Where feet are as light as feathers (a world of things)

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Where feet are as light as feathers (a world of things)

Katie Zickefoose

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

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate my work and supporting monograph to my family and the Holy Spirit, the fountainhead by which all creative inspiration flows.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge those who have supported my artmaking endeavors including the faculty at James Madison University School of Art, Design, and Art History, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro School of Art and Art History, my family, and my fellow graduate students.
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Abstract

*Where feet are as light as feathers (a world of things)* is a combination of 2D work including painting, drawing, and prints, in conjunction with a written monograph that supports and gives insight into the work. Through a series of short stories, both fictional and nonfictional, fleeting thoughts, as well as research in critical theory and art history, I make connections between my art, my process, and my own earthly living.
TOTAL DEPRIVATION (My Toenail Fungus)

Every morning, after I wake up, I cut back the toenail, wash the nail bed and re-treat it. When I come home at night, I repeat these steps. Somehow everything that is wrong in the world is summed up in my toenail. It is infected with a fungus that I have tried get rid of for years. I’ve treated it daily with many different ointments, both natural and unnatural, but nothing seems to work. The toenail has given up and you cannot distinguish it from the skin surrounding it; there is thick, hard skin and soft, peel-able toenail. It is a nagging reminder, like hunger pangs when you would rather not stop to eat. After several months of treating the nail, I let it grow out, hoping that it will come back anew—born again. But it always comes back yellowed, and still made of many thick, squishy layers. I repeat the treatment process changing a detail that could have been a factor in its failure.

My toenail signifies the unavoidable failure in my effort to take care of my body properly, and my own mortality. My problem is simply one of vanity. However, those living with a chronic illness must know what it is like to be hyper-conscious of your mortality on a daily basis. Tending to your mortality not only grows wearisome, it also seems to prove a cruel point: through earthly work we keep alive, but only for a little time. I often go through spells where I become very tired of bathing. Brushing my teeth harbors a similar resentment.

As a child, I was perplexed by all of the laws in the Old Testament that centered on hygiene. As I grew older I realized that in the ancient Hebrew faith there was no compartmentalization of faith and actual day-to-day living. God was right there and He was aware of all your pooping. I liked that better than a god who was oblivious to such earthly things. I realized that the laws of the Old Testament were established to ensure less pain and struggle, and were intended to make life easier. In the end however, no one could possibly keep all the laws and everyone died.
In artmaking, there has to be a perceived struggle, but it doesn’t have to be grand and it doesn’t have to be overt. In fact, sometimes the more pathetic and stupid the struggle is, the better. In artmaking, the depravity of the mortal creating is essential. The artist is always striving toward a perceived idea of perfection, yet falling short. The key then, is to not be surprised, and instead become unaware of progression or regression. Artmaking is simply doing, just process with an understanding of the lack of control, the unknown outcome, and the worthwhileness.

In *Painting, Smoking, Eating* (Figure 1), a painting by Philip Guston, the artist exposes his mortality in an embarrassing way. Returning to the baggage of imagery in contrast to his Abstract Expressionist days, in *Painting* Guston depicts himself in bed painting, smoking, and balancing a plate of fries on his prostrate body. Red paint underneath his head signifies paint first, and blood or ketchup second. He almost appears dead, if not for the lit cigarette hanging from his mouth. The character in the painting is disgustedly pathetic--like an immortalized mummy of Pompeii who was unfortunately “caught” taking a crap. The artist exposes his gluttonous behavior that would later lead to his death by heart attack. In *Painting*, Guston portrays human nature in all of its doom and self-destructive behavior.

In Michael Hilsman's *Naked Somersault Yom Kippur Painting* (Figure 2), the finger of a stray arm barely touches an oversized tooth. I think of everything that can go wrong with that large tooth: a cavity, a root canal; it may have to be pulled, it will have to be picked at by the dentist, and it has to be cleaned twice daily with bristly hairs. In the painting, the tooth is dislocated, floating in a space—not in a mouth where it belongs. As I am looking at Hilsman’s painting, suddenly I have become the tooth, and the tooth becomes a signifier for human mortality.

Total deprivation, a term coined by St. Augustine, teaches that Adam's guilt is transmitted to his descendants, and enfeebles his free will. Any good work then, is still ego-
driven and indefinitely flawed. Proverbs 26:10-12 in the Old Testament likens a fool to a dog that eats his own vomit, and a clean pig who returns to wallow in the mud. Like animals, Augustine knew human nature to be tainted to the core. Dürer spoke of human work in a similar way when he stated, “Even our groping will fail.”

