrapping or rubbing to render lighter values. This emergence of light from darkness is a strong metaphor of my struggle between self-realization and uncertainty. The wide range of value that can be achieved is also representative of that gray area. They were very popular in the 18th and 19th centuries as means to reproduce portraits and other paintings, but became obsolete

with the introduction of photoengraving. I'm interested in the realistic qualities that can be gained from the process, in particular the idea of trompe l'oeil, or the illusion of seeing reality. The various elements in my compositions are rendered true-to-life, yet the visual juxtaposition of images creates narratives of a more surreal, unsettling, or supernatural quality.

Another appeal of the mezzotint process is a reflection of my athletic persona. I spent a lifetime in swimming and track. But when my accident left me unable to compete, I had to pool that energy into something new. Mezzotints involve an intensive process of patience, endurance, and repetition just to ready the plate surface for drawing. An athlete must practice rigorously in preparation for competition – correct form is an important factor, and it can be easy to fall into bad habits. The position of the hand, the angle of the rocker, pressure, and speed can all affect the quality of an image – not to mention all of the dynamics of drawing, inking, wiping, and printing.

Although I had just recently begun investigation into this process, I've found satisfaction in its rewards. I trained in swimming and track to constantly improve on myself; to shave a tenth of a second off my time, or jump two inches higher was a tremendous accomplishment. Just like stepping up to the starting blocks, I would get a rush of adrenaline each time a new plate was cranked through the press. Success with my prints could be measured in the smallest of increments as well. My goal with each one was to be better than the last. Great athletes are capable of feats not easily accomplished by the average person.

But the correlations between athletics, and my approach to mezzotints could also be a double-edged sword. An athlete strives to attain perfection, and with dedication, this goal is quite attainable. But if an artist reaches this point, does his work become more of a craft? I became frightened with the idea that I was a craftsman rather than artist. When athletes attain flawlessness, they can ride the wave until they either burn out, or retire. My prints are anything but perfect, but I came to wonder if I pooling more of my efforts into mastery of the process was having adverse effects on my creativity. Is this not a trap that many artists, printmakers in particular, fall into?

In response, I began to draw and paint, silkscreen and cut stencils. It was refreshing to step away from the press for a bit and work with more immediacy. As deadlines grew near I began to reflect neurotically upon the art that I'd made, growing more insecure about cohesiveness, merit, and how my audience would respond. I started to cannibalize older prints and rework them into new narratives based on these thoughts.

