A WRITTEN REPORT

By

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THE PROBLEM

There is a scene in the 2006 movie, *The Devil Wears Prada*, where the character Miranda Priestly, played by Meryl Streep, chastises her personal assistant for not taking fashion seriously:

... you think this has nothing to do with you. You go to your closet and you select out, oh I don't know, that lumpy blue sweater, for instance, because you're trying to tell the world that you take yourself too seriously to care about what you put on your back. But what you don't know is that that sweater is not just blue, it's not turquoise, it's not lapis, it's actually cerulean. You're also blindly unaware of the fact that in 2002, Oscar De La Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns. And then I think it was Yves St Laurent, wasn't it, who showed cerulean military jackets? And then cerulean quickly showed up in the collections of 8 different designers. Then it filtered down through the department stores and then trickled on down into some tragic casual corner where you, no doubt, fished it out of some clearance bin. However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs and so it's sort of comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when, in fact, you're wearing the sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room. From a pile of stuff.¹

So what could this lengthy dialogue from a movie whose tagline reads, “Hell on Heels”, possibly tell us about the state of the art world today? Surprisingly, quite a bit. Many visual artists, just like Miranda Priestly’s assistant, are in a state of denial. They are under the blind assumption that the pile of stuff from which their art is created is somehow devoid of all the trappings of a trickle-down culture. The fact is, many people, including artists, get their information about the world today through mediated sources like newspapers, television, or the internet, (i.e. mass media). Sources, that no matter how democratic or open they advertise themselves to be, are ultimately owned by someone making decisions as to what will or will not be shown. More tragic are the artists who understand this dilemma and yet still believe they are separated (or is it insightful?) enough to objectively comment on its influence. But how can a person, with their nose pressed flatly against the mirror, possibly see the big picture of life?²

¹ *Devil Wears Prada* 2006
² This might have come from Charles Bukowski poem.
One may argue that this discussion excludes the possibility of context, that what
an artist chooses to depict is different from how and in what way they choose to organize
those depictions. Yet, with postmodernism’s ambiguous nature and disbanding of
traditional categories, there no longer exists an agreed upon standard for which these
combinations can be judged. It does not seem to matter how an artist chooses to combine
images, it will be just as valid as any other artist’s combination. To stick with the clothes
metaphor, my decision to wear a cerulean blue sweater with a pair of jeans is just as
acceptable as someone else wearing that same cerulean blue sweater with a skirt. With
the importance of what an artist chooses to depict rendered meaningless by the
acceptability of every and all configurations of images, it seems the emphasis for the
artist today dealing with mass media becomes not what they choose to depict but how
they choose to depict it.

MASS MEDIA & ART

The convergence of mass media and art is nothing new. Pop artists like Andy
Warhol and even the Dadaists artists before them merged the “low” of consumer objects
with that of “high” art. What is new is seeing the fruits of this marriage between mass
media and art and how enslaving to art it really can be. Carried to its logical conclusion,
Pop art’s interchangeability of high and low cultural references blurs the line between
what we define as art and what we define as merely mass media. If there is no longer a
clear distinction between theses two cultural entities, there can no longer be a clear
distinction between each one’s agenda. Today, artists are left dealing with art and mass
media being equally important and having similar agendas. Therefore, it can be said that
art and mass media are competing for the same resource, that of a viewer’s attention.