When I got home, my apartment had again turned into a rainforest. This time, the steam hit me just as I opened the door, fogging my glasses. The windows were steamy too, and I heard that the hot water heater was louder than usual. Luckily the ceilings were not as wet as they had been before. I looked in the closet to see a pipe leaking hot water into a basin beneath the tank. Gnats flew into my eyes and crawled up my nose as I looked for the valve to turn it off. I opened the breaker door and switched off the breaker to the hot water heater. As I stepped outside to see if my neighbors were home (they are usually gone months at a time and leave notes on my door in Russian and cigarette butts on my porch, (this lets me know when they are here)), I noticed a small hole in the front of the building, by which a small, white PVC pipe drained the hot water from the hot water heater inside my closet. It streamed down the brick and mortar and landed on my downstairs neighbor's air conditioning window unit. I got a new one, and the next day the old heater sat outside on my porch, homeless, begging and whimpering at me to let it back in.

THINGNESS: (Bricks, Ropes, and Oranges)

When I was shown my apartment for the first time, my Dad and I noticed that outside of the back window, located directly behind this particular unit, was a building and construction

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1 Ra McLaughlin. "Total Depravity, part 1". Reformed Perspectives. Retrieved 2013-2-14. "[Any person] can do outwardly god works, but these works come from a heart that hates God, and therefore fail to meet God’s righteous standards."

supplier. The apartment was adjacent to the backyard of the supplier, and all of their forklifts, two-by-fours, metal beams, and other things were clearly visible from the second story unit. The construction supplier was separated from my apartment’s parking lot by an ugly metal fence. It was a glorious eyesore. My dad, in his wisdom, was quick enough to ask the office manager if the supplier created a lot of noise—apparently it didn’t.

Inspired by my Dad's inquisitive attitude I began an online investigation to see if this particular apartment, tenants, and/or landlord had any reputation. I was lead only to an archived newspaper article online that chronicled a high-speed police chase ending with the police car inside one of the apartments. I quickly knew that it was the one I was shown the day before, as it was the “star apartment,” and the most newly renovated. This apartment also sat directly at the dead end of the street named in the article, and at the bottom of a hill that is so high, that from the top of it, the apartment is not visible.

This incident, only several years old, ended up with the tenant of the apartment in the hospital. While the criminal knew exactly where he was going, the policeman, unaware of the landscape, was suddenly inside instead of out. I would have liked to see the apartment in this state, with pieces of bricks, mortar, and glass strung about the lawn. Each piece of debris must have been picked out carefully from in between each blade of grass, like lice from hair. The 1950s building, laid brick by individual brick, was completely undone. The labor was undone as well—and that was the end of that. Comically, this incident would become an excuse of why nothing should ever be wrong with my apartment, according to my landlord; everything had just been redone and therefore was in fantastic working order.

In material-ridden society “it is impossible to act as if pre-imaging is possible.”3 As a painter, my practice requires a mental collection of things that must pass a rigorous test if they are

to find rest in the storehouse of my mind. Firstly, I discover the thing, either with my eyes, or in a hypnopompic vision. This thing must strike me as having an uncanniness. Secondly, I discover and then prescribe meaning to the thing, both consciously and unconsciously as I recollect experiences and perform through the process of drawing. Finally, in a painting I construct a pre-determined space where I drop these things.

Some of the objects that have passed this test are oranges, palm trees, ropes, bricks, and other various materials of the construction trade. These things do not solely consist of the fact that they are represented objects—it is rather their function, and how we use the thing. Like a jug, “whose character is defined by the poured gift of the pouring out, the giving of the outpouring can be a drink, the outpouring gives water, it gives wine to drink,” the orange is a sweet and juicy nourishing treat, and the brick is one of many uniform objects that through its communal nature can build great walls. The rope, through its various purposes can be used in a pulley, to lower things slowly, or to hang a criminal.

Meister Eckhart, a 13th century Christian philosopher, used the German word thing (ding) for God as well as for the soul.

God is for him the “highest and upper-most thing.” The soul is a “great thing.”

This master of thinking in no way means to say that God and the soul are something like a rock: a material object. Thing is here the cautious and abstemious name for something that is at all.

Almost immediately after I moved in, I noticed that this construction supplier had many men working as early as 6:00am. The sound of forklift noises as they maneuvered the metal fork under a large wrapped parcel, was like someone uncomfortably rubbing a party balloon—a

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5 Ibid., p.174
sound that seeped through my window. Lying in my bed and quietly listening, I counted how many times it took to situate the metal forks under the parcel by the sequences of the beep-beep-beep from the forklift shifting into reverse. There are many more unpleasant ways to be woken up, besides the sound of people working.