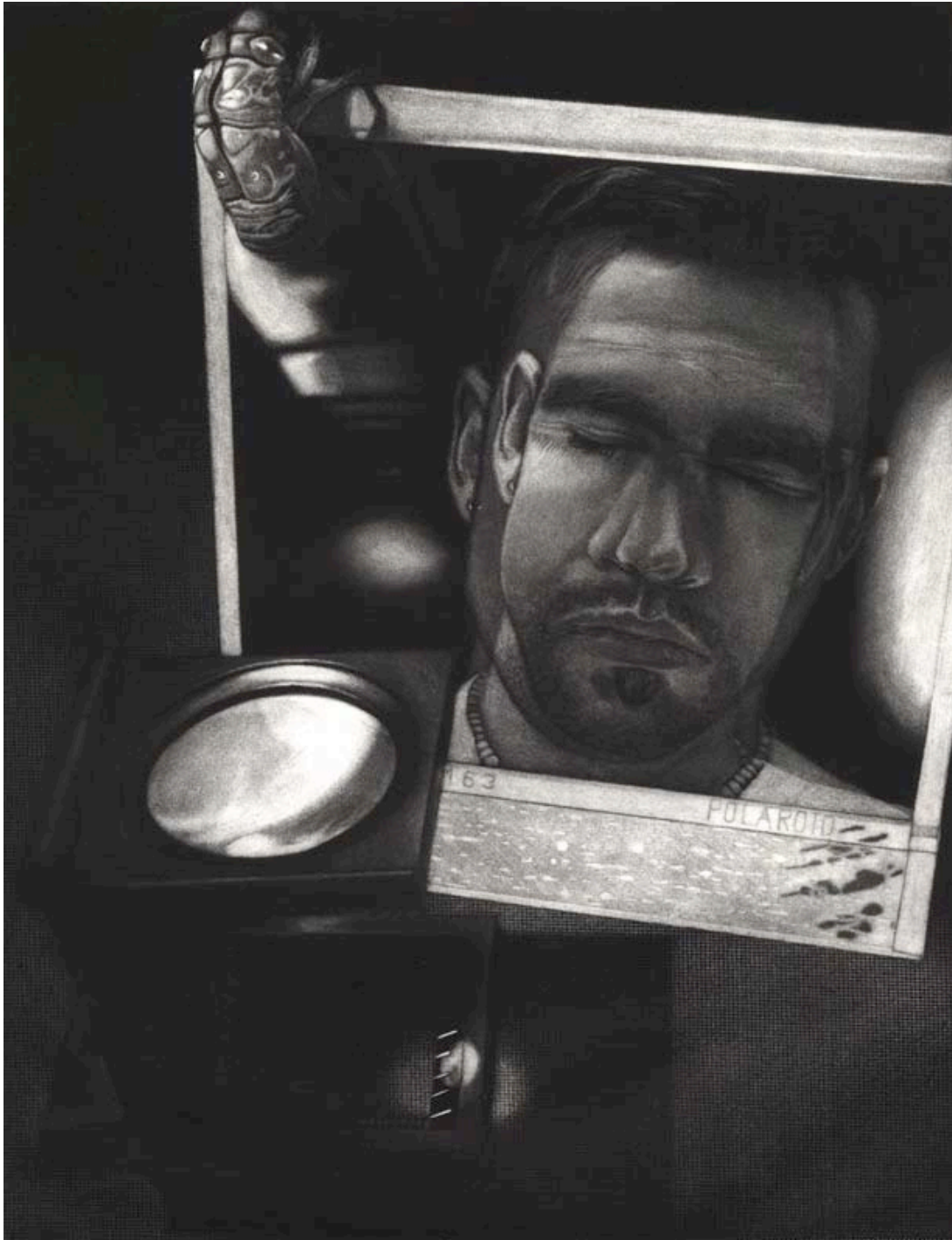
Much of my work is linked by compulsiveness, or an obsessive attention to detail. This is a quality that I have always possessed, another extension of my athletic upbringing. In sports every aspect of mental, physical, formal, and technical preparedness was emphasized in order to become successful. During intense training, I learned to quiet my mind in order to numb the pain and continue toward my goals. The process of art plays a similar role. In the moments when I am deeply involved in a project, I lose track of my anxieties and concentrate instead on the relationship between my eyes, hands, and work. I intend to form a similar connection between the art and the viewer. Many of the images are small and intimate, often with elements hidden from plain sight. This is meant to draw the viewer close, asking that they observe carefully. A

relationship is then formed between my hand and the viewer's eyes. I want them to realize that the work is highly personal, but I am offering them an open window to climb through. Once inside they might make discoveries that I had not seen.

A violinmaker fashions an instrument with care. Its design and sound is signature to that person. When it leaves the store, one might appreciate it simply for its craftsmanship, someone may understand its dynamics but not know how to play, while another could work the strings as they had been taught. But someone will pick it up and improvise, and make the sound their own. As long as people view my efforts in any of these ways, then I have been successful.

It would be nice if we could have seen my thesis exhibition together. You could've asked questions, made comments and assumptions, or said nothing at all. I wish I could have looked you in the eyes and gave you my answers. Instead, the slides you see are old and outdated, just pieces of my history as an artist. Reproductions don't do justice to works of art, nor do writings fully convey the experience of seeing it in a gallery where it's presented and lit just right. But maybe as you read this you can relate to what you are experiencing at the moment. If we had a chance to meet and talk I would say this is what I meant when I told you.

