The University of Arizona School of Art
MFA Thesis Exhibition

April 12 through May 13, 2007

University of Arizona Museum of Art
Joseph Gross Gallery
Lionel Rombach Gallery
Marie Bower
Gerardo Castillo
John H. Clarke
Zak Cushing
Don Douthitt
Jessica Drenk
Eric Easton
Travis Feltman
Bettsy Garcia-Montijo
SJ Gibson
Kimberly Largey
Doc McCabe
Alan Skees
Kristin Skees
Angela Harden Wilson
Exhibition Essay
Marie Bower

My work explores my conflicted feelings regarding decadence and spectacle, which I am simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by. I was raised in a religious, middle-class household where humility and simplicity were highly touted and necessary virtues. Growing up, I felt a sense of pride in my background that was often mixed with envy. I was taught that the meek will inherit the earth and that less is more. While these statements are probably true, they are not much fun.

I no longer want to deny my immediate attraction to frivolity and luscious surface. I want to make art that is shiny and self-indulgent. History tells me that I am not alone. People have always been compelled to acquire vast amounts of material possessions despite the negative impact this has on society. Examples of this lust for wealth can be found in diverse sources, from contemporary entertainment to the art of the Rococo.

I construct sculptures by taking molds from cheap figurines that I obsessively acquire from flea markets and thrift stores. Many of these kitsch tchotchkes are descended from fine porcelain collectables that were produced during the Rococo. Often made from materials like plastic and plaster, these cheap collectables are readily available to a wide audience of consumers. At first glance my sculpture mimics what was once reserved for the elite. But much like a good forgery, upon closer examination the truth is revealed.
My latest series of work is about how cultural background affects identity. In the past six years, I have lived in three different locations: Laredo, Texas, Lawrence, Kansas, and Tucson, Arizona. I spent the majority of my first thirty-five years of existence in the border town of Laredo. Laredo has a unique culture that is exclusive to border towns. The vast majority of people living in Laredo are Mexican-American. Being a part of this majority, I did not often focus on my cultural identity; I simply existed. This changed when I re-located first to Kansas and then to Arizona. Being identified as an “other” for the first time made me examine my “otherness.” I became acutely aware of subtle but significant cultural differences. This introspection inspired a series of portraits and self-portraits that investigated identity. In addition to things such as occupation, race and social class, it is the little day-to-day things, such as the way we walk, talk, and interact that identify who we are.

Border Sneetches examines the topic of the proposed 2000 mile border fence and illegal immigration. The Sneetches by Dr. Seuss was an inspiration for this piece.
Hegemonic masculinity has contributed to contemporary misconceptions in the variety of the masculine. Post-modern and feminist disillusionment of maleness dismisses academic interest and certain depictions of masculinity as propaganda developed to limit the feminist movement. This “…newly-revived and reactionary moralism has continued to place the subject beyond the pale of serious exploration and assessment.” While practitioners of art debate whether masculinity is a worthy subject of study, social constructs continue to limit fluidity of masculine identity with unfavorable consequences.

Use of appropriated photographic imagery examines how the camera has codified and perpetuated a hierarchy of acceptable forms of masculinity. In process, each gelatin-silver print is roughly formed over the body post photographic development. Following initial casting, the form is finely sculpted immediately after it is removed from the body. Though some of the portraits’ photographic elements are abstract, their three-dimensional renderings create unique attributes that distinguish its subject matter.

Whereas the conventional figurative sculpture is associated with monument and sentiment, a photographic portrait functions more as an anthropological document. It is not my intention to harmoniously integrate these two mediums. I consider different modes of masculinity and histories that influence and affect my gender identity. For each stereotype, I limit personal preconceptions. The attempt to conform renders each object hollow and devoid of detail. Despite apparent substantiality, each photograph is au-naturel and surprisingly fragile.

1Alasdair Foster, Roberta McGrath, Behold the Man: the Male Nude in Photography, (1988).