How did I not think that someone should be working all of the time? There were many days too, when they did not work at all, and I watched as the materials and machines sat in silence—hammers not hammering, and no beeping forklift. I wanted to see something happen, a machine doing something, like a messed up parking meter spitting out quarters. However I became complacent watching the flag on the pole “clank” over and over again, as the wind whipped through it.

ALLEGORY and EARTHLY WORK

When I got to the Hollywood sign, I realized it was made out of chocolate chip cookie, so I took a bite out of the “D”, strapped the “H” to the top of my car and drove back to my studio, where I used it as a model, drawing it from different angles and in different ways. It was a great model and very sexy to work with.

In a painting I construct a pre-determined space where I drop things. The things are unrelated at first, but as they become things that are painted they take new form. They become ridden with story and meaning, and the paintings as a whole become allegorical. Because of the lack of unity among the objects, both the artist and the viewer must pay attention to both the objects' relative independence and their associative juxtaposition. An allegory itself refers to a “composition made of personifications that are all reducible to a conventional set of meanings.”

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As in a Baroque still life, allegory is a mode of communication that cannot be comprehended simultaneously, but pondered piece by piece. It is naturally disjunctive, a puzzle pieced together; “it is as if something incomplete and imperfect that the objects stare out from the allegorical structure.”\textsuperscript{7} Objects become signifiers, and therefore allegory uses symbol as a form of interpretation.\textsuperscript{8}

I arrive at my allegorical puzzle pieces internally and privately. However many of my “things” have been used by artists for centuries before to signify similar meaning (figure 3). In \textit{Melancholia I}, Dürer illustrates “the disorderly life lived in competition with the Divine” (figure 4). The personification of Melancholia is an earthly builder surrounded by various tools of the construction trades such as a ladder, blades, and scattered nails.\textsuperscript{9} A wooden ladder leans against the masonry that seems to emphasize the incompleteness of the tower she resides in.\textsuperscript{10}

As the slumped demeanor embodied by Melancholia alludes, work can become emotionally taxing and feel meaningless in competition with the Divine. Artmaking is a form of earthly working, both in its physical and mental labor. As I paint rope I may want to depict a knot, so I will go through the process of tying the knot in my head. At that moment, I am no longer painting a knot, I am tying a knot. It is through painting, that I am attempting to tie any knot in the first place. Although I did not physically tie a knot, the exhaustion of having done so will accompany the process, as I most likely tied the knot wrong several times in trying to depict it properly.

\textsuperscript{7}Ibid., p.56
Rope in my painting, like any other allegorical imagery, is appropriated imagery. I did not invent the images, however through the confiscation of the image, in a new time, and by a new person, a new meaning is prescribed.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{Like a reverse wrecking ball, a large black balloon is jerking in the wind. It was tied down to the top of the building for reasons unknown; it is a failed weather balloon. Last year in the same spot, I noticed all the flat tires together tied and bound, like a beached whale, heavy and blubberful*, like something that disrupted everyone's summer beach vacation. Again, in the same spot, a wrecking ball took the building down slowly and unimpressively. It was a lot like tying up the whale, binding its fins close to the body, putting it on a large tractor trailer, and moving it through the bustling city to dispose of it “properly.” The gasses start mixing and heating up from within the bowels and then gurgle-bam-splat—you have whale blood and guts exploding. I can taste the blubber now, picking the whale parts out of my hair and my morning coffee.}

\textit{The wrecking ball was like a finger flicking a booger, only magnified 100x—not impressive at all. Sometimes it would miss entirely and simply graze the side of the building, destroying nothing, just upsetting some dust.}

*made of much blubber.

\textbf{MEANINGLESS WORK}

\textit{I feel like a blinded forklift in the middle of an open field, picking up and moving parcels that are not even there. I'm moving forward one way and lowering the fork and lifting it back up, only to realize there is no parcel on the fork. So I back up with a beep-beep-beep, and attempt}

\textsuperscript{11} Owens, Craig. 1984. "The allegorical impulse" p. 69
the same maneuver in a different location, completely unaware about the wrong location the whole time and that any effort was futile.

Walter de Maria speaks of meaningless work: or work that is performed without a means to an end. He says in order for work to be meaningless it must be concrete, abstract, foolish, honest, and not too pleasurable. Perhaps the most telling, it is always done alone. In painting, as in work, errors and “stumbling upon” occur and discoveries are made. It is in these moments that truths are decoded (that may appear to be falsehoods later).

