INK ON PAPER, OR, HOW I MADE ONE PAINTING IN SPITE OF MY SELF

by

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But, above all, I would like to thank my parents for supporting my endeavors, unconditionally and in the full knowledge that I am certifiably insane.
All artists, however humble, are hung like bears.

The desire to be right and the desire to be honest seem opposed in the discussion of Art. Since I do not desire to be correct, I will opt for honesty instead and as simply as possible describe to you how I made one painting, Oil on Canvas.

In my studio, a very unkempt place, there was a painting, a large painting which was complete. A complete painting in a working environment cannot last long. The messiness will disrupt it, make it too stolid. I have to change it. Therefore, the piece Oil on Canvas came about originally because an older painting remained on my walls too long.

There is another significant event, specifically regarding this work, which took place before it was begun. I have a painting in my bedroom which is titled Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes is a very important painting for me and is responsible for the direction my work has taken, both in form and mood. On a particular day, I awoke from an afternoon nap and I noticed a patch, a sewing patch, I had placed on the wall next to this painting. The patch is an "S". The white "S" outlined in red interacted perfectly with this painting, but Sherlock Holmes was finished. I thought for a while and realized I had to paint another Sherlock Holmes, this time with an "S" outlined in red.

Sometime thereafter I found myself in my studio, the aforementioned "complete" painting there on my wall staring blankly like a still-born child. I had to change something, so I got to work. I marked off an area with black
lines, the area the size of Sherlock Holmes, maybe larger. As always, I picked up my largest brush out of the bucket that holds all my brushes, all dirty, and covered the area with whatever color occurred. In this fashion I can see the size of what I have done.

The next day I cut the canvas and removed everything outside the black lines and it felt great-- the possibility of success and of change. I cut an "S" out of the extra canvas, painted it white, let it dry, and painted its outer edge red. While it dried I experimented with the canvas on the wall. I realized I was not interested in another Sherlock Holmes. I needed a discovery, not an "invention". I had no desire to be a puppet of clever ideas. I had to experience physically the discovery that produces a painting, otherwise I would learn nothing, become nothing. I tried pure black with a stripe of white serving as a landscape; I tried blue with a strip of sand-colored land. Everything was stale, lifeless. I came to understand that I was adhering too closely to my original intention and it was preventing chance-taking. I immediately took the brush in my hand and marked over the entire canvas. When I returned the next day I was determined not to paint well; I would not desire to make a good painting. I remembered the old questions I usually ask myself while I paint, "What is possible in a landscape?" and "What can happen in this landscape?". I was thinking about objects and what objects I might fit in out of necessity and not out of desire. So I began to think more realistically.

I have always been interested in shape and mass. I have never desired to paint illusion. My first significant experience with art was my discovery of the art of the insane, uneducated and isolated. Their art is solid. Even flat paintings on metal or wood are objects, objects in our world. It is this solidity that affects me. It is immediate. For these reasons I discovered that a person
did not have to abandon simplicity and directness to be a great artist. I discovered that a person did not have to be Michelangelo to be great.

As I contemplated my next significant move with this painting, I began to consider the painting as if it were not a painting. I asked myself, "How does this object defy gravity?" and "How does it hang on the wall without assistance?". If it is not painted it is not real. I considered painting strips of tape, but decided against it because it was too abstract. Then I remembered a drawing by a young boy named Pier Francesco that I had found in Italy the summer before.

I had hung the drawing on the wall in my bedroom with band-aids because I didn't have any tape or glue. As the summer went on the drawing fell off my walls over and over again because the adhesive was not strong enough to withstand the humidity; by the end of the summer band-aids were holding the band-aids that held the drawing to the wall. I knew this was the next decision for the problem of my painting. I didn't care whether I was right or wrong. That is discovery.

I spent two edgy days painting these band-aids. I am more accustomed to expressive painting, or perhaps a better expression is immediate painting. That is, painting whose purpose is the result of spontaneous action; however, I plowed ahead with my own doubts and painted band-aid after band-aid. I arranged them as I completed them, with no desire for pattern or system. I only considered how I would place them if the painting continuously fell, as if the band-aids lost their grip, allowing the painting to fall like the drawing by the Italian boy. Then I went back into the first section of the painting.