1 Opposite, clockwise from left:
Super Tress, 2007, gelatin-silver, 70” x 34” x 13”
Untitled (Coplan), 2007, gelatin-silver, 68” x 34” x 12”
The Ideal Height, 2007, gelatin-silver, 70” x 34” x 13”

John H. Clarke

Appropriate Masculinity

Appropriate Masculinity

Appropriate Masculinity

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Appropriate Masculinity

Appropriate Masculinity
Zak Cushing

One is always responding to ‘what is.’
To respond optimistically is design.
To respond pessimistically is to accept unnecessary burden.

As artist and explorer, I am searching for bargains:
entire worlds contained within humble housings,
words that propose multitudes,
imagery beyond time and trivia,
neglected abundance, unfinished poetics…

On some occasions I draw, on others it seems appropriate to
search for a photograph. Some days I work with whatever is
handy. More often than not, nothing comes to my aid in record-
ing the overflow of fascinating information that the world pres-
ts. On these occasions, I forgive my incomplete abilities and
use the sense of loss as fuel for the fire.

I try to not get too bogged down in self-classification as any par-
ticular form of artist. Ultimately, the true camera is my skull. One
cannot do anything worthwhile with a sensitized surface if one is
not already a sensitized surface made manifest. The training to
be such a surface is ongoing.

“He saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it:
and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man’s insan-
ity is heaven’s sense: and wandering from all mortal reason,
man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is
absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised,
indifferent as his God.”—Melville

It seems that we humans have few questions worth asking. I
have two at this time. The first is leisurely, to be addressed in
art and play: what is beyond beyond? The second question is
practical and urgent: what happens at the end of thousands
of years of war?”
Don Douthitt

I knew what it meant to be a Christian, but that was before I knew disappointment.

During the last few years all of my relationships have experienced major difficulties. These times of loneliness have forced me to find strength and fulfillment outside human companionship and to reexamine my relationship to God.

Until recently I believed that a relationship with a perfect God would have to be perfect. In striving for that flawless connection I only allowed myself to express emotions of joy and adulation toward Him. This installation, Discovering Honesty, articulates the transformation that took place in my comprehension of God as I came to understand the strangely complex relationship I have with Him.

As His creation, my very body is connected to Him, and yet His words and presence remain ambiguous. Like a word on the tip of my tongue that I cannot express, His simultaneous presence and absence frustrates my being. In this piece the video images and audio are activated by sensors in the kneeler that respond to the biorhythmic pulses of the body. In this way, Discovering Honesty offers the viewer/participant the opportunity to share in and connect with my personal imagery through their physical presence.

(Left and right) Discovering Honesty, 2007, digital video and audio, electrodes, in wood and cloth structure, structure: 108" x 183" x 102", projection: 48" x 30"
Jessica Drenk

A natural history museum is a place of order, where specimens are divided into categories and classified, then neatly arranged in displays. The physical organization of the museum reflects the order we like to keep in our own minds by using language to divide the world into categories, naming and defining everything.

My work blurs the distinctions between categories. Changing the form of a familiar object, the definition of that object is also changed and confounded. As the meanings of objects are shifted, so is the way these pieces are displayed: the expected arrangement is left askew.

I believe there is value in looking beyond the category, the classification, the signifier—to muddle distinctions and see things out of order. The grey spaces in between categories, the things that do not fit into the classification, can reveal our standard modes of thinking and push us beyond the limits of the known. To step outside of the logical places in our minds and embrace the intuitive—this sparks important new connections between previously unrelated categories.

(Opposite) Q-tip Cluster, 2006, porcelain-dipped and fired cotton swabs, 7” long

(Left) Toilet Paper rings, 2004, toilet paper, wax, 4” wide
My current work attempts to analyze visual representation and the principle boundary of two dimensional art—that of the flat surface or plane. For me there is a certain fascination with the nature of space, particularly dimensionality in all its expressions and logical deconstructions, mathematic and visual, perceivable and theoretical. These ideas are informed by topics in theoretical physics that explore the universe in higher dimensions, and abstract art theory that investigates the innate nature of two dimensional art. I am interested in making art that attempts to find an intersection between representation and abstraction in an effort to reconcile the flat picture plane with the delineation of higher dimensional- ity, and can possibly fluctuate back and forth between the two modes. I am utilizing interior spatial delineations with linear perspective motifs and nonspecific spatial fields as mechanisms that consciously betray the principle boundary of the picture plane and simultaneously call attention to it.