The competition for an audience is a lot more of a struggle than many realize. A
viewer’s attention has become a prized possession. As David Foster Wallace says in his
essay, “E Unibus Pluram”, people are, “wooed several gorgeous hours a day for nothing
but our attention, we regard that attention as our chief commodity, our social capital, and
we are loath to fritter it.”3 This would seem like a good thing for artists and the art world. In general, if people hold their attention with such high regard, it implies that most would not spend their time looking at things that were not intellectually and visually of a high quality. But looking at television today with its 1,000 channels and still there are complaints that there is nothing good to watch. Or the internet, with the wealth of information it has made available to people and still the most popular sites are sex sites. Or just the simple fact a person can see the same movie remade two or three times in their lifetime. Many point to mass media for not providing viewers with better quality options from which to choose. Yet, it would be extremely naïve to blame mass media as the sole entity responsible for any of these problems. Obviously, there would have to be an adequate demand and therefore, monetary success for such things or they would not be available for consumption. So even though people complain that they can’t find high quality programming or are tired of seeing the same old things, it seems that the majority of people really do want to see the same old thing and are not inclined to spend time on intellectually stimulating pursuits. The reason for this, as Wallace writes is, “simply because people tend to be extremely similar in their vulgar and prurient and dumb interests and wildly different in their refined and aesthetic and noble interests.”4 Thus, in order to attract the largest group of viewers, which is mass media’s goal, it appeals to the lowest common denominator of society’s interests. This explains why mass media is seen by many as crude and wasteful, but what does this have to do with the current state of art? Art has much nobler interests than mass media and is not consumed with appealing to such a wide audience…right?

Once again, with the introduction of Pop art, art has put itself on the same level playing field as that of mass media and therefore is in competition for its viewers. Mass media, backed by huge resources, is constantly providing more and more options to its audience, even if those options are strikingly similar. With more options vying for a viewer’s attention and the viewer having only a finite amount of time to view these options, a viewer is to spend any large amount of time on any one option, including art. I believe artists are aware of this problem, and as a result have made a conscience effort to

4 Ibid., p.37
adopt some of the same tools that mass media employs. By adopting the look and
strategies of mass media, the artist hopes to entice more viewers into thinking they are
looking at something that is more to their liking. A great example of this is the December
2006 issue of Vanity Fair. The issue, simply dubbed “The Art Issue” features a Robert
Wilson portrait of Brad Pitt, shirtless in the rain, with the headline “Avant-Garde
Impressario Robert Wilson Photographs BRAD PITT and Other Stars”. Inside, the
article explains that these photographs are actually life-size videos of the celebrities,
complete with soundtrack, displayed vertically on Voom High Definition plasma flat
screen monitors with the celebrities making limited, slow motion gestures.\(^5\) Robert
Wilson is making basic portraits (they are actually referred to as Voom Portraits) but
because he is using the technology normally regulated to viewing mass media\(^6\) and
because his subjects are celebrities who many know from mass media, his work is
deemed important enough to have three simultaneous exhibitions in three different spaces
in New York.\(^7\)

Now just because one artist whose work mimics the look of mass media is on the
cover of Vanity Fair doesn’t necessarily mean every artist in the art world is mimicking
the look and strategies of mass media. After all, Vanity Fair is not an art magazine nor
does it claim to have its hand on the pulse of the art world, but it is a magazine trying to
reach the widest possible audience in order to sell more magazines. Consequently,
Vanity Fair is going to highlight artists who are the most recognizable in their field. And
maybe Robert Wilson’s work is on the cover because it has an image of a half-naked
Brad Pitt which seems to appeal to a lot of people. However, the other artists featured in
this Vanity Fair issue are also artists that have a large amount of recognition or success.
Looking at the other artists in the magazine, especially the ones under the heading “The
New New York School”, all seem to share an affinity for creating works that touch upon
the materials of mass media if not completely crossing over. Artists like Terence Koh
uses books, zines, and web sites, Mika Rottenberg works with video installation, and
Marcel Dzama has made CD covers and costume designs for music videos. It would be

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\(^5\) Bob Colacello, “The Subject as Star”, Vanity Fair, December 2006

\(^6\) Voom HD Networks which financed Wilson’s portraits, is a company specializing in high-definition entertainment

\(^7\) Paula Cooper Gallery, Phillips de Pury & Company, and Nathan A. Bernstein & Company, January 2007
easy to conclude then that today’s artists are having their work seen by a wider audience, and it appears to be holding its own against mass media for the attention of a viewer.