Adhering to the two basic components of Sherlock Holmes, a striped color below and a darker one above, I used lead white to paint a string of land as the base because I had decided to use band-aid-colored paint for the air above.
That is, I wanted to have the band-aids set against the color white so that there
would not be too much of a blend as these objects crawled into the piece. The
piece is in reality only the organic rectangle. It is a painting of a painting.

I continued to work with the feeling that I might be a fool. Who paints a
collection of band-aids? I erased color by changing its tone, adding black or
yellow, trying to give a sense of physical movement or touch to each brush
stroke. I wanted the process of its Making to be as much a part of the art as its
shape, its object, and its color.

It still wasn't enough. It was too comfortable, monochromatic. It wasn't
empty or crowded. It was all in-between. It was tasteful and decorous. So I
had to introduce an element to break its expectedness. I knew it had to be a
thing with a name. I find meaning in a humanless landscape, so no people. I
decided on a collection of trees. I would like to pinpoint an exact cause why I
chose pine trees but I can't. In Pier Francesco's drawing, Santa Claus stands at
the foot of a Christmas tree with presents underneath and colored bulbs in the
limbs; R.A. Miller has made trees of cut tin. I remember thinking about
Marsden Hartley's paintings of mountains and trees. There is no clear-cut
answer. Nevertheless, I placed them in the painting with the larger of the two
forcing its way out of the bottom edge of the frame or land, just as the band-
aids did to the left.

A side issue is lead white paint. I was very nervous using the material,
because I became unaware of my actions as I painted. As I approached
completion I became convinced that I was poisoned and that the lead in my
body would erase my memory, preventing me from completing the painting.
As you see, doubt feeds on itself, but doubt is a natural aspect of discovery.

At this stage, I had a central rectangle (although not hard-edged) with
objects crawling in and out. I desired this transition because I believed and
still believe that it denies a sense of the arbitrary to shaped objects. Furthermore, it lends to them a sense of solidity and believability as they crawl from illusion into a state of objectivity. Their physical sense as shaped objects is intensified.

Afterwards, I painted and then cut out of another canvas two more large trees, but there was something too repetitive about their shape. Each tree, while of different height, was identical in terms of shape. In this situation, the uniformity seemed far too blunt; I considered abandoning the painting. I had decided that if I could not create spontaneity or manifest it by my ability to choose, then my painting could not have life. I stopped painting because I was angry. I was angry because my painting was not invested with life. It was invested only with decisions.

Despite my reservations, I knew that the painting was entering its final stage. In one week and a half the painting had to be at the museum in order to be included in the exhibition, but I was determined not to complete the painting out of mere necessity. I needed a sense that it could not exist in any other form.

One afternoon out in Bishop, Georgia, riding in a Jeep with a friend I noticed the pine trees on the roadside. Instantly I discovered my mistake. Shapes are very different among evergreens. Some resemble Gothic spires. This was the first connection. I went back to my studio and, with lead white, changed the shape of the largest tree. I painted a smaller tree of the same shape and four more trees, each less than one foot tall, and cut them out. It was the discovery I was hoping for.

Lastly, my friend Bill Davis and I spent forty-eight hours non-stop, attempting to stretch them individually. It is very important to stretch these
paintings as closely as possible to the way other more traditional paintings are stretched, so that the edges of the stretched pieces are thick.

This necessity for thickness is purely personal. It derives from an experience I had before I ever considered being a painter. I was walking through an exhibition of paintings by a group of undergraduate painters at the College of Charleston. Those artists had all executed paintings on identically thick stretchers regardless of the length or width of the image. I remember thinking that these painters could not have cared one way or the other about what they were doing because not even one had considered that the side of their painting was as much a part of their work as the color red, blue, or yellow. I realized every decision is as much a part of the work as another.

Reconnecting with these influences, I was able to begin physically constructing the piece. I traced each individual shape on a piece of thin wood, cut it out, and repeated the process. Afterwards I determined the thickness I desired for each piece and cut pieces of wood to place between the two traced and cut pieces. After nailing the wood construction together, I wrapped the sides in canvas, then glued the painting to the front. I varied the thickness of each piece in order to create a sense of focus on the central painting and to create a sense of illusory space.

I completed the piece the day it was due with many cuts and blisters on my hands, as is appropriate for a painting of band-aids. This is the process which produced *Oil on Canvas*. I would like the emphasis to rest where it belongs: on the work, not the words or reproductions which follow. Theses are rarely fourteen inches thick.