Moments of Revelation

by

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Ruby Tuesday’s crab cakes may have been the absolute best choice for lunch I’d made in weeks. The anticipation during everyone’s conversation at the table was exciting. Spending an afternoon with friends and food. What could be better? The eight of us hadn’t seen each other in over a month. As her phone whistled, Christa squeezed her husband John’s shoulder with a look of concern. She left the table to answer the call. A few minutes later Christa reappeared with a look of urgency. The color completely drained from her face as she announced, “Kyle confessed to cheating on Jana. He just left her and the kids.” The table was silent. No one moved. Stunned, no one knew what to say. Pure emotion quickly emerged. I was angry with Kyle, totally judging him as an inconsiderate dad and I was heartbroken for the betrayal Jana must be feeling. The next thing out of Christa’s mouth changed my life, “John, go find Kyle. He must be hurting and he needs a friend. Don’t let him be alone right now.”

Christa’s response of mercy toward Kyle surprised me more than the news of Kyle’s cheating. Here’s the good news; through counseling the marriage recovered and personally witnessing such an immediate response of mercy was life changing for me. I’ve since wondered if Judas would have weathered any differently if someone would have gone to him with the same
response of mercy after he had betrayed Christ. Character changing moments like these inspire my work.

Christa’s response was a Revelation for me. It triggered a paradigm shift in my thinking. Within relationships and daily interactions with people, considering more than one-person’s perspective has become a sought-after observance. Seeking the crux of a matter, reexamining things normally taken for granted, asking questions first, and postponing judgment based on what we initially see or hear has proven to be an invaluable practice.

Taking a similar approach within the realm of art making I attempt to share my discoveries. I do not presume I have the power to change someone’s mind or supply answers to each individual need, I can only address the perceptions of my environment. I collect moments of revelation and try to visually give them away as a drawing or painting.
My work is based off my faith. From that world view, things come together for me. My work is spiritually and relationally based. I became a believer in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ thirteen years ago. This life altering belief occurred around the same time I became serious and purposeful in my understanding and practice of painting and drawing. My faith and work are interconnected. My love for God isn’t complete until it is expressed. There’s is a quote from the 1981 movie, Chariot’s of Fire, that has resonated with me for years after I saw the movie, “I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.” When I paint and draw I feel God’s pleasure. I believe there is a source evident within the DNA of art, a starting point that feeds the work. Personal interests, beliefs, and observations that lead to questions make up the artist and, as a result, make up the art. My personal identity pulses through every creative process and, inevitably, each work of art is on some level a self-portrait or a journal entry. The physical and formal aspects of my research buttress my intent and content. I use symmetrical compositions to create a meditative space for thought. I use expressive mark like a love language and often a piece will begin as a spiritual necessity. I’m persuaded into thinking that drawing is similar to prayer. Like C. S. Lewis, "I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me
all the time—waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God—it changes me." Drawing, like prayer, changes me. Mark making captivates me and visually captivates the viewer. The unity produced in a work through variety of mark lures a viewer into a work. Drawing as a short hand and expressive way of describing what the eye or mind can see engages the imagination and affords me the freedom to immediately record an idea and the viewer to engage the work. Formally, it's a pleasing visual habit I've been using for years. Its foundational, decisions based on the elements and principles of design come into play when I make a mark and react to it.