But I think this has become a very serious issue and I think the artist’s use of materials that mass media employs so effectively is actually what is causing the art world to stagnate and regress. If an artist’s work is designed to appeal to a larger audience it must make some of the same concessions mass media makes. In other words, artists must appeal to some of those lower, vulgar interests that Wallace says so many people similarly share. Many artists working today make enticing and visually breathtaking, but ultimately hollow and unsatisfying work (see Mathew Barney’s Drawing Restraint 9) or are re-presenting watered down versions of old ideas in new packaging under the heading “avant-garde” (see Robert Wilson’s VOOM Portraits).

MY SPECIFIC AGENDA

So far, my purpose has been to illustrate how I have seen the art world celebrate what they call “innovation”. Pop art blurred the lines between what was considered low and high art and carried this idea to its theoretical end. In other words, Pop art explicitly eroded the division that separated art and mass media. This statement seems to be implicit in today’s art world except that many artists appear hell-bent on maintaining this illusion of distinction for the sole purpose of breaking it down again. The problem with only maintaining an image of conflict is that it limits the artist’s vision. The artist can no longer critically comment on consumer culture when they are actively still trying to promote and benefit from it. Artists, without a critical stance have turned to other avenues to determine the measure of success in their work. By mimicking the elements of mass media, artists are afforded inclusion to a much wider audience, which can lead to greater success both financially and professionally. This wider appeal of art leads to the break down in its standard of quality, both conceptually and aesthetically. Much of art has fought to get to the grand stage and once there has completely underwhelmed.

It is my position, that art cannot separate itself from mass media, nor can art be totally critical of it since an artist is never completely outside of consumer culture. What can an artist do then? It can find alternatives, just as it did with the invention of
photography. In an interview with the *Guardian* in 2003, the artist David Hockney states, "Once chemical photography took over, photos and films became our accepted western idea of reality, colonising the rest of the world. Artists responded by trying to find alternatives; hence impressionism, cubism, abstract art and today's conceptual art."\(^8\) The same can be true for artists today by not employing the same elements that mass media already uses successfully, but focus on the things mass media has failed to capture.

In addition to today's artist failing to capture a new image of culture, I am going to point out the decision by the contemporary viewer in not applying sound reasoning to interpret artwork. If art needs reasoning to discover its truth, that reasoning now has been replaced by a viewer's reflexive use of irony. However, I will show that by implicating the viewer in the creation of the illusion of the work, an artist can bypass irony and its resulting short-term concerns. It is only when the passive viewer again becomes active or responsible in the creation of the work that the work, and this is very important, can be read not as a self-referential object but as an object that points beyond itself.

**APPROACHING THE WORK**

I want to make it clear that my argument is not that artists shouldn't be able to use elements of mass media in their work or that the artist who do are only making shallow, superficial work. I am only stating that there are some artists who jump to the "look" of mass media in order to garner the attention and credibility that so many believe mass media provides. However, it would also be foolish to think that an artist could make relevant work without being influenced by mass media. It can become a vicious cycle. Mass media provides people with a whole slew of pop-cultural references that the artist uses to signify that they are hip to present-day life and can credibly comment on it. But, by using such short-term, often trite references in their work, artists are giving undue credibility and validity to these references that only perpetuates referent existence. We might loathe the two minute sound bites of politicians on CNN, we might be irritated by the tabloid style headlines of magazine or newspapers, and we might be perplexed by the 15 minutes of fame given to an individual's video on YouTube, but this is ultimately how

\(^8\) Andrew Marr, "Brush with the hawk", Guardian, January 6\(^{th}\), 2003.
people communicate now. In other words, mass media provides the language of society and artists must use that language to reflect on society.

