Kaczynski is to Walden as a Predator Drone is to Batman.

Evan Fitzgerald  
James Madison University
1. Kaczynski is to Walden as a Predator Drone is to *Batman*.

Evan Fitzgerald

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

School of Art, Design, and Art History

May 2013
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Abstract

I can see an image of Darth Vader making graphs that describe the Singularity with his left hand while tightly rendering Odysseus gouging out the eye of Polyphemus with his right hand. At the same time Vader is reciting philosophy and critical theory in both English and binary code through a speaker in a mask that filters his true voice.

The written portion of my thesis provides perspective into my artistic practice while elaborating on the ideas behind the two-dimensional allegorical panel paintings from my thesis exhibition, *Kaczynski is to Walden as a Predator Drone is to Batman*. I use symbols to construct imagery that aims to provoke thought surrounding our current relationships with technology.
Kaczynski is to Walden as a Predator Drone is to Batman.

The title of my thesis exhibition, _Kaczynski is to Walden as a Predator Drone is to Batman_, is as an analogy. I want viewers to familiarize themselves with my subject matter while introducing them to the way I construct thoughts through the juxtaposition of disparate elements. In most respects I am a traditional artist in the way I rely on the established device of allegory to convey meaning. The work is a reflection of my day-to-day thought processes. I rationalize the real world by relating it to the fictional iconography that is most familiar to me. I use symbols to make connections across time and space, fact and fiction, and the natural and artificial in an attempt to make sense of the world as I experience it.

Henry David Thoreau wrote Walden in 1854. At this time the steam engine was the highest form of technology. For Thoreau the world was moving too fast, so he left civilization to live in a cabin by a pond. Ted Kaczynski is better known for a series of terrorist attacks that happened between 1978 and 1995 that earned him the moniker, the “Unabomber.” Kaczynski hated technology and decided it needed to be stopped. His response to technology was violent. In contrast, Thoreau wrote peacefully in his cabin by Walden Pond describing all the changes and happenings in nature resulting from the seasons’ change. Kaczynski instead fashioned homemade bombs and tried to slow the progression of technology by destroying its developers. Each man rejected technology and returned to nature. Their relationship lies in the realization that technology irreversibly changes the world.
As Thoreau and Kaczynski share a relationship through technology, so do Predator Drones and the fictional character of Batman. In the year of 2013, discussions of drone warfare are common. Americans cannot agree if the use of drones is morally right or wrong. The very same argument surrounds the mythological character of Batman. Why is Batman considered a hero? He hides in the shadows in order to beat criminals into submission with the use of technological wizardry. Predator drones hide in the clouds waiting to drop bombs on unsuspecting terrorists. Both of these scenarios seem acceptable because the people on the receiving end are considered “bad guys.” Batman and the drones are questionable “good guys”. Both Batman and Predator Drones represent the use of technology at its most advanced state. The pairings of Thoreau and Kaczynski, Predator Drones and Batman, illustrates decisions to either embrace or reject technology. These analogies represent the decisions we all face when evaluating the presence of technology in our lives.

As a maker of traditional two-dimensional images, it is increasingly difficult to compete with today’s advanced modes of image making. With 3D television sets and holographic image projections, computer animated worlds with fully customizable digital avatars, billions of terabytes of visual entertainment accessible anytime through augmented reality glasses and hand held computers, there is little room left for static imagery that hangs on gallery walls.

I have more of an appetite however, for the thoughts of philosophers made manifest through the tangible objects of art makers. A familiarity with contemporary mythological characters is a favorite past time, but no longer provides sufficient stimulation on their own. In addition to knowing which planet Chewbacca hails from and
what Bruce Wayne does once the sun goes down, I am focusing on the real world and what can be revealed after reflecting it back out through my own personal lens.

I am interested in the power of symbols and the response to charged imagery. Drawing from memories and our collective image repositories—I use objects as signifiers to construct complex referential systems. By removing these elements from their original contexts and allowing them to inhabit the same picture plane, I have created a level playing field where contrasting elements of iconography can interact. My work is—at its core—a visual language reliant on allegory investigating the ubiquitous influence of technology and its role in our lives.