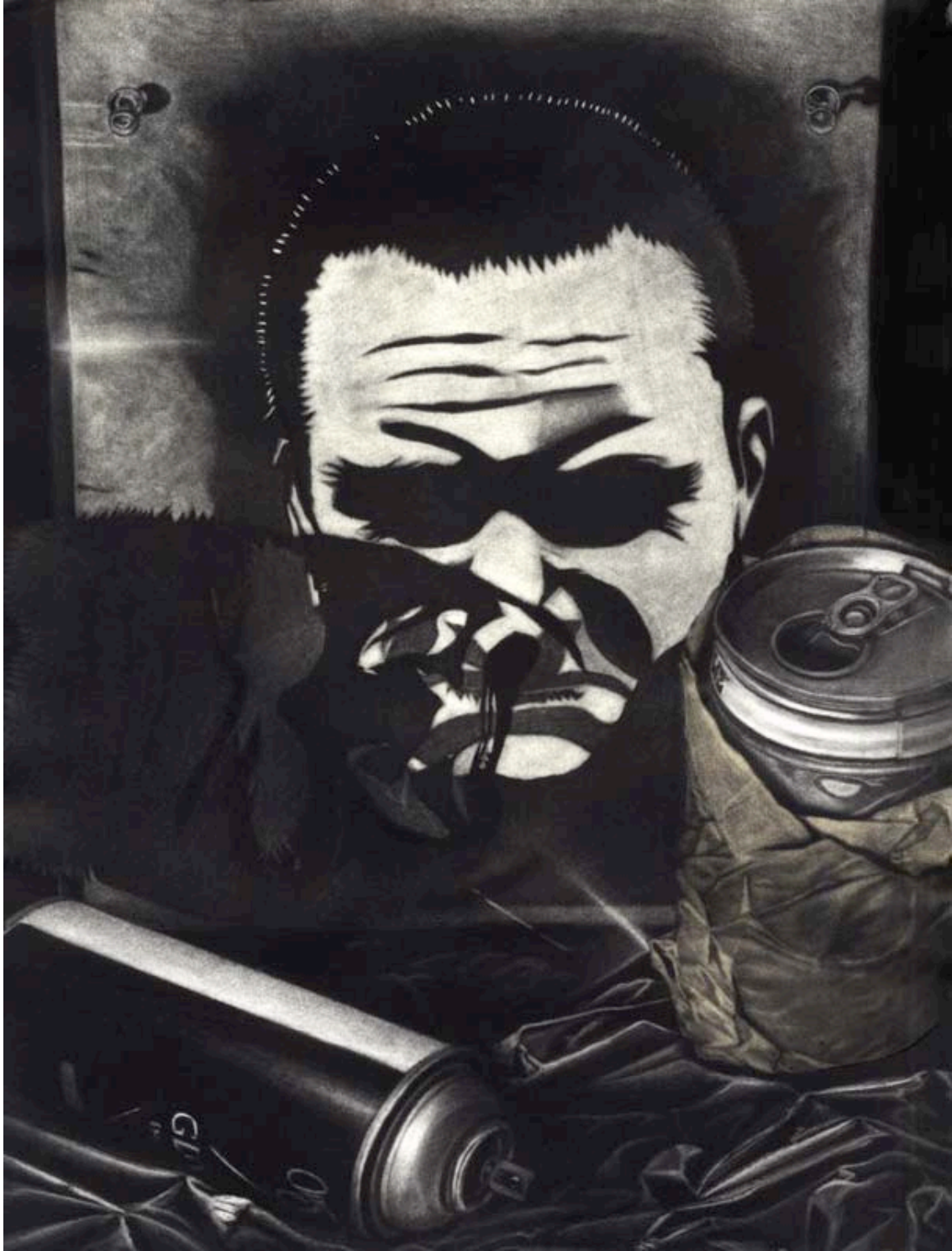
IMAGES



Loop
Mezzotint with softground, 10" x 13"