If mass media and art are to coexist and be mutually dependent on one another, then perhaps the best thing for artists is to stop trying to co-opt the elements of mass media that it uses so successfully, i.e. quick pacing, barrage of imagery, expensive new technology, and instead concentrate on the elements or effects mass media has yet to completely master. Take for instance the green screen films of the past couple years, films like *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*, *Sin City*, or *300*. These films are shot entirely in front of a green screen in a warehouse where actors fight and jostle with thin air and speak overheated prose to tennis balls at the end of poles. It is only later, in post-production, that the big scary beast is digitally added along with backgrounds and any other element necessary for the scene. These movies have been extremely successful at the box-office. The movies have also been visually stunning, being highly influenced by comics and pulp magazines. However, some critics have been skeptical of the blending of live actors with these digital environments. In Jonathan Romney’s article, “Edge of the Real”, he points out that the actors in the movie *Sky Captain*, “have been flattened, as if seamlessly airbrushed into their surroundings, as if they were themselves digital creations. The three-dimensional weight of flesh and blood - like those elusive screen effects ‘charisma’, ‘presence’, ‘star-quality’- are surplus to requirements.”9 Whether it is the actor’s unfamiliarity with working against nothing but a flat screen or the limitations of today’s technology to fully integrate an actor into a believable reality, there always seems to be something a little unnatural about these movies.

This is where the idea to begin using visually flat backdrops or “screens” in my paintings came about. In these films, there is effort by everyone involved to make the actors performance appear “real” when they are in these imaginary digital settings talking to this imaginary digital people. Sometimes, the actor’s performance appears stiff or wooden, other times they can appear downright silly. But with a flat two-dimensional piece of art like a painting, the concern for the believability of an actor’s performance is not a registered concern for the simple fact that figures in paintings do not move. Also,

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with green screen films there is the criticism of actors looking flat or flattened. This is where painting, I believe, has its advantages over film. With the build-up of the actual material of paint, I can begin to suggest in certain areas three-dimensionality in actual physical terms rather than just visual, something film cannot do. Why is this important? As the artist Mark Tansey states:

The reading of textures, unlike the immediate optical sensation of color, involves the association of visual appearance with the memory of tactile sensation...[it] involves interactions of time, memory, touch, and sight.\(^\text{10}\)

The reading of textures I believe becomes very important when viewing my work in person because it asks the viewer call upon their own physical memories of how things felt. It asks them to engage the work in a participatory manner rather than as a passive viewer as is the case when watching films. A conventional Hollywood film asks nothing of its viewer except his/her undivided attention. It stimulates the viewer without causing the viewer to exert any mental or physical energy. The differing textures in a painting on the other hand, ask the viewer to become aware of their physical surroundings and be conscious of how those surroundings may have informed their past and future experiences. As my work has progressed, I have tried to make this idea more explicit by separating the different layers in the painting with color and even thicker paint.

Of course, for any of these issues to come up with my paintings, an audience has to be aware of the technological advancements in films. This is where the far-reaching aspect of mass media has its advantages. With the movie industry now trying to build excitement for movies years in advance, there is no shortage of behind-the-scenes features on channels like E! or in magazines like Time or Entertainment Weekly that explain the entire filming processes of an upcoming movie. Many DVDs now also contain a Special Features section that shows actual raw footage of movies before any digital effects have been added. As a result, today’s audiences are more informed about the technical aspects of the movie that they are about to watch.

With the technological savvy comes a change in the audience's visual perception of things. If I walk into a movie, fully aware that what I am about to see has all been digitally created in a computer, obviously I am going to have to make concessions as to what I perceive to be real. My visual focus has shifted from the illusionary to a focus on representation. In other words, I am not looking to see if I will be fooled into believing that the digital car on the screen is a real car, I am looking to see if it has enough of things of which I know a car to represent. Does it have four wheels? Does it have a front and a back? Can people fit inside? Does it move from one place to another? If it meets this criteria, I am satisfied enough to call it a car. This becomes my new criteria for visually identifying all the things in the movie. This is not say we are no longer interested in realism just that the constructed reality has become the authoritative voice in how we view the world over merely the depiction of reality.