I draw because it gives me the ability to create my own mythologies. I look to the science fiction and mythological stories I grew up on in order to make connections to what I see as their contemporary counterparts. I learned to draw from copying pages out of comic books. The stories were never the focus of my attention, rather the realization that the images were visually arresting.

I have gorged myself on science fiction and fantasy ever since I saw dancing brooms in Disney’s *Fantasia* and the jump to hyperspace in George Lucas’s *Star Wars*. These films allowed me to see things that were completely new and previously unimaginable. Like a child learning about animals in the Zoo, I watched these films in awe imagining all the possibilities and new discoveries that awaited me in the future. Except I was keeping my fingers crossed for jet packs and laser swords. What fiction stimulates in me I can’t completely articulate because the attraction doesn’t lie in any one particular element. What has become clear is that I need more of it, all the time and in all its forms. So the goal became to create more of it. Looking back on my artistic
development, I see fiction helping me to better understand the real world by experiencing it a second time. Fiction is rooted in reality and in order to be successful it needs to tell us truths about the world we live in.

The lure of the unknown and a love for adventurous storytelling are common themes throughout my work. While I am exploring specific subjects and ideas, the work remains equivocal. The multifaceted nature of my imagery aims to provoke thought about the digital age while mimicking its delivery methods of image inundation, manipulation, and regurgitation. Through layers of transparent imagery a variety of marks aim to speak from several places and one simultaneously.

These marks also work to find a relationship between the hand-made marks in comparison to the computers modes of image making. From pixels on a screen to halftone dot matrixes, the computer works to fool the eyes just as an artist’s vocabulary of marks can. Each technique requires distance in order for the illusion to work. The correlation I have created between the two modes of mark making diffuses part of the dichotomy between man and machine.

As a fan of science fiction I am excited when things from this genre become real. I am amazed when science fiction becomes science fact. High tech gadgetry is one of the most powerful and influential forces on the planet. An awareness of technology’s importance has prompted this investigating and specifically what it has meant to me.

Technologically induced changes have affected everyone by altering the way we live our lives. This has been a common and reoccurring theme throughout my life. When I was born the Internet was just beginning to take shape. Personal computers were
too expensive and rare. There have been a lot of changes in the last 30 years due to technology, and as a result the world and I have changed along with it.

These ideas regarding the advancement of technology are relevant to my work because they led to the rekindling of my fascination in our future. Kevin Kelly, the executive editor of WIRED magazine and the author of several books revolving around technology writes, “About 10,000 years ago, humans passed a tipping point where our ability to modify the biosphere exceeded the planet’s ability to modify us. That threshold was the beginning of the technium. We are at a second tipping point where the technium’s ability to alter us exceeds our ability to alter the technium”\(^1\)

Thoughts like these have led to the animal and machine hybrids in my work. I have been asking myself what the world will look like once the natural and the artificial are fused as one. If everyone is capable of everything, then the world will be a very different and perhaps unrecognizable place. The animal’s appearance in my paintings represents the downside of off-loading all our tasks and responsibilities onto machines. These animal and machine amalgams are capable of many different things. Each addition to their natural abilities has resulted in a diminishing of their original being.

*Half-Stepping to the Paradigm Shuffle I*, and *II* are the most recent paintings in the show. Centrally located in each panel is an American buffalo. All the animals represented in the show are distinctly American. These animals have many capabilities, but are encumbered by all their upgrades. American buffalos are primarily grazing animals. My buffalos are equipped with propellers and farm equipment that would increase mobility and the quantity of their harvest. The buffalos are a caricature of myself using electronics to make my life easier.

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The second layers of *Half-Stepping to the Paradigm Shuffle I and II*² are examples of technology’s power. Viking ships were capable of exploring the oceans and shallow streams while traveling faster than any other vessel in the world. The Vikings ships signify advanced technology. Viking technology is what made them a powerful people. In contrast, *Half-Stepping to the Paradigm Shuffle II* depicts the Greek god Bacchus as an infant. The god is guzzling a bottle of wine while urinating at his own feet. The Greek god of debauchery is how I see America. Both America and Bacchus are depicted as powerful, yet gluttonous entities. Each born with great promise and potential, but are instead seen as the butt of a joke.

