Into That Good Night

Submitted to the Art Department, Allegheny College,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

John Conant

30 April 2012

Project Board:

_____
Sue Buck

_____
Darren Miller

Pledge:

_____
John Conant

Acknowledgements

I would like to start by thanking Sam, Matt, Kelly, Randy, and Anna for your help with pouring the bronze. Next I would like to thank Jacqui, Sarena, and Kelly for your help installing my work. I would also like to thank Sarena and Mahone for being there for me when I need someone the most. Then I would like to thank Val for answering all of the questions I had, helping with the pour, giving me the idea to make a metal frame, and helping to install my work. Next I would like to thank Darren for being there when I needed a new perspective on my work, for helping me take the first steps toward being an art major, and for agreeing to be my second reader. I would like to thank Rich for creating a positive impression on me as my first art professor. Finally I would like to thank Sue for all of her advice, encouragement, and guidance over the last two years. Without all of you I would probably not have this body of artwork.

Artist's Statement

At night with nothing to distract me, fear overwhelms me, and I feel the weight of isolation press against me. Every concern and worry is magnified; they are what my existence hinges on in that moment. I need to escape fear, but it is firmly latched to me. In this body of work I try to understand this recurring story.

I have this need to analyze all of my feelings, to understand the inner workings of my brain. In the beginning of the semester I had an overwhelming need to escape from society and enter the wilderness. What about society made me hate it to the point I had to get out? Eventually, I reduced it to fear of being consumed by society: that I would lose sight of my identity in an attempt to survive. But how can I guarantee that I would not lose my sense of self

out in the wilderness? So such a reaction to the fear of being consumed would be completely irrational. I realized to act on such a fear would be to completely lose myself in fear. This is the point my project started to shift. I began to try to understand fear and how it affects me.

I quickly started thinking about the nights when fear would overwhelm me and fill me with anxiety. I would find myself in a state of complete fear, when I reach this state I do not trust anything in my vicinity, so I move. I do not stop moving because doing so will let me think, and I do not trust myself to think. So I move until I am exhausted, and finally fall asleep. These nights were the most intimate understanding of fear I had. This is where my bronze and photographic installations had to start, but I did not want this to be the end of the story. I was becoming aware of this consumption by fear, and I needed to find a way to fight it.

Prior to this project I had never thought of fear as something I could try to fight. I thought of it as a powerful churning force so powerful that it could quickly destroy me entirely. I was also aware that fear needed me. It could not live without me, so it would keep me alive. I could trust fear to keep me alive, but how much would it cost. Of course when fear would completely overwhelm me at night, it was not helping me.

It began to take on a life outside of my identity; I began to notice a give and take between us. To understand this relationship let us think about Hobbes' state of nature. This state of nature is described by Hobbes as a war of all against all. So in this state we can see that a person would not trust anything. This would be a state where everyone is completely consumed by fear. Then as humans progress from this state of nature and organize, they begin to trust certain people (i.e. no longer fear them). So fear is no longer all consuming, it becomes variable and we can

therefore become aware of it.

In my junior seminar work, I looked at the social anxiety and the loneliness that had consumed my day-to-day thoughts. I managed to generalize the eventual fate of all of my relationships as a sort of passive termination. I had never been able to open myself up enough to take my friendships to that next level. Even though I was starving for human intimacy that this next level would bring, I denied myself this need out of fear. The art, however, focused on my anxiety and actual behavior. This semester I dug deeper to explore the cause of my actions.

During my junior seminar I also began to work with a combination of photography and sculpture. I cannot remember how I ended up coming up with the idea of joining the two together. I think the most interesting pieces were where I had the sculpture and photo physically interacting (see illustration 1). We start by empathizing with the figure; his terror makes the eye he is ripping at seem almost real, but by ripping into it he also makes us aware that it is just a photograph. Once the eye becomes a photo, we start to see an underlying madness to his actions that this fear is not entirely rational.

Another important thing that has carried over from my past work is my use of eyes. For me eyes are terrifyingly beautiful things. I felt that eyes had a life of their own that they could see my secrets if I looked at them. Every time I would look at someone's eyes the entirety of my character was being weighed. Eyes had become the object of all of my social anxiety. So it was natural for me to represent anxiety in my art as photographs of eyes.