This way in which a viewer can process visual information, being able to see the artificiality and the reality of something at the same time, is not an entirely new concept. Photographers like David Levinthal, Thomas Demand, and Cindy Sherman have made entire careers using this philosophy. However, their photographs always promote illusion over the artifice, and the concern with my work is the presentation of the artifice over the illusion. I make this distinction in early paintings like Playing Oedipus, Blind Hindsight and Re-deconstruction, by having shadows from objects in the foreground lay flat against the objects and scenery behind it, negating the depth of field and creating a flat pictorial space. In the Tourist Series, I drop the shadows completely and instead use a monochromatic underpainting for the background to create a separate and clear description of a “screen” in front of which thicker painted figures are placed. I want the viewer to understand that these images in the foreground and in the background “screens” do not exist in the same location (i.e. the pink elephant in Blind Hindsight) or even in the same time period (i.e. present day tourists with past war images in the Tourist Series). I want the viewer to be highly aware that the images they see are being constructed and placed on the canvas rather than perpetuate the false illusion that the painted image somehow appeared complete and as a unified whole on the canvas.

Why am I so eager to let the audience in on the joke so to speak? During a recent critique of artwork, an artist had stated that what he looks for in artwork is not that $2+2=}$
4 but that special something that makes 2+2=5. More directly, he was looking for an outcome that was contrary to what was expected. This criteria, which I have heard many use for the judgment of what is good or bad in art today, is basically a form of irony. People need a certain level of irony in the work in order for the work to speak to them. The only trouble with using irony as a barometer is that irony is only good for the short term. As Lewis Hyde states, “Iронy has only emergency use, carried over time it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage.”11 My paintings show the viewer, not a complete illusion as other paintings do, but how the illusion itself is being formed. Because illusion is in its infancy stage in my paintings, its potency on the viewer is kept to a minimum. The viewer is not engulfed by any prescribed, fully formed illusions from the onset that would place them on a predetermined path for reading the painting. Instead, the viewer is allowed the opportunity to step back and read each image in the painting separately and construct the images together as they see fit. The viewer becomes an active participant in the creation of the illusion rather than merely a spectator going along with illusion’s ride. And because it is the viewer who is directing the illusion, it would be hard for them to arrive at a conclusion that they did not seek. So any unexpected outcomes from my paintings for the viewer would be negligible, ruling out any kind of references to irony.

With irony out of the way, my paintings can be enjoyed beyond the current present of viewing them because the images are deployed in manner that eschews references that would only lead the viewer back to the initial reference as is the case with statements like 2+2=5. In other words, the intentions of my paintings are no longer limited to a merely “here and now” time frame because they are no longer self-referential. It is very important that art begins to point beyond itself and begin to speak to both past and future. Why? The most common complaint I have and have heard others say about art today is that it has nothing to do with their lives. Art has become non-communicative or worse it has become irrelevant in today’s society. This feeling of missed connection with the viewer I believe stems directly from art’s desire to only speak about the very now, something pop culture readily endorses. By speaking about only the

current present, we ignore the past and distance ourselves from the future. Suddenly, everything we do seems new and innovative without a past to reference and everything seems like it will last forever when we do not concern ourselves with the future. This microscopic view of our time, "temporal chauvinism"\textsuperscript{12} as Mark Tansey calls it, allows artists to make work that appears to be saying something while communicating to no one. Again, I am not suggesting that artists make work that just speaks to more people. Hopefully, at this point I have explained why this is extremely hurtful to art. What I am suggesting is that society, time, and even life are much more complicated than we make them out to be. Just as David Wallace stated that people are, "wildly different in their refined and aesthetic and noble interests" so too are they in how they perceive themselves to fit in this world.

Mark Tansey:

Is there a temporal chauvinism here that makes it possible for art discourse to ignore all other structures of time (cultural, biological, geological, physiological, cosmological, etc.)?\textsuperscript{13}

By having art speak to the future, it opens up the possibilities for art to speak not to a larger group of people but perhaps a larger variety of people. This has been my goal in the three years that I have been here, to have my work not necessarily dissolve boundaries between mediums or cultural references, but to dissolve boundaries between people.


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, p.135
THE WORK

First Paintings

When the idea to use "screens" in my paintings first occurred to me, I was heavily influenced by the photographs of Cindy Sherman, in particular the color photographs from 1980 like Untitled Film Still, no. 66 and Untitled no. 74 which show a costumed Cindy Sherman standing in front of a back projected screen. The use of back projection in these photographs alludes to the special effects techniques used by directors before the advent of green screens to show the illusion of space when filming tricky scenes on a sound stage. I had seen this technique used in past films by director Alfred Hitchcock and even in current films like Kill Bill in 2003-04 by Quentin Tarantino. And while I was drawn to the difference in clarity and color that these films and the photographs by Cindy Sherman suggested, between the "real" foreground and the projected background, I did not want to make such clear distinctions between the backgrounds and foregrounds in my paintings. For me, the background was just as important and interactive as to what took place in the foreground, again making reference to the use of green screens in cinema today.

It was also during this time, I was looking extensively at the seemingly over-exposed paintings by the artist Luc Tuymans. These paintings, like 1999's The Room or 2002's Still-Life, are painted in the way to suggest that the paintings themselves are emanating an almost eerie light. Writers on Luc Tuymans' paintings have made connections between this light and the light that emanates from a computer screen or television set.\textsuperscript{14} What I found peculiar about the bleached out look of these paintings was the evenhandedness in which the light in the paintings was handled. By having the light appear to be emanating in an even tone over the whole canvas, it flattens the painting without necessarily losing the illusion of space. The light in these paintings also carries with it a psychological effect. The brightness of the light and the fuzziness of detail in Tuymans' paintings give the work an almost dream-like state, of a memory slowly fading away where one cannot recall all the details.

\textsuperscript{14} Luc Tuymans, Phaidon Press Inc., 2003. p.82 and p.152
The resulting paintings that I made while investigating these artists and issues, differ in size, composition, and technique but were similar in theme. The theme was simply that of seeing. It was a conscious effort on my part for paintings like Playing Oedipus, Blind Hindsight, Re-deconstruct, and Expose, to set up conflicting scenarios in each painting in the hopes of discovering a new way of seeing. This focus on “seeing” is reinforced in the paintings by the inclusion of objects such as glasses (Playing Oedipus), reflected images (Expose), and the more obvious reference of blindness (Blind Hindsight).

In addition to this underlying theme of “seeing”, each of these paintings dealt with my own internal concerns. Playing Oedipus is essentially a self-portrait. The painting depicts myself wearing what appear to be joke glasses, glasses with a plastic protruding nose and plastic mustache rolled into one. Yet, the only thing really fake in the painting is the mustache. The glasses are my own (I need them in order to read) and the large nose was passed down to me through generations of Italian ancestors. The specific separation of my own glasses and nose were to show the intention of disguise with the impossibility of actual concealment. The glasses and mustache are also a symbol of adulthood and masculinity. The glasses have traditionally been regarded as a sign of intelligence or smarts, but in my case have the connotation of aging as well, in that I now need them in order to read. The thick full mustache proves my superior masculinity as the passage from boyhood to manhood often coincides with the ability to grow facial hair (again, I did not and could not grow this mustache.) But again, the glasses and the mustache are clearly separated from the rest of the face and it is because although they are clearly part of me, I still do not feel comfortable with what these things symbolize. The intention of the painting was not to imply that I am uncomfortable with the idea of growing up and taking on adult responsibilities. I feel uncomfortable because I do not know what the responsibilities are for the adult male today. The painting was intended to show my uneasiness with wanting to play the part of a man but no longer understanding what that role requires.

