My MFA Statement

by

Bob Abernathy

B.F.A., University of Georgia, 1985

A Report Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2003
My MFA Statement

by

Bob Abernathy

Approved:

[Signature]

MAJOR PROFESSOR

[Date]

April 29, 2003
When I entered the MFA program at Georgia, I had been painting Cezanne-esque still-lifes for a number of years. I painted the still-life below my first semester here.

![Still-life painting](image)

It is a typical example of my work at the time. The subject is conventional - a basket of fruit and some drapery. I was more interested in the formal elements of painting than content at this time and was not bothered by the Sunday-painter nature of the subject matter. Still-life seemed an ideal subject for learning the formal elements of painting and there is no doubt that my skills improved. Nevertheless, in the graduate school environment, I began more and more to view this approach as inadequate. Though I'm proud of the above painting, the critical response to my work made me seek a change.
I spent my second semester of the program in Cortona, Italy where I began to produce ink wash drawings like the one above. Though this picture is a still-life, it marks a change in the way I approached the subject. The introduction of the hammer strikes a more modern note than the baskets of fruit I painted earlier. Another modern touch is the apparent use of two light sources resulting in a quietly upsetting double-shadow effect. One more important development in this picture is the compositional attitude of the drawing. Though we are still looking at objects on a table, the point-of-view is higher, producing yet again a quietly upsetting feeling in the observer. This picture was something of a breakthrough for me and I soon followed it with more.
The apples are gone and have been replaced by light bulbs. Not only do light bulbs have fewer of the Sunday-painter associations I was now seeking to avoid but the forms themselves are more complex and interesting. Though round at the bulb end like an apple, the light bulb tapers into a cylinder capped with a metal screw shaft. I also enjoyed the challenge of drawing the distortion of writing on the curved surface of the bulb. Once again, I used the sides of the page to crop the objects - this time cutting a razor blade (itself a cutting instrument) apparently in half. In this picture, a psychological dimension is present that did not exist in my earlier pieces.
I tried to find surprising objects for these still-life drawings - potato chips seemed like an interesting choice for that reason. And I wanted to place subjects together in a way that was unexpected. To find a hammer amid potato chips therefore had an element of surprise to it that I valued. It may also suggest to the viewer that the hammer will be used on the potato chips. The Q-tip plays a role in this relationship among objects as well.

Aside from the novelty of the subject matter, this drawing also represents a refinement in my ink wash technique. The objects are rendered with softer edges making them look more realistic. This realism is important to me. When we look at a highly rendered light bulb, for example, we don't look at it the way we normally look at a real light bulb. Its abstraction into drawing encourages the viewer to study and delight in this transformation.
To others, these still-lifes often seemed to have hidden messages—usually of a sexual nature. Though at first I dismissed these interpretations, I now believe that they are at least partly valid, even if I did not consciously encourage them. At any rate, thinking about this led me to explore my own psycho-sexual territory.
Another contributing factor to this decision was the emotional impact I, like many others, struggled with in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. My response was to explore the darker side of my nature. The above picture represents a break with the still-lifes. What was only suggested before now became explicit. Perhaps because of the explicit nature of this image its realization is less "arty." The drawing is more of an illustration and is produced with documentary-style detachment.
Continuing in this vein, I produced a nude self-portrait in graphite. The sexual nature of the picture which is imposed by the composition appealed to me. Also intriguing was the idea of producing a self-portrait without seeing myself through another medium – a mirror or camera, for example.
I also produced two large ink wash drawings of the subject above. A nude man sits with a cast at his feet.
In a break with the body of work I was producing at this time I now went back to oil painting. I wanted to get more color into my work and also, though satisfied with the work I had been doing, I now sought to escape the darker works of the recent past. This painting of a man standing in water next to a boat is different in look and tone to the black-and-white works which came before it. Not disturbing at all but quiet, the imagery of the nude figure, the water, and the boat all contribute to a meditative note.
I produced at least one other successful picture of figures standing in water. This large oil painting has been called a "sexual baptism." In this ambitious painting, the inclusion of more figures and a further abstraction of the water surface and its colors interested me.

In conclusion, my experience in the MFA program has been valuable to me as an artist because it gave me the time and encouragement to find my own voice as an artist and to value that voice. The evolution of my art over the last few years has produced several bodies of work all unified by a belief that the inward-looking artist reveals not only himself but a common ground of visual experience shared by all.