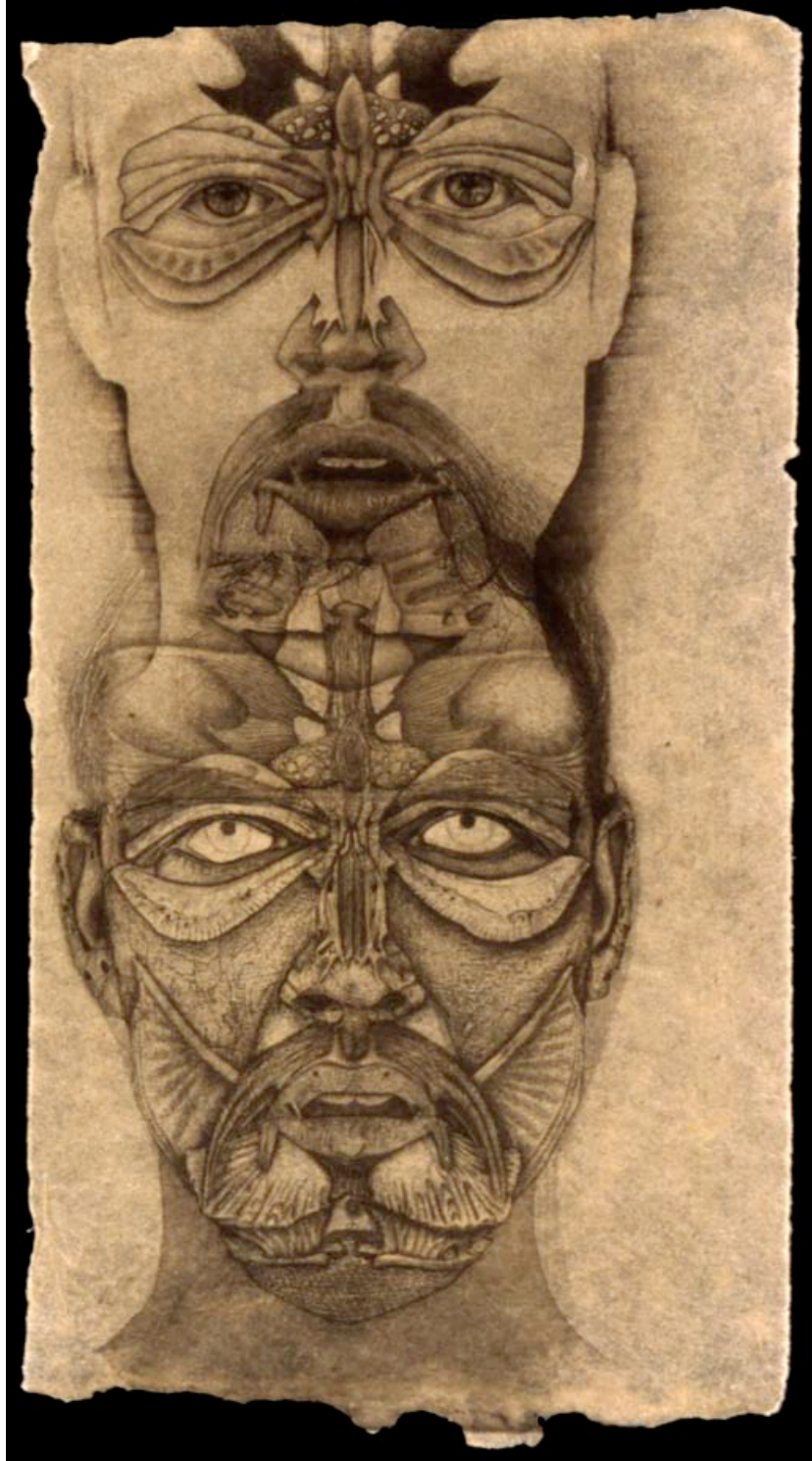
Bridge
mezzotint, 10" x 13"



Tek
mezzotint with chine colle, 10" x 13"



Fifth Year
Mezzotint with etching and chine colle, 11" x 14.5"



Multiplicity
etching on handmade flax, 10" x 17.5"