The third layer is the title. *Half-Stepping to the Paradigm Shuffle* implies that the paradigm shuffle is the name of a dance. When someone is half-stepping to a song, they are not fully participating in the dance and are only swaying to the rhythm. This is now my approach to all technology. Although I am interested in the promises made by technology to improve my life, I am hesitant to go full swing without first weighing my options.

In order to be removed from technology, one needs to be prepared to live at a disadvantage to those who embrace it. Machines today are inescapable. This is why Thoreau went to Walden Pond, and why Kaczynski lived in the woods for 25 years before he was apprehended. Since Kaczynski’s arrest, he has had the time to compose his manifesto in prison. In his manifesto Kaczynski writes, “When a new item of technology is introduced as an option that an individual can accept or not as he chooses,

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² Figure 16: *Half Stepping to the Paradigm Shuffle I*, 2013, Acetone Transfer, Acrylic, and Lead on Birch Ply. Pages 25-26
it does not necessarily remain optional. In many cases the new technology changes society in such a way that people eventually find themselves forced to use it.\(^3\)

I don’t completely share Kaczynski’s gloomy outlook. I accept technology along with all the possibilities and capabilities it supplies me with. I am also aware of technology’s shortcomings. One being that with each problem solved a new one is created. This cycle keeps us in a perpetual state of change that is both exciting and alarming. With technology, there is something gained and something lost. As a general rule, we would not accept the technology into our lives if we didn’t think what we gained wasn’t larger than what we lost. These are the types of things that are exciting to me while at the same time contribute to the anxiety surrounding technologies power.

Technological advancements accelerate our development but often times we cannot predict the outcomes of these potential paradigm shifts. I relate the unforeseen consequences of technology to the unintended effect the drawing machine had on my practice.

I now work in tandem with a drawing machine. Much to my delight, a machine whose original design was to be a mechanized part of a kinetic sculpture has emerged as a skilled and prolific draftsman. Its marks compliment and clash with that of my own. I see few distinctions to be made between the dismantled gadget and myself. As with all technology the machine is simply an extension of my own hand. The resulting imagery is a product of our collaboration.

A machine is meant to be precise, predictable, reliable, and repeatable. Yet, mine manages to create a seemingly endless array of minimalist abstractions. Surprisingly,

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through observation I have been taught the strength in simplicity. I have struggled with abstraction, both in my creation and understanding of its forms. Over time however, abstraction has crept into my practice like a parasite slowly consuming its’ host, or more akin to the relationship between a remora and the shark. By observing the marks made by the drawing machines, I have experienced some liberation from intent and precision in my work. I learned simplicity and spontaneity from a machine that is complex and calculated in its design to do the same thing flawlessly forever. After I intervened and added to the machines abilities, it in turn added to my own. A seemingly ridiculous story, but this process has added an important component to my work.

As I began to experiment with my own forms, my interests grew in the work of Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke. For decades Richter and Polke have explored the relationships between abstraction and representation through a multitude of painting approaches. As a painter whose primary focus had been the development of a vocabulary used to describe representational forms, it became crucial that I break free from the burden of representation in order to find my own voice.

Keeping in mind the relationship between man and machine, including this man to his machine, I have been investigating the language of mark making from both the human hand and the computers’ print. The goal it seems was to highlight their vast differences while allowing them to work together. Whether it’s the pixels on a screen or the moray patterning of dots, the machine mimics life so that it can fool the eye into seeing an image. The illusion is revealed upon a closer look, just as a painting can appear as if it’s a photograph until you walk closer and reveal a pile of marks. Each image works like two magicians performing tricks on the same stage while dancing to the
alchemist’s intelligent design. Not only is the work a comparison between two modes of mark making, but an investigation into the viewers relationship to the piece and how the image can change according to their distancing from it.

Each image contains separate forms that mingle through transparent layers. Some marks are clearly hand made while others imitate halftone dots and pixilated imagery. This contributes to the overarching theme of the artificial worlds relationship to the natural while creating images that require multiple points of perspective to be read fully. I am working towards creating imagery that changes drastically from every position in the room. So one read will not be sufficient, and a single interpretation will inevitably fail.
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