Although a singular painting or drawing might have an end, the life of artmaking in relation to the artist has no definite end. One does not peak or fail. For this reason I always lamented the term “mature work” in reference to a high point in the life of an artist. Perhaps the “meaninglessness” of painting and drawing in contrast to work of the construction trades allows the artist to get more to the heart of earthly building.

ACTION/PERFORMANCE

I have put myself in the place of the man on top of the roof, lowering his friend down through the opening. What labor and tools will this require? Will the ropes break under the weight, and will the strands be splitting one by one? We are trying to lower him slowly and carefully, but the mat moves in jerky motions as it sways left to right. Now I am on the mat: physically paralyzed by my own body and by fear, but with nothing to lose. All my trust is in a magical physician who waits below as the crowd, alarmed by my dissension as from heaven, disperses to each side of the room.

I am Judas awaiting my fate, but I am trying to figure out how to hang the rope and tie the knot correctly so I might end his wretched life.

Bricks, ropes, and nails not only become timeless symbols of earthly work, but also serve as a metaphor for the process of painting. Unlike the construction trades, there is no blueprint for painting or drawing—so often a great amount of “taking back” by scraping, erasing, and destroying is necessary. I will often build a brick wall in my painting, only to tear it down. I’ve built a wall, knocked it down, built it up again, and ended by knocking out a brick here and there.

Rope serves as a link between a physical and spiritual reality for me, a sort of metaphysical thing that I can see strung throughout history. Physically, ropes more or less appear the same, however I believe they are filled with different spirit. Through the act of painting and drawing, I feel as if I enliven rope. Suddenly the rope I saw walking down the street, discarded among gravel and scattered bricks in a construction zone, was the same rope that was used to hang Judas, and the same one used in pulleys millenniums before. Rope in a painting is practically personified, and it knows exactly what its role is.

TRUTH IN FICTION

I often ask myself “can this be true?” and then its OK. If it can be true then it goes into the painting. If something feels false about it, it is simply left out. Of course it’s all fiction. However unlike bricks, oranges do drop, (they are not suspended by ropes), and fall naturally once they are ripe and hit the ground with a beautiful, earthly thud.

Through constructing new worlds there is a truth that surpasses day-to-day reality. “Making up” or playing “make believe” has always been an instinctual way for all animals to live; it is something we are in danger of losing as we grow up. Artmaking that results in extreme
straightforwardness seems to be missing something pivotal. Whether the bluffing comes in the form of abstracting or cartooning forms, or having surrealist circumstances take form, this language is essential to me as an artist.

Fictional writer Jonathan Lethem has stated, “for me, the truth is always about this muddying of actuality and metaphor. We live on a mingled plane.” Lewis Hyde describes the archetypical trickster character as one who imparts on us the “gratuitous untruth.” Referencing several animals that use artifice by means of survival, such as the octopus whose inky faux-wall is his means of escaping predators, Hyde proclaims the trickster’s role is to construct a lie that cancels out opposition and therefore creates the possibility of new worlds.

In an unfamiliar world, a heightened awareness is key to survive as an alien. This is where observation and clue hunting become pivotal. The “marks of the axe, the embers of the fire, the footprints in the snow mean the action themselves” and everything may be inferred from them. As someone makes his or her way around the inside of a painting, clue hunting becomes an important means by which to make sense of this different “painted world.”

**SPACE: INTERIOR, EXTERIOR, METAPHORICAL**

*Most days the bricks swing haphazardly, falling toward the ground slowly, appearing both small and insignificant as well as close and menacing, as a swarm of locusts could. But instead of locusts, they are more like spiderlings, with spinnerets thrust into action for the first time ever, which are catching a gust of wind and flying away. In this world, there is nowhere to*
go, so nobody stops what he or she is doing. If any bricks hit you, it is painless because they are suspended by rope and so their fall is softened—it is not like bricks are being hurled down from heaven. Ropes become twisted and knotted with each other in air and clusters of ropes and bricks, like concentrated meatballs in a sea of spaghetti, dot the sky. I am finally figuring out that it is always sunny in this world. Collecting the ethereal ropes, now earth-bound, I trip over mud clods and the ropes are draggling.

There are two kinds of concrete spaces: inside and outside; interior and exterior. A space is needed before something can happen—you need a stage by which characters can act. A space is needed to breathe in, to live in, and to die in. There is also another kind of space that moves between finite and infinite.

In my mind, space is on string. At one end is interior space, where we expect certain things to happen: in a library we know that the space is the best place to read books, in a kitchen we know it is the correct place to cook food. Next, near the center of the string, is exterior space or landscape. This space is always the metaphorical garden, where the most human of human experiences can take place. It is everyman's land, created by God, so it levels the perspective by which the space is understood. Somewhere between the center and the end of the string is mixed concrete space: both interior and exterior space, and both earthly and heavenly struggle. This can be seen clearly in Melancholia I, as Dürer contrasts the interior working space, with an open window through which we can see a miraculous sun. Finally, at the end of the string is abstracted space, where concrete space is rid of entirely.

The spaces in my paintings move between a definite and indefinite space. At first they perhaps seem more concrete, like spaces stuck in a particular place and time. However, it is my desire that the paintings move past this clear black-and-white definition. For example, the painting’s location could be in Hollywood, California, but the landscape looks wrong, the foliage
is not native, and there are bricks swinging in the air tied to ropes. The space in my paintings can exist in more than one location.

Horizon lines can be problematic, as they can tend to make a space more concrete. I try to either avoid them or make them nearly invisible. By doing this, I feel as if the space is less finite, and therefore more boundless. The idea of space both with and without bounds becomes important—there is a level of each in whatever space I create. Even though a space may have certain concrete limitations, the space should also have a boundlessness. Through the boundlessness, the space can become metaphorical. The spaces in my paintings are a combined space of places.

By not being able to put your finger exactly on the space, you start to ask questions: “Where is that place?; what room is this?; what exactly is going on in this place?; who exists in this space?” Your sister might be in a dream, but the person who is your sister in your dream does not look like her at all—she looks like a complete stranger. Still somehow, you know that she is your sister in your dream. Not unlike this strange experience, it is my hope that a viewer will decide to move into a space in my painting, and that it become a “vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled” a place where we can inhabit “which enables us to travel in another realm.”

NOSTALGIA and OVERPOWERING FEELINGS

I often close my eyes and in my mind enter through the front door of the house where I grew up. While there, I am instantly at ease as a silent and invisible observer. In the kitchen, my Mom is chopping vegetables in preparation for dinner. I have already passed my Dad who is outside working on one of the cars in the driveway. It is late in the afternoon and cool outside, so coming inside feels warm and comforting. Inside I wander through each room, where my sisters

and my brother are carrying out their separate activities. Everyone is busy at work. I have found a place where the best moments are frozen in time.

I find one of the most powerful things a person can do is visualize images. Visualizing can bring about a state of ataraxia, and a means of escape. I find paintings often depict scenes or things I want to see carried out, or illustrations of my daydreams. These visualizations have become important for me, and I know that something about them must convey a truth. I have always thought a painting has had the ability to shed light on an unseen truth, and by doing so, can be more real than reality itself. As the Apostle Paul wrote (1 Cor. 13:11-13), we are only capable of seeing partial, if not a miniscule amount of truth, to “only see a reflection, as in a mirror…then we shall see face to face.” This passage almost entirely sums up my desire as a human being, and my work as an artist—to see more fully and clearly.

The German philosopher Novalis stated that “philosophy is really homesickness. It is the urge to be at home everywhere.” Homesickness is essentially the same as nostalgia. Nostalgia intrigues me as a powerful and uncompromising feeling. Nostalgia’s power lies in its strength to satisfy more richly than reality, and as Kierkegaard stated “it has a security that no actuality possesses.” Although the frustrating ink wall of illusion that nostalgia presents has caused me to want to kick the door off the hinges again and again, its power is unmatched and its relentless torment is perplexing. I can't help but think that behind the deception lies some truth.

Philip Guston said, “I have a studio in the country – in the woods – but my paintings look more real to me than what is outdoors. You walk outside; the rocks are inert, even the clouds are inert. It makes me feel a little better. But I do have a faith that it is possible if you can move that

18 Ibid., p.21
inch.”19 If everyday life becomes inert as Guston suggests, I choose to regain the power through the paintings. There's something gratifying about painting in that it does not become inert like so many other things. Even though painting itself is a repetitive act, it is in its own way, new each time.

It may be impossible to experience what it is like to feel truly at home.20 Instead, nostalgia reminds me that on earth I am eternally homeless. Like a jazz musician riffing on the same tune, artmaking allows me to revisit homelessness and nostalgia again and again.

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20 Illbruck, Helmut. “Nostalgia” p.216
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Figure 20: (installation view), 2013.
Figure 21: (installation view), 2013.

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Figure 35: *Jade (earthly building)* (detail), 2013. Oil on canvas.

Figure 36: *Jade (earthly building)* (detail), 2013. Oil on canvas.
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