This semester I began to make a distinction between fear and anxiety. I saw fear as the cause of anxiety, so it makes sense now that I would choose to use film with eyes to represent

fear, but I did not come to this conclusion until the end of my project. In the beginning I was concerned with trying to find a concrete way of representing fear. I wanted to leave no doubt when the viewer saw it that they thought, “Oh, this is fear.” Of course I do not know how I had planned to do this, and I eventually focused on finding my own personal representation. I began to think about the seductive nature of fear. When I think about seduction, I am reminded of the serpent from the story of Adam and Eve. So I wanted to have fear be something that could twist and wind like a snake as it seduces prey, which is how I got to using film. Now the only thing I had to figure out was what to put on the film. At first I wanted to try and capture this idea of a total fear. I struggled to find this balance between generality of the idea and the specificity of the imagery. I realized though that even if it is a specific fear I was representing, it could be extended to fear in general. So I decided to photograph eyes, but I did not feel other people’s eyes were appropriate to put on the film. I wanted to depict the source of this fear of eyes. I needed to photograph my eyes because my anxiety of looking other people in the eyes came from the fear that my eyes would betray my secrets.

This issue with my own eyes led me to leave my figures without them. Why did I think this was necessary? Even now the idea of sculpting an eye bothers me. At least with other eyes, they have a give and take, but with a sculpture's eyes there is no giving. I feel like giving my sculptures eyes would have given them too much power. I needed them to be vulnerable.

This led me to simplifying their faces. I wanted the primary focus to be the gesture of the figure. When figuring out how to do this, I was influenced by Degas' waxes especially his dancers (see illustration 2). There was elegance in all of the poses. Every part of the body felt

like it had a purpose which is something I had struggled to achieve with the poses I was using. Another thing I was trying to get out of my figures was an expressive gesture where the emotion is seen through the pose and a face is not even necessary. Figuring out what to do with all of the body parts that were there without purpose was my main obstacle in getting the poses right. I needed to find a way to engage the entire body in the action to create a sense of urgency. Once I got to a point with one of my waxes where I did not know what to do, I would just leave the body parts out or half complete. This simplifying of the figure was my eventual solution.

I did not really begin to see the possibilities in a simplification of form until two things occurred. First I read an essay by Jean-Paul Sartre about Giacometti. In this essay Sartre talks about Giacometti's fear of the infinite:

> But space, even if naked, is still superabundant. Giacometti has a horror of the infinite. Not of the Pascalian infinite, of the infinitely great: there is another infinite, more devious, more secret, which slips away from divisibility: “In space,” says Giacometti, “there is too much.” This too much is the pure and simple coexistence of parts in juxtaposition. Most sculptors let themselves be taken in by this; they confuse the flaccidness of extension with largesse, they put too much in their works, they delight in the fat curve of a marble hip, they spread out, thicken, and expand the human gesture. (Sartre 186)

This idea of not taking up too much space seemed to make sense for what I wanted to achieve in my sculptures. I wanted to emphasize the idea that this entire story was taking place within the figure's head. Keeping them from achieving a full physical presence, not just keeping them from

taking up too much space, seemed like the starting point. I began to think what body parts were really necessary for the gesture of the figure, but this idea would not become fully realized until I changed my figures starting point. Typically I would begin each figure at the torso, but on one sculpture I started with the hand. What this simple thing allowed me to realize was my figures did not necessarily need a torso. This is where I began to seriously think about what the figures really needed.

I realized that by completely stripping each of the figures of whatever body parts were not needed, I helped emphasize the nightmarish state in two ways. By having body parts appear and disappear throughout the story, it is playing with the limited awareness of dreams. People are not constantly aware of all of their body parts especially in dreams where memories of the dream are less formed than reality. In a similar manner, I play with the scale of the existing body parts. This is most apparent in *Into That Good Night #5*, where the figure is desperately ripping apart his torso with an enlarged hand to get at the film trapped in him. By enlarging the hand that is ripping him apart, I make his primary focus getting rid of his body which is where he physically feels the anxiety, and his secondary focus actually removing the fear.

The fact that every body part disappears at least once except the head is important to creating a dream-like state. There is even a point where the figure has only a head. This creates the implication that none of this would exist without the head that the struggle is all in the figure's head. I pushed this concept even farther by enlarging all of the heads making the bodies seem even smaller.

Another important thing to consider when making my figures was the texture of the wax.

When I think about texture, the first person that comes to mind is Giacometti. He has a great physicality to his mark making. When I saw *Walking Man I* (see illustration 3) the first time, I approached it from the front, and when I was about 15 feet away from it, I saw a cleave in its chest. The violence of the mark unnerved me. I knew that it had come from an intense feeling, that it was the mark that had to be made in that moment. Whatever Giacometti was feeling when he made this sculpture, you know he felt it completely. Although I might not show it in the surface quality of my bronzes, I feel like I need to be feeling and thinking what the sculpture is as I make it.

I am more directly influenced in my mark making by Degas. The first bronze of his I saw was *Dancer Looking at the Sole of her Right Foot*. I was fascinated by the selective smoothing and layering. Then in other works I found the gestural quality of the surface with his fingerprints something I wanted to get as well in my work. I love the feeling that he is working as quickly as possible before he loses the moment he is trying to capture.

So there might be some confusion as I talk about my wax figures, since I said that they were bronze earlier. Let me explain the process of making a bronze sculpture. I start by making a wax sculpture. Next I attach a system of wax rods that will allow bronze to flow in and let air out. Then I invest all of that in plaster and sand. Once the mold sets, it gets put in a kiln for two or three days to burn out the wax. During this time I have to make sure the temperature does not get so hot that it destroys the mold. Next the molten bronze is poured into the molds. Then I have to cut off the system of rods I added to allow the metal to get all the through the mold and reintroduce texture to those areas. This can be done in many ways, and for these pieces I used a

cutting disc to create lines on the spots and bled them out into the original sculpture. Next I add a patina to bronze, which is using chemicals to alter the color of the bronze. Finally I need to drill into the bronzes to add posts as needed for the installation of each piece.

Now that I had bronze and film the question became what environment did they belong in? Originally I wanted to put the sculptures in an environment that would overwhelm the viewer, make the viewer feel the terror I felt. I had been looking at the work of Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz. A lot of their works are highly detailed environments. They try to put the audience in the story. This is what I had been hoping to achieve, but I realized that this wouldn't help me understand fear anymore than I already did. It would only make the audience feel the same feelings. It wouldn't help them gain any insight either, so I had to rethink. Then I thought about one piece that I saw of theirs, *Sollie 17*. The way it was installed was the door was slightly ajar and Plexiglas blocking the opening. So you had to shuffle into this crack to look into the room. I doubt this was how it was originally meant to be displayed, but in this method of display the viewer was isolated with the art. To create an isolated voyeuristic viewing experience was my new goal. Another artist who pushed me in this direction was Ilya Kabakov. With his work *The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment*, he created a room where the audience couldn't enter, but they could peer through the slats of the boarded up door. I eventually realized this idea didn't work either, and I decided on an open and barren installation. Even though I didn't end up creating these highly detailed environments, what these artists helped me do was become aware of the environment of my sculptures.

I have been hinting this entire time at trying to tell a story with my sculptures. When I set out to do this, I knew I had to limit the number of scenes used to tell the story. So I had to condense and simplify the story. I started by identifying the basic points of a plot: the introduction, initial incident, rising action, turning point, climax, and conclusion. The benefit of this approach was that it would create this disjointed narrative which would enhance the dream-like quality I had been trying to emphasize in the work. In the introductory scene (see illustration 5), the figure begins looking at a length of film by holding it up to the light. I see this scene as fear warning the figure about all of the horrifying things in the world, gaining his trust by demonizing eyes. This entire time the majority of the film still hiding from the figure; he does not know the full extent of this thing he is beginning to trust. With the way he is already falling backwards, it makes you think that if he was fully aware of the vastness of this new friend, he would quickly reject it entirely.

Then we see the second piece, and the figure contently accepting the film into his body. This is a disconcerting jump in the narrative. How much time has passed? I am led to believe that the figure has simply set aside and forgotten about this new found fear in the back of his mind, and now as he sits in a moment of contentment, fear is working its way into the core of his being. His look seems distant; the source of this happiness is inside his own head. The body has swelled substantially with still more film to enter. Now is when we become aware that the film might not be good.

Looking at the third piece there is more confusion. The film is gone, replaced by a photograph of an eye. The figure is terrified and is falling off the edge of the pedestal trying to get away from

the eye. The film has completely internalized itself, and has caused the figure to start seeing the object of his fear. This the state of complete fear. The figure's only thought is escape. The lack of limbs except the one leg means there is no catching himself, and as he looks down, turning his eyes away from the object of anxiety, he knows there is no going back.

The fourth piece serves as the turning point between internalization and externalization. There is no body just the head and film. The film is erupting from the head and pulling both the figure and itself out of free fall. By erupting out of the eyes and mouth, it seems like the figure had no choice in the matter. The figure is on the edge of forever losing himself. The fear, just as it is about to push the figure beyond this edge, releases it hold on him. It is not out of kindness that the fear acts, but in the interest of self-preservation. How can fear exist without its host?

Now we get to the climax; the decisive battle scene. The figure is in the process of sacrificing his body so that he can finally be rid of the film. He sees no other option, except ripping his body open at the place of anxiety to get at the fear. He has become afraid of fear. He can't even trust his own thoughts anymore. He continues fight until we arrive at our final scene. He has ripped away the entirety of his torso, and still the film is latched firmly to his arm trying to pull him down. He is still hanging on, desperately waiting for a time when he will be free of his tormentor.

In the beginning of the semester, I thought a lot about the poem *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night* by Dylan Thomas. I began to associate the title line with my own situation. I was determined to fight fear to the very end before I would let consume me again, but I did not

understand fear. How could I fight something as intimidating as fear without understanding it? I realized that the only way to start fighting it was to dive into it. I had to go into that good night to understand fear. The very thought of willing opening myself up to anxiety terrified. I knew there would be an emotional toll. I was not if the benefits would be worth it, but I was curious about the beast that was haunting my nights. I needed to know more. I came to the conclusion that fear is a paradoxical thing. In order to vanquish our minds of it we need to be afraid of it. So fear is inevitable, and trying to fight it will lead to my own destruction. I am left with my original reaction, escape. How can I escape something that follows me everywhere? I found this answer in a quote by James Baldwin, "… the paradox which dictates that the only means of escape from this human condition was the acceptance it…" (Weatherby 121) This is not an acceptance of defeat or failure. I think of it as a neutrality between trust and fear. That once you reach the point of acceptance that fear will just exist and so will you. I have not figured out if I can attain such relationship with fear. Will my acceptance of fear during the day keep me mind free at night or will I once again plunge into that good night?

Work Cited

Sartre, Jean-Paul. "The Search for the Absolute." Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings. First Edition. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. 185-189. print.

Weatherby, W. J. *James Baldwin, Artist on Fire*. New York: Laurel, 1990. Print.

Works Consulted

Degas, Edgar, Suzanne G. Lindsay, Daphne Barbour, and Shelley Sturman. *Edgar Degas Sculpture*. Washington [D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2010. Print.

Pincus, Robert L. *On a Scale That Competes with the World: The Art of Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz*. Berkeley: University of California, 1990. Print.

Illustration SEQ "Illustration" *Arabic 1: Jack Conant, *Repetitive Fate #3*, 2011, Bronze and Archival Inkjet

Illustration SEQ "Illustration" *Arabic 2: Edgar Degas, *Grande Arabesque, Second Time*, c.1885/1890, brown plastiline, wax, and cork, 48.1 x 56.4 x 21.7 cm, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, Source:http://www.nga.gov/fcgi-bin/tinfo_f?object=110299

Illustration SEQ "Illustration" *Arabic 3: Alberto Giacometti, *Walking Man I(det. head and chest)*, 1960, bronze, 71 3/4x10 1/2x38 in, ArtStor Slide Gallery, Source: University of California, San Diego

Illustration SEQ "Illustration" *Arabic 4: Edgar Degas, *Dancer Looking at the Sole of her Right Foot*, 1896-1897, bronze, 18.2x8.5x8 in. , *HYPERLINK "http://www.clevelandart.org/collections/collection online.aspx?type=refresh&searchoption=1&csearch=Credit line:Hinman B. Hurlbut Collection"*Hinman B. Hurlbut Collection, Source: www.clevelandart.org

Illustration SEQ "Illustration" *Arabic 5: Jack Conant, *Into That Good Night #1*, 2012, bronze and film, (bronze) 6.5x7x5 in.

Illustration SEQ "Illustration" *Arabic 6: Jack Conant, *Into That Good Night #2*, 2012, bronze and film, (bronze)5x2.5x5 in.

Illustration SEQ "Illustration" *Arabic 7: Jack Conant, *Into That Good Night #3*, 2012, bronze and archival inkjet, (bronze) 3x11x3.5 in. (photo) 15.5x15.5 in.

Illustration SEQ "Illustration" *Arabic 8: Jack Conant, *Into That Good Night #4*, 2012, bronze, film, and steel, (bronze) 5.5x6.5x3 in. (steel) 72x20x20 in.

Illustration SEQ "Illustration" *Arabic 9: Jack Conant, *Into That Good Night #5*, 2012, bronze and film, (bronze) 6.5x6.5x9 in.

Illustration SEQ "Illustration" *Arabic 10: Jack Conant, *Into That Good Night #6*, 2012, bronze and film, (bronze) 18x2.5x4 in.