I returned to this idea of ambiguous masculinity in the painting Expose. The painting shows a flasher opening up his trench coat to expose himself to what one can assume are people inside an office building. Society deems flashers to be degenerates,
yet I knew that people would be drawn to this vulgar display as again, “people tend to be extremely similar in their vulgar and prurient and dumb interests.” Understanding this basic human desire to see what the flasher was exposing, I purposely situated the flasher so his back would be the viewer. The only access for the viewer to see what the flasher has exposed would be through the reflection of the office building window. However, the reflected image in the window is again the back view of the flasher. The viewer cannot and will never be able to see everything. Expose also underscored my inability as an artist to fully rendered the internal issues I was trying to convey to my viewer. Because of the nature of language and signs, I could never truly expose myself to an audience.

Tourist Series

The paintings, Playing Oedipus, Blind Hindsight, Re-deconstruct, and Expose, failed to live up to the standard I was reaching for, in that they still seemed to rest on that kind of “a ha!” moment of illumination. These paintings were using ironic statements in order to lead the viewer to what I felt was a pre-established conclusion. It was at this time too that I was frustrated with investing myself with internal concerns and wished to make a work that spoke more of the external world around me. I began conceiving of a series of paintings that would focus on different aspects of the same issues and would include only the most basic of elements to convey these ideas. These paintings became known as the Tourist Series.

The Tourist Series was heavily influenced by the paintings of Manet from 1866. These paintings, paintings like The Fifer, Matador Saluting, and Young Lady in 1866, showed Manet’s interests in a realism that no longer required faithful renditions of reality. Paintings like The Fifer, Matador Saluting, and Young Lady in 1866 show a single individual dressed in costume standing in the center of the picture plane. What is interesting about these paintings is how Manet handles the space surrounding the figures. The figures stand on a ground plane that dissolves seamlessly into an empty background. There is no clear distinct horizon nor is there any indication of a wall in which the figure
is standing in front of. This situation is exasperated further with Manet’s limited use of shadows underneath the figures, which give no help in determining how far back the space around the figure goes. The space may be ambiguous yet it still carries with it a sense of depth. We, as a viewer understand this space because of the advent of photography. During Manet’s time when photography was first developed, photographers used flat backdrops behind the people they were photographing. Manet not only co-opted this look, but treated it as a new form of reality. He understood that how images were being viewed through the camera lens would carry over into how people viewed other aspects of their world. Manet foresaw people’s acceptance and eventual dependence on photography’s depiction of reality.

With the Tourist Series, I wanted to use some of the same elements that Manet did in his paintings from 1866. I incorporated a single figure, or tourist, in the center of each picture plane, but rather than have the figure surrounded by the photograph-like space that Manet had, I used the idea of a monochromatic screen that contained images from war movies. I wanted to allude to the idea of a digital-like space that had both depth and flatness much in the way Manet’s paintings referenced the flat yet deep space associated in photograpy.

With this series, I wanted to try and tie together the seemingly disparate elements of tourism, military actions, and the art world. I saw the tourist, not as someone on vacation, but as a costumed spectator. The tourist is an outsider, someone not commonly associated with the place, group, or even time that they are participating in. Yet, the tourist does not typically bring any sort of outside perspective to these new experiences. The tourist instead tries to be absorbed into these new experiences, to disassociate themselves in a way from his/her own identity in order to adopt the persona of the place, group, or time that he/she has come to experience. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. In other words, there is an attempt by the tourist to surrender oneself for the experience of a greater whole. But the tourist is incapable of this self-surrender because the tourist’s experience is a finite one. I think it would be safe to say that most tourists are visitors, or people who could not or do not wish to establish themselves as permanent fixtures in their new surroundings. As a result, the tourist comes to view the experience of his/her new surroundings with the knowledge that their pre-established identity will
understandably remain the same well after the new experience is over. Therefore, the
tourist can never fully surrender himself or herself to the idea of the experience. The
tourist, not really being able to be a full participant in the new experience that they seek,
is left with maintaining an illusion of full participation. Tourists often do this through the
purchasing of souvenirs and the taking of pictures, it gives the appearance that the tourist
was a full participant without actually having the tourist explain his or her particular
participation. In a sense, it is the forgery of an experience.

The most troubling thing I find about this scenario of the tourist trying to maintain
an illusion of full participation, is how easily it can get out of hand. The more
photographs taken, the more souvenirs bought, the more in touch the tourist seems later
to have been with a new experience. However, constantly pursuing the “look” of
belonging leaves less time to actually experience belonging. What I am trying to say is,
the more a tourist tries to appear to be part of the given experience the more they stand
out. I wanted to emphasize this in the paintings from the Tourist Series with Tourist
Series, 6.6, 6.25, 6.28 and 12.7 all showing figures in a position that would draw a
considerable amount of attention from others. Whether it is from their attire, like the
Mickey Mouse ears in Tourist Series, 6.6, or from their actions, like using a camera
phone in Tourist Series, 6.25, each figure seems ridiculously focused on the wrong thing.

The artist as tourist was another connection I wanted to make with the Tourist
Series paintings. The artist, after all, is deeply invested in the forgery of an experience.
Manet evoked the experience of photography with paint in his paintings from 1866. I
myself am trying to evoke an experience involving a tourist and a scene of war. What is
perhaps more sinister for the artist as tourist is the thought that the artist can also be seen
as a visitor to the art world, one only interested in short term concerns. As the years go
by, there are increasingly more and more people becoming visual artists. With the
increasing number of individuals in the field and the booming prices of artworks at
auction houses, there is more pressure for an artist to establish themselves NOW in the art
world with little thought or concern for their future participation. Just like the tourist, the
artist can get sucked into pursuing the “look” of belonging to the art club and just like the
tourist, they and their work can become out of touch with the very experiences that they
are trying to convey. I tried to express this danger in Tourist Series, 6.28. The painting
shows a tourist, complete with fanny pack and hat about to snap a picture for future credibility. The would-be photographer faces left, focused on something outside the picture plane, but in the background an image of a World War I soldier faces right. The soldier, armed with a rifle, is focused on the danger ahead. Essentially, the tourist/photographer has his back to the action and has turned away from what is important.

All these ideas of the tourist also influenced how I perceive America. I began to wonder if America, as a country, could be considered a tourist. This thought was partially stimulated by the current political climate and with the country still at war in Iraq. However, my intention was not to make anti-war paintings, nor did I want to portray war as some sort of joke. What I wanted to do was honestly question the similarities between how a tourist sees the world and how America as a country sees the world. I wanted to put my experiences of war, which is only through the images that I have seen on TV and in movies, in a context that showed reverence to the idea without it necessarily falling into satire. In the Tourist Series, I decided to include the images of war from war movies like Saving Private Ryan, MASH, All Quiet On The Western Front, and Pearl Harbor, on a clear and distinct “screen”, different from my previous paintings where I tried to blend the background with the foreground. I also intentionally kept the background screen monochromatic. This gives the background a cold feeling of remembrance or recollection that precludes the viewer from romancing these images of war. By having the tourist stand in a space that he could easily walk into, but having that space overtly separate, provides each painting in the Tourist Series with the inclusion and distance needed to talk sincerely about the issues concerning tourism and military action.
Cindy Sherman *Untitled Film Still*, no. 66, 1980

Luc Tuymans, *Still-Life*, 2002

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, no. 74
1980

Luc Tuymans, *The Room*, 1999

David Levinthal from *Hitler Moves East*
1975-77

Thomas Demand, *Zimmer (Room)*, 1996
Edouard Manet, *Matador Saluting*, 1866

Edouard Manet, *The Fifer*, 1866

Edouard Manet, *Young Lady in 1866*, 1866
Playing Oedipus, 2005

Expose, 2005

Blind Hindsight, 2005

Expose (detail), 2005

Re-deconstruct, 2005