Psychologically, I believe the visual history of the hand on the surface of canvas or paper presents a human connection to the viewer. I need a place to think and my process is meditative. Drawing or painting is a catalyst that allows me to enter a quiet place of conversation between myself and God. Upon completing a work, I hope the conversation can continue between the viewer and God.
After my first year at the Lamar Dodd School of Art my research changed. Most of my work prior to spring 2009 has attempted to state biblical insight and has incorporated the figure to address human nature and experience. My research at the Lamar Dodd School of Art by began as a continuation of seeking terms, phrases or idioms that I could define visually like the 2006 piece, “Fellowship”. (Fig. 1) The Cambridge Dictionary of American English defines “fellowship” as “a friendly feeling that exists between people who have a shared interest or are doing something as a group.” I visually defined “fellowship” by drawing two figures in a two-man boat because sharing a small boat with someone involves sharing so much of the same experience. In terms of interactions between the viewer and the work, I see the human figure as universally relatable and timeless. All of a viewer’s existence inhabits the human figure. It functions as a point of reference. In conjunction with a common experience, the representation of the human figure can connect a viewer to a work of art across thousands of years and still be relatable and understood. As long as humans exist, make art, and view art, the human will be a timeless subject whether depicted as a figure, symbol, or metaphor.
In order to visually define the word "meditation" as "devout religious contemplation or spiritual introspection" I relied on the idiom "chewing the cud" and substituted a cow for the human figure. The cow acts as a bridge for the definition, a more literal yet metaphorical translation of the figure. With charcoal and black pastel I drew a 5-foot by 7-foot dairy cow, "Meditation". (Fig. 2) Across the subject I painted ten 1 inch squares, unique by color, each representing a letter of the alphabet. Together the colored squares spelled the word, "Meditation". The alphabet found it's way into other work as well. Several critiques led me to realize my work was too coded and unaccessible to the viewer. My intent to inform the viewer with biblical insight was not successfully communicated. It appeared that art as a visual language really asked leading questions better than it gave direct answers. I began a search to find the best way to ask the right questions that could guide the viewer toward biblical insight and the hope of personal revelation. My intention is to give the viewer a validated personal take on my work while basing the work on biblical truth. Scriptural inspiration and moments of revelation remained but the function of my work and the methods I employed to communicate changed. I abstained from any overt sentiments. A work that's telling the viewer too much information can overwhelm and prevent the viewer from seeing themselves within the work. It's not as engaging and applicable to each individual viewer and leaves no space for personal reflection. A Mark Rothko painting (Fig. 3) is a good example of a painting that has spiritual intentions and creates space for reflection, but this work is too abstract. Rothko's work is figureless and, for my intentions, too open for interpretation. Crossing the divide between the viewer and the painting is harder without the human figure. I need the human figure to give my narrative meaning. I want to provide more
direction for my purposes of sharing revelation. Showing or asking questions became more important to me than communicating through encoded answers.

As a visual language, I have found myself believing that art asks questions better than it gives answers. So I seek to create work that will invite the viewer to reexamine and acknowledge a lack of information in order to focus them on the available information. I limit information with the hope of opening up the applicability of the work to the viewer and transporting them to a meditative space where they can perceive answers. I employ a single saturated hue as the background transcending a normal environment and entering a spiritual space. Creating a condition that allows discovery and reflection drives my research and begins engaging conversations. This notion is exemplified in the "Notice" series. (Fig. 4) The religious references of my work relate to pre-renaissance art, when the major patron of the arts was the Church. However, I inform the viewer with the formal vocabulary of renaissance art.
creating the sense of the anonymous gives the viewer permission to safely join the group, engage, and project one's self into the work. The anonymity becomes a capacitor for reflection. The content was open enough for the viewer to project his or her own assumptions to questions that were unanswered. What are they looking at? What are they waiting for? Who are they? Then more questions arose: What do people ignore? Why? What do they notice? Why? As a whole the series became a series of questions. When displayed as a group a viewer or group of viewers multiply and sustain the work. It's repetitive. Looking at the back of someone looking at the back of someone else, etc., looking toward infinity. (Fig. 5) To disengage the piece and walk away sets you apart from the group. There's a certain inclusive versus exclusive experience that intrigues me. There's a concealed identity, a veiling, plus a personal and public duality that led my research forward to the Box series.
Around November 2006, you'll see I began to use a square as a linear frame within the picture plane and behind many of my subjects. i.e. "Bluebird" (Fig. 7), "Plumb line" (Fig. 8), and "Utensils" (Fig. 9). It started as a template for size constraints and desires but soon after I broke the boundaries of this motif that I will refer to as the "framework" from this point on in this report. My drawings began to use the "framework" as something to mediate the push and pull of the space within the composition. Upon entering graduate school, the idea of visual definitions captivated me. Works, as visual definitions, that included the "framework" were "Meditation" (Fig. 2) and "Presence". (Fig. 10) During the creation of these pieces I realized I began to favor the framework as aesthetically pleasing to the point of almost needing the framework to consider a work to be complete. The "Notice" series (Fig. 6) was my attempt to create some work without this formal crutch, but I soon revisited the "framework" with the "Box" series.

In order to become more informed with the broader implications the "framework" suggests I decided to go through a book of mine, Signs & symbols in Christian art by George Wells
Ferguson. According to this book a circle relates to Heaven when viewed as the perfect geometric shape. The square, in contrast to the circle, is the emblem of the earth, and of earthly existence. In consideration of what I found, the “framework” could represent being "of" versus "in" the world/earth, a scripturally based concept.

"Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.” –1 John 2:15 (Holman Christian Standard Bible)

For the grace of God has appeared, with salvation for all people, instructing us to deny godlessness and worldly lusts and to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way in the present age, while we wait for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. --Titus 2:11-13 (Holman Christian Standard Bible)

With this new body of work, I took the “framework” and reinvented it three-dimensionally in the form of a “box”, and it became the focus of my most significant work.
The "Box" series (Fig. 11 - 21) is comprised of both drawings and paintings. Each piece consists of seated or standing figures wearing cardboard boxes. The figures, either sharing a box or existing alone inside a box, are placed within a plane of pure infinite hue. The plane of hue serves as a duality of flatness and infinite space dipping into what I want to seek to give a presence to in my work, the eternal. The boxes usually have a different color base that vibrates against the color plane while both the figure and the box are drawn with thin ink-like coats of brown. Information is focused and a beautiful variety of fresh mark abounds within the definition of each box and figure. (Fig. 12) Through saturated color and symmetrical composition I invite the viewer's appreciation of skillfully rendered subjects and the consideration of those subjects to be metaphorical. The concealed identity of the figures further allows for these considerations and the personal applicability of the metaphors investigated. In the midst of creating this new body of work, I made the framework three dimensional and the focus of the series instead of abandoning it. Partnered with the plane of color playing against loose brushstrokes of translucent gesture, I realized I was drawing with paint which brought with it many of the aesthetic pleasures I inherently enjoy with drawing. It's ironic, I've taken what I compositionally loved in the past and partnered it with what I've conceptually come to admire in my "Notice" series.

This is important because the box is a limitation for the figure (Fig. 20) and the above scripture references imply that becoming too caught up in the world can lead to the loss of a life-giving, loving, meaningful life. Loving God and loving people equals a life full of relationships not objects. In my "box" series the figures are veiled and blinded by an object. The box appears to
read as a barrier that the figure cannot, chooses not, or naively doesn't recognize the need to escape.

The metaphor of the box and spaces broadened as this series progressed. Viewers began to ask what the box meant and what was going on inside. The plane of color, used as the ground, became psychological, the figures were inhabiting a form of faith, lies, identity, limitations, a secret, a false belief system, or a limited perspective. Mental space and spiritual space became a focus by replacing the background of my photographic reference with one saturated hue and capturing a sense of the abstract within the rendering of the box surface. (Fig. 15) Capturing the abstract, visceral immediacy of my mark making and balancing the depictive aspects of a work that one can commune with is very important to me. Poor consideration of form and function could run the risk of presenting dead facts versus, what I would consider, presenting the truth in love.

The same perception of inclusivity versus exclusivity from the "Notice" series reappeared but these paintings acted more as a presentation than an invitation to join or enter the box. The invisible versus visible came into play responding to much of what I was reading at the time.

"We have lost an awareness of the invisible and eternal. The world is too much with us so that the invisible and the eternal seem to be quite forgotten or at least we are not aware of it. We're only briefly aware of it when somebody dies."

-A.W. Tozer, The Attributes of God Vol. 1
Like my previous series, the box series began with a question: Why and how do we hide? I wanted to deal with isolation, and compartmentalizing. I believe we were created with the need for community, and communication beyond ourselves. Veiling and perspective became significant while questioning what feels safe and comfortable. I felt the box began to represent the unknown, a void for the viewer to fill with their own projections. So I created scenarios where the figure, consumed by a cardboard box, was clearly limited by the level of physical interaction they could have with another human being unless they shared a box with someone. (Fig. 21) Within my own struggles for my work to reach out and make the personal something both accessible and local I found this series addressing the same issue. Asking questions is a great way to encounter someone else's inner dialogue with the hope of understanding. The hope of relationship. It's seeking common ground and a person's heart, not the box.

In “Box No. 6” (Fig. 17) I added another element, a light source within the box. Another perspective emerged in my dealing with this series and I began to think about light as a metaphor for knowledge and the box as a metaphor for innocence. I relate innocence to the box. Innocence is a veil representing the unreconciled self to sin. It's odd to think of innocence as darkness but I think it's true at least in the sense of knowing. Illumination comes with the recognition that innocence is dangerous. There's a freedom in purity that doesn't lead to destruction. So the question is, "What is purity?" It's the redemption from sin. In light of these paintings, it's the removal of the box.
The "box" series reflects and in some ways documents my own spiritual questions regarding faith, innocence, purity, community, human nature, relationships, and truth. The biblical definition of faith continued my investigation. Faith: A firm conviction in what cannot be seen. In 2 Corinthians 4:18 it states, "The things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." What's inside the box? What's outside the box? Can we see the invisible if we look with the heart and not our eyes? How do you do that? I think relationship is key so my figures began to share their boxes with other figures. A fellow artist once said, during a critique, "A secret can control or shape your entire life." Do these boxes keep us from influencing the lives of others and being influenced as we live this life. Intimacy or superficiality? That's our decision. That's our opportunity. It's a relational lifestyle. If we walk around in a "box" we prevent anyone from truly knowing us and we may never get to truly know anyone else.

The box has provided a means of addressing identity and the unseen. As much as I continue to be intrigued with these concepts I wonder if I can ever get away from the occupation of the box.

"God Almighty is running His world; the day will come when God will lift a cloud off the world and they shall gather in admiration from everywhere and say how wonderful God is" - A.W. Tozer, The Attributes of God Vol. I
We are under occupation. This blinding oppressive cloud will one day be completely gone. 1 Corinthians 13:12-13 states: “For now we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, as I am fully known. Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.” Now we see in part but then....whole. No lies, no masks, no false belief systems, no sin. We will be boxless.....
"Blind M." (Fig. 22) is what I believe to be the first of a new series continuing with my theme of the unseen and identity. A representational portrait of a female face veiled with a loose blindfold stands illuminated within darkness suggesting they have submitted to this blinding or blindfolded themselves. I chose the blindfold because it limits the subject's sight and only partially limits their identity. The tension between what the facial expression of the subject connotes versus what the assumed emotional state of a typical person would be when blindfolded is intriguing to me. It seems to evoke a lifestyle of trusting others despite the unknown. This series, in contrast to the "Box" series, employs a highly descriptive paint handling that focuses on classical, technical transitions of hue and value. Although this piece started with the initial compensation for a loss of a sensory faculty, the affinity with the image, the idea of persecution, and the idea of interrogation points me to my faith. The color field and composition reflects the sense of the subject by surrounding the subject and recalling darkness. A shared sense of what the subject may see using darkness as this specific color atmosphere leads me to a verse from the second book of Corinthians, chapter five. Verse seven states, "For we live by faith, not by sight."

Suddenly living with trust despite the unknown makes sense.
The Figure rendered through dynamic mark making within symmetrical compositions is the form that makes up the vast majority of my work. Through the viewer, the subjects in my work are metaphorically activated. As the figures, boxes, cows, or clouds become metaphors for humankind, innocence, meditation, or the presence of God, they guide the viewer toward biblical insight and the hope of personal revelation. Engaging the viewer’s perspective with an assembly of captivating mark and inspiration has been the success of my work. By making the personal local, a viewer’s unique interpretation of common experiences can be shared. Composition is paired down to a simple formula of figure and ground with limited distractions in order to become meditative for contemplating the subject and asking questions. When a viewer perceives the subject and arrives at questions they can project their own personal memories and subjective reasoning upon the work. Gaining a new perspective is possible but one must engage and accept the invitation.

I intend my work to act as a solarium, a space for growth and the reconsideration of internal definitions. Multiple perspectives can point to truth. My work is for the consideration of new
perspectives, an invitation to investigate and enter into a dialogue of basic human questions regarding faith, innocence, purity, community, human nature, relationships, and truth I have had the privilege to consider and desire to share.
Fig. 1, Fellowship, charcoal, mixed media on paper, 70" x 48", 2006
Fig. 3, Mark Rothko, Orange and Yellow (Albright-Knox Gallery, 1956)
Fig. 8, Plumb line, charcoal on paper, 16" x 20", 2007
Fig. 9, Utensils, charcoal on paper, 14" x 14", 2006
Fig. 11. Box No. 7, oil on canvas, 60" x 72", 2010
Fig. 12. Box No. 11, oil on canvas, 66" x 84", 2010
Fig. 13, *Box No. 3*, charcoal on paper, 24" x 24", 2010
Fig. 15, Box No. 9, oil on canvas, 46" x 60", 2010
Fig. 16, Box No. 8, oil on canvas, 42" x 48", 2010
Fig. 17, Box No. 6, oil on canvas, 46" x 72", 2010
Fig. 18, Box No. 5, charcoal on paper, 24" x 24", 2010
Fig. 19, Box No. 10, charcoal on paper, 18" x 28", 2010
Fig. 20, Box No. 12, oil on canvas, 42" x 45", 2011
Fig. 21, Box No. 13, oil on canvas, 30" x 35", 2011