(Unleft) Untitled, 2007, etching, collagraph, relief, 42” x 70”
(Below) Untitled, 2007, etching, engraving, collagraph, chin colle, 42” x 70”
Travis Feltman

My recent body of work focuses on systems and their organization throughout the universe, within communities, society, and within the human body and mind. A belief that intrigues me most is that there may exist a macrocosm within a microcosm and vice versa. I believe that organisms and environments at the molecular level can reflect what occurs on an astronomical scale. I also concentrate on filters within my work. I am particularly interested in human interfaces, such as language and the senses. I consider what happens internally and externally, and question whether reality is what we recognize or simply a mirage of what presently exists. Within my work and poetry I question whether these human interfaces act more as a limitation rather than an enabling factor in my life...
Bettsy Garcia-Montijo

The phenomenon of immigration to the U.S. has unleashed a series of politically-charged situations that affect immigrants, their left-behind families, and their involuntary host. This social phenomenon, driven by unchanging primal needs, is now so strong that it demands deep, non-isolationist changes in government regulations.

As an artist and as a person, I have been profoundly moved by how this situation perturbs communities. Although I have been in this country legally for 6 years, I have friends and family who are here illegally. I have witnessed the toil and sacrifices they offer in return for a better quality of life. This has inspired me to offer my interpretation of the immigration phenomenon.

In my work, I have depicted two phases that many U.S. immigrants go through. Initially, the immigrant is forced by misery to cross the border. Crossing the desert requires physical stamina and knowledge. The “coyote” provides that. For money, it delivers “heads” to the U.S. Like the “nahuales” in Aztec mythology, the “coyote” can disappear and abandon the “meat” that it hauls across the desert.

Secondly, the economic and emotional stress that the immigrant’s family suffers during the time of crossing is devastating. Once the immigrant is in the U.S., he/she is left with a deeply scarred psyche and is dislocated from his/her family. Furthermore, he/she now must function within a very limited context, that he/she cannot exit due to language, legal, and social constraints. All this begs the question: is this the only way?

This is what my current work is about.

(Opposite) La otra realidad del sueno americano (The other reality of the american dream), 2007, oil, 67” x 71”
SJ Gibson

Better days.
Once, so it seemed, fortune threw long
Arms around my neck and kissed me.
What can I have had on my mind
When I made the mistake of not
Suspecting this impossible?

No one can have back ancient pasts
To rearrange for convenience
Of these presents. Trust s to the self
Deceived what paint was to the old
Masters, with the accent on old.

Though as everybody believes
What they most want to believe will
If it comes true somehow save them
In the end strange things must happen
To those who do too much thinking.


First comes experience. Waking with each day I refer to the knowl-
dge I’ve gained on each former day in my continuing personal
evolution. I believe it is only those experiences that one has felt for
onself that can become material for comment. With this in mind,
I have found that most paramount is leading a rich life. Thus, when
one reminisces over the nightcaps and half moons, enveloped in
that favorite sweater with the stor of early fall serving as a quiet
reminder of the inevitable onset of winter, what it is that we truly
longed to attain is in fact what made the struggle to regain con-
sciousness and rejoin the outside world each day truly worth the
shower and shave and clean pressed shirts.

To Pine: Timbers of pine individually selected and hand treated with a palm block from
100 to a 2000 grade automotive finish sandpaper, 2006–2007, dimensions variable.
There are two things in my life that I cannot escape from: loss and the subsequent anxiety as a result of loss. Loss, of course, is something none of us can escape from entirely. It is just a part of living. What matters is how you deal with and allow it to manifest in the rest of your life.

I don’t address the losses in my life so much as I dwell on them endlessly. They have compiled and consumed me. I believe that the intensive rumination I have done on these events, both large and small, have not only not set me free from them but the complete opposite: they have fused themselves to all the other aspects of myself, all of the parts that make me, me. The work I make is just one of the many methods I use to glean some greater understanding of how all the pieces fit together.

