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Dustin Springer

John Wesley Powell Undergraduate Research Conference, 2013

Illinois Wesleyan University

Hello everyone, thank you for coming today. My name is Dustin Springer, I'm a B.F.A painting concentration though I also work in glass enamels through independent studies in the university and I also do a fair amount of print making work. I wanted to start talking today about my influences as an artist. One of my strongest most lasting personal influences that I'd like to talk about is that of fantasy art. When I say fantasy art I do mean dragons, elves, fairies, things of that nature. Things that I grew up seeing on book covers and posters as a child, those were the things that really inspired me to think about art for the first time as transcending reality. That was the first time that art was really for me validated as a way of making something more of what the world holds, necessarily, because as a child I wasn't that worldly really. So, I didn't have experience with abstract expression or anything of that nature. So the world that I saw was still-life and deer in the forest and photographs and things of that nature. For me that was the first time that I really got to experience what art could do. It's really resonated with me and for that reason my work throughout these years has retained something of a fantastic nature throughout the imagery that I choose. The other thing that appealed to me about fantasy art and still appeals to me in the art that I do is that they were making images that weren't real. They were depicting things that didn't exist in the world and for that reason they couldn't really be questioned. You can't really say that this thing doesn't actually look like that because it doesn't actually look like anything. For that reason, that's kind of why I am drawn to making work that kind of questions that same sort of question of reality.

Growing up I then was influenced more by surrealism, but I feel that I learned to say that I was influenced by surrealism just because it deals with fantasy in sort of a similar way. But, its accorded respect that fantasy art isn't, so it's a little more legitimate to say surrealism.

I want to talk about a few objectives in my painting, the first one is that, like I said with the fantasy art, it questions something about reality and so for my work I like to question and challenge assumptions that I think are prevalent in our society, particularly with the western society. So first my motivation for using the human figure stems from my observation that humans approach their bodies as known quantities. Not only is this assumption wrong, in my opinion, in so far as we are only able to see a small percentage of our bodies at any given time: the exterior and not even all of the exterior at once. It also inexpertly leads to the conclusion that our body is somehow the pinnacle of evolution and a symbol for our species supremacy, that's at least what I've observed in my time on this earth. I think that people look at

themselves often and as the perfect vessel. We're taught that our body's a temple and that we should take care of ourselves. To a certain extent it makes sense to maintain that your body is what carries you through the world, it makes sense to maintain that. But, there are these really too high expectations nowadays in our society, not even what the human body is supposed to do and function as, but what it's supposed to look like. So that is why I use the idealized male form a lot in my work. But, like I said, this thought that were supreme leads to the abuse of other inhabitants in the world such as plant-life, which is what the series behind me is about. It also leads to the abuse of fellow humans who don't measure up and these are themes like we see in my work.

Secondly, my paintings can be seen as an objection to the antiquated gender roles plague the Arcanum. Specifically the use of the idealized male figure is meant to highlight the objectification that society rarely directs towards men in art. Male nude in art is not rare, you see it all the time, but when you do see a male figure it's always this robust, strong depiction of a god or depiction of strength, depiction of something of that nature. What I like to use, when I use the male nude, especially in this series ("Ming", "Black on Red") and this one behind me ("Homo sanguine", "Homo aethiopica", "Homo majus") I like to merge them with feminine imagery to question the kind of objectification that we direct toward women and that we don't really direct towards men. Men are powerful and strong and women are fragile, they're vessels, they're just really forms more than allegories for anything other than beauty. I like to try to, in a way, force the viewer to consider their own reactions to the male form being portrayed in that way when they look at my work. Much like the fantasy art that inspired me at an early age I hope that my work allows viewers to shift their frame of reference at least momentarily away from the societal norms that are typically accepted without question.

Some of the themes from my work: the first thing I'd like to talk about is transformation. Although I have in the past described my work as dealing with transformation I now feel that this term does not adequately represent the nature of my images. While the various composite images that I draw from are certainly altered and transformed, the figures represented in my paintings exist in a fixed state. That is to say these figures behind me did not start as humans and transform into botanical hybrids nor are they caught mid shift from plant to human. Rather they occupy a version of reality in which they have always been as they seem now, equal parts plant and human. I realize that this is slightly confusing, possibly arbitrary distinction to make especially for the viewer looking at it without my direct frame of reference but I think that it is an important one for me. Because I think that when we look at art as humans, when it has the human form that we relate to, especially like my work I think that people would approach these pieces as "oh well they're humans that then transformed into something else or maybe they're mid-shift". But, the conclusion that I hear from people when they look at my work is that it started as humans and to me that's wrong because when I think of them I think of them as

existing in their own state. These creatures, or whatever they are, exist in some other reality and in that reality this is how they have always been. They didn't start as anything. I think that to imply that either was secondary was really undermining the point of the series. I think that fusion is maybe a better word for what I do because it implies more of a mutual combination.

Secondly, I'd like to talk about ornamentation. I use ornamentation to call attention to kind of the objectification of both men and women as can be seen in my ceramic figures there and my "Opulence" series there. Specifically to the "Opulence" series I adorned the figures in trim, bells and tassels in order to compare and reduce the highly touted form to furniture. In doing so I seem to question the way in which society has turned the infinitely complicated and varied human form into a standardized commodity. That series is about opulence, that's the whole point of the piece. The figures are there and they're adorned in lavish material, material which when you look at it can be expensive and also to an extent when I was trying to paint it I was trying to render it lavishly and keep on the opulence, really. But the figures themselves appear detached and distant. I think for me that speaks for the unrealistic expectations of humans in society that we expect them to be these opulent forms but in the end were all just people.

Lastly, I wanted to talk about composition a little bit. In general, I slate my figures in the center of the canvas surrounding them by either minimal landscapes or flat black. Doing so, I seek to give the figures a monolithic quality, enhancing their presence and their preeminence. The black backgrounds while symbolize in some ways implies a vastness that is really important to me in the work. It places the figures in a sort of vacuum directly all attention to the subject at hand and allowing for calm observation by the viewer.

For me I just want to say that for me painting has always been sort of a means to an end. In that what I want to achieve is representing the images, the things that I concoct, and the fusions of things that I'm thinking of. Painting, for the most part, offers me the most possibilities in terms of scale and color things of that nature. But, if I feel I can express something adequately with another medium, print-making for example or glass enamels, I don't hesitate to do that. I also wanted to say that painting, the way I approach painting, painting is a challenge for me. Painting does not come necessarily easy to me. I work extremely long on each of these paintings because I struggle with it and for me that's part of the appeal, though, is the challenge. I find that I work a lot in series but I almost always like the first thing in the series better than anything else because that's the one that I put in the hours to figure out "how do I paint those tassels?", "how do I paint skin?" or "how do I do this, that or the other thing?". So then I feel like I've achieved that and I want to do others and the other ones just never really measure up. For me, I feel like it's because I become bored with them more easily, that's just a personal note.

Speaking of challenges, the glass pieces that you see on those four walls I approached because of the challenge of them. Glass enamels is this thing that people worked I think about a year and a half ago and hadn't worked with at all in any way. And like I said I did independent studies with the pieces so basically I was teaching myself essentially how to work in that way, how to use the layers. So, that was fun for me, continues to be fun because it allows me a way to challenge myself as an artist compositionally. They still all deal with the same compositional concerns and thematic problems I think the rest of my work does.

Whichever medium I use my primary concern is to make a clear or good representations of the concepts that I wish to address. I find that is of the upmost importance to render the images that I create with clarity and technical precision capturing a quiet moment in which the viewer is offered a chance to reconsider how they define what is real. Thank you.