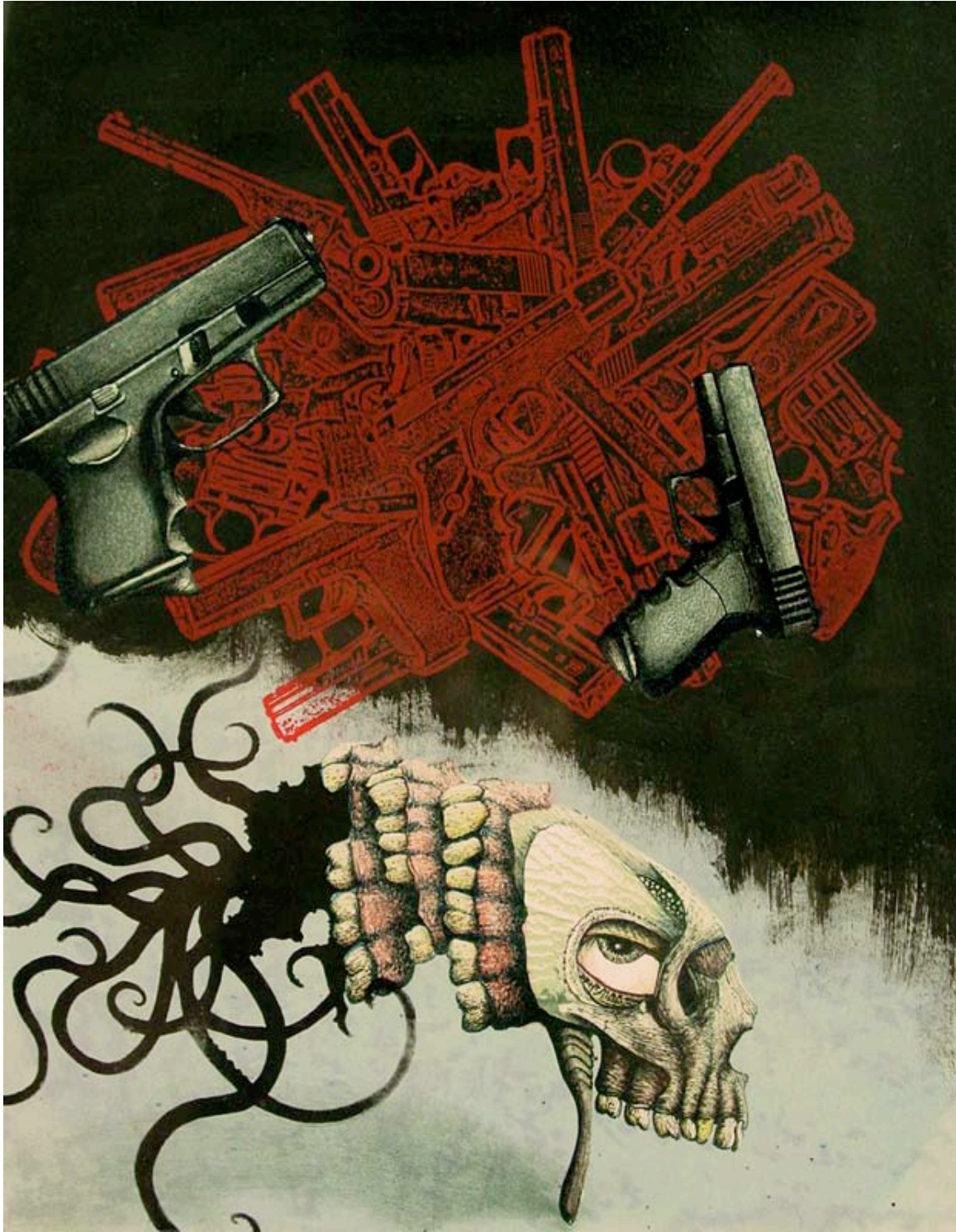
Mezzotint Plate: *Calculating Risk*
copper, ink, acrylic laquer, 6" x 8"



Mezzotint Plate: *Death of Communication*
copper, ink, acrylic laquer, 6" x 8"



Mezzotint Plate: *Strongarm*
copper, ink, acrylic laquer, 6" x 8"



Full Blown
mixed media on paper, 11" x 14"



Home Grown
mixed media on paper, 22" x 30"



Swarm
mixed media on paper, 22" x 30"



Forewards, Returns
mixed media on paper, 22" x 30"



Just a Few, Detail
housepaint, spraypaint stencils on panels, 16' x 8'



Gallery Photographs



Gallery Photographs

VITA

Ryan David O'Malley was born in Laramie, Wyoming, in 1979. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of South Dakota, Vermillion, in May 2002 under the instruction of Lloyd Menard. He will receive his Master of Fine Arts degree from Louisiana State University in August of 2005.