Kimberly Largey

Sappy-Sad-Sack, 2007, mixed media, dimensions variable
I am interested in the process of thought as it relates to the variances of universal ideas, but also as it is engaged during interface narrative interaction.

The Collective is an interactive documentary dealing with universal archetypes and the network of universal unconscious social relationships. Fifteen people, all of whom are linked to my personal relationships to varying degrees, were asked to respond to five archetypal topics: Divinity, Family, Feminine, Masculine, and Violence. The responses are arranged so that relationships and networks of responses are developed. The viewer is allowed to navigate freely through the project and must actively engage the interface in order to view the entire piece. The Collective creates an environment in which each viewer can generate their own narrative from the piece and also grasp the commonality of thought among people from a wide range of backgrounds.

Dac McCabe

The Collective, 2007, dvd, 48" X 36"
“Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.” –Benjamin Franklin

I believe the current civilized societies of the world are based upon and focused on one thing: fear. Technologies are being developed at an astounding rate to monitor and track the public at large, all in the name of safety. The intent of these technologies is to seek out potential threats before they arise. In a time when information and ideas can cross the globe instantly, everyone is potentially a threat. Governments around the world are now currently attempting to implement ways to track, monitor, and analyze their citizens. The technology is already here. In the U.S., the government is already trying to pass laws and acts to make biometric based identification a reality without the general public being aware of the ramifications.

The questions that arise from this are many. How far into our private lives will this monitoring invade? Will it actually make us safer? What is the cost of implementing such technology? What will be done with all of the information collected? Who is watching the watchers?

In this series of work I explore our near-future society based on surveillance. It is my idea of what could happen when all private information is made available quickly and easily. I leave the viewer with an open ended question: What happens when a system of this scale is abused, corrupted, and exploited?

Security is only truly based on how long it can hold out from a focused attack, internally or externally.

Alan Skees

(Adjacent and above left) Identity: Eye Scan, 2007, video
(Below left) Identity: Hand Scan, 2007, video
Kristin Skees

Poke, pick, poke, pick…knit, purl, poke…knit, poke, purl, pick

Whether I’m peeling labels off of bottles, picking at dead pieces of my skin, poking my hand with a safety pin, or simply knitting a complex pattern, I am constantly finding ways to keep my mind from becoming overwhelmed with anxiety. By nature I am obsessive, over-analytical, and a worrier. My inner battle with identity and uncertainty often spills over into my personal relationships, causing me to feel vulnerable, disconnected, and inadequate. Day by day I mold these feelings into a socially accepted and uncomplicated veneer of myself. This series of work is a manifestation of my continuous internal conflict. Here I seek to uncover private and vulnerable moments that hint at the deeper psychological discontent hidden by the façade of everyday life. Video and digital stills create a voyeuristic portrayal of strange and abstract moments, neither sensational nor explicit, yet subtly disconcerting.

(Copycat) Homemade Umbilical, 2007, video

(Below left) Wrapped (venis amores), detail, 2007. Installation of 60 digital stills individually mounted on wood with resin, dimensions variable

(Below right) Prod/Poke, 2007, video
Angela Harden Wilson

My photographic work is an evolution of daily life experiences. I’m creating a diary which traces the visual articulation of my domestic affairs. I feel that I have two intensely passionate relationships in my life: one with my husband and the other with my camera. I concentrate on the notion of “everyday” to suggest that stories emanating from within the home have great significance. While marital experience catalyzes my work, these representations form an accessible, fertile, pictorial ground for dialogues about my identity.

This inquiry often manifests itself in rich, dramatic, staged imagery, poetic series, methodically formulated installations, and souvenir-yielding performances. I begin with autobiography and then utilize color and theatricality to blur the boundaries of self. I work on the premise that “meaning” can be discovered through experimentation with a variety of materials and processes, undertaken in pursuit of ideas specific to my interests and world perspective. My practice has always been process-oriented, with process often becoming a metaphor for experience, which in turn conceptually frames the work.

The images in Icing are taken digitally, printed on photographic canvas in black and white, iced with royal frosting mixed with painting medium, and coated in resin. The resin seals the frosting, giving the photograph a glossy, shiny, candy-like surface, protecting the icing from damage and decay. My color palate is restricted to strawberry pink, lemon yellow, white vanilla, and chocolate brown. Painting food on the photographs interconnects my domesticity with my life as an artist, positioning both harmoniously and not allowing one to dominate the other.

(Clockwise from left)
Domestic?, from the series Icing, 2007, royal frosting on photographic canvas, 30” x 40”
Reflections, from the series Icing, 2007, royal frosting on photographic canvas, 30” x 40”
Sponged, from the series Icing, 2007, royal frosting on photographic canvas, 30” x 40”
Is there a history of art after Modernism? Many contemporary artists would find the notion outdated, if not entirely irrelevant. Contemporary art frequently disregards the narrative of art history as bankrupt or hopelessly devoted to a plodding linear-evolutionary model, within which many artists cannot or will not envision themselves and their output. But the meta-narrative of art history is not only a potential context for an artist’s work: it need not serve only as a chronology in which one is compelled to find one’s place. For some, it becomes a rich source of material. Art-historical concepts, methods, and theories are readily adapted to 21st century social, economic, political, and cultural contexts. Such work embraces both continuity and change: rather than ignoring or “liberating” itself from history, it interacts with, challenges, and criticizes it.

Marie Bower addresses the material nature of culture and the quest for mass-produced luxury in the 21st century. Raised in a somewhat puritanical household, she finds herself simultaneously repulsed by and attracted to frivolity. The art of the eighteenth-century Rococo style, among the most frivolous and excessive artistic styles in history, thus holds a powerful draw for her. Her sculptures reflect this interest, referencing the lavish nature of Rococo art, but with a twist: her lost-wax molds are made from flea-market tchotchkes. She appropriates cheapness and tackiness, transforming them in her molds into appealing, luxurious objects. Her work becomes, in the process, a kind of commentary on conspicuous consumption. In her hands, the cheap is transformed into the desirable; the allure of the handmade covers and disguises the products of the machine.

Jessica Drenk also performs a kind of bait-and-switch with her installation. The viewer enters what appears to be an old-fashioned natural history museum, with the usual assortment of geological and biological specimens: corals, shells, meteorites, gems. On examination, however, the viewer finds that these are, in fact, no ordinary specimens. Coral-like structures are manufactured out of plastic straws; crystalline forms turn out to be agglomerations of staples, or cotton swabs; the dried body of a spiny sea creature is, in fact, made out of wooden toothpicks. Drenk’s
works engages with the notion of art as an imitation of nature; but through it she also comments on the history of museums, on how deeply he has integrated the structures of the border into his own understanding in making his work. Raised in the border crossing: the vagaries of living in a suspended state, García-Montijo addresses the dangers—and the rewards—of the border crossing; the vagaries of living in a suspended state, between two nations but fully occupying neither.

Gerardo Castillo, too, references the U.S.-Mexico border in his work. Unlike García-Montijo, who has chosen to reference the experiences of others in her paintings, Castillo explicitly draws on his own understanding in making his work. Raised in the border region.

Don Douthitt’s installation, Pray, addresses a liminal state different from Castillo’s, but equal in its dependence on personal experience. Douthitt, raised in the Assembly of God church, a charismatic Protestant denomination, draws on his own religious experience and on the practice of prayer in contemporary secular society, fail to account for the complex nature of emotions one might experience while in a state of prayer. A faster, “angrier” pulse thus generates a more discordant image; a slower heart rate elicits a more contemplative display. In response to perceptions and portrayals of Christianity—from believers as well as non-believers—as a kind of moral binary code, Douthitt is interested in communicating the entire range of emotions one might experience while in a state of prayer. The contentious issues associated with religion, particularly in contemporary secular society, fail to account for the complexity of the personal religious experience. Douthitt employs new media to address the age-old questions of doubt and anger, which he believes are as much a part of the experience of faith as are acceptance and love.

Kristin Skees also addresses gender issues and institutions in her installation Unumbro. The installation consists of a video projection accompanied by a series of plywood tiles onto which are mounted stiffs from another video. In both pieces, Skees works with yarn, deliberately evoking associations of domesticity and its status as a creation of society suppressed. Yet at any given time, the dominant concept of masculinity is a cultural formation, one that changes drastically over time. At times—speaks also of an engagement with later feminism’s willingness to consider women’s experiences as complex and varied. The artist employs a number of traditional methods of making art as the result of a process that is ultimately as important as the object. Gibson’s work engages with the notion of art as an imitation of nature; but through it she also comments on the history of museums, on how deeply he has integrated the structures of the border into his own understanding in making his work. Raised in the border crossing: the vagaries of living in a suspended state, between two nations but fully occupying neither.

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Love, as both an institution and a personal experience, is Angela Harden Wilson’s focus. Wilson began graduate school as Angela Harden, marrying during her second year of work toward the MFA degree. Her recent work addresses the transitional state in which she now finds herself. Marriage offers the possibility of domesticity as a comfortable post-graduation option; but she is unsure of the extent to which she will be able to accept a domestic life as an alternative to employment. She continues to live as an independent artist, working her way through the use of cake frosting as a material. Intimate studio portraits of Wilson and her husband, printed on canvas, are iced with pink, blue and yellow frosting; pastel shades reflecting the sweet possibilities that a domestic life offers. But the cooking imple- ments which accompany her photographs in the exhibition, virtually淑た by their own thick coating of frosting, speak to the potential dark side of domesticity as an airy, heavily dulant state. The body of work demonstrates her keen awareness of our presence on a double threshold: between the independence of single life and the cooperative life of marriage, and between the dependent, directed state of the student and the existential questing—and frightening—state of post-graduation uncertainty.

Kim Largey’s installation for this exhibition makes literal as well as figurative reference to states of transition and intermediacy. For one, her background as a printmaker is visible here not only in her choice of medium—drawing/installation—but, in part, in her attempt to define. Her awareness of the physicality of paper, too, seems a natural extension of her training, the size of the in- dividual sheets of paper is a limiting factor here, as it would be if “the rug were pulled out” on our perception of the world. The paper is an object in itself (many of the individual sheets of paper in the installation are blank) is likewise drawn from her awareness of the physicality of paper, her choice of medium—drawing/installation—but, in part, in her theoretical science or the pristine surface, the world of the viewer sinks into the chair and looks into the camera, he or she may choose to take a different tack, directing his or her gaze through the lens of a thrift store easy chair. Through high digital technology, McCabe highlights shared connections among groups of individuals, while also commenting on the complex and varied concept of community.

Prior to attending the University of Arizona, Alan Skees worked in a telephone company data center where he had unfettered access to legally protected private information. His concern over the privilege accorded him, and the ease with which it was granted, figure prominently in his work. In his video Coded Surveillance, Skees explores the use of technology to gather personal information, ostensibly to seek out potential threats to society before they arise. Coded Surveillance is dominated by an image of a single eye (Skees’ own) as it undergoes a retinal scan, a type of identity coding that Skees believes will become ubiquitous in the near future. The scan is matched to an unsettlingly large data set containing “protected” personal information about Skees—financial information, health records, even grocery store and restaurant receipts that are used to track what he buys and where. Coded
Surveillance asks what will happen when truly large-scale systems of information gathering are implemented—a very real possibility. The video offers no resolution to this question, just an eerie, continually running loop that begs the question, who is watching? Skees implies that already, the post-9/11 world is a dystopia in which a dominant fear of attack and desire for security have tipped the balance in favor of invasive privacy violations, rather than civil liberties. The irony is that this universal security comes at the price of our own personal security: our bodies are more, not less, threatened by a potential invasion of scanning and surveillance devices.

The postmodern period is characterized by a near-obsessive need for self-contextualization. Questions abound regarding where we fit in history, where we have been and where we are going, and what our present will look like when, in our future, it has become the past. Postmodern society quantifies itself. Historicizing its experience even as that experience unfolds. To ask ourselves if there is a history of art after Modernism, as we did when we began, is just such an attempt at self-definition. But this exhibition makes clear that the attempt is premature. Historicizing the dazzling variety of work being made by these artists is something like playing Whack-a-Mole: just as we identify a dominant issue in one artist’s work, another appears and demands attention. But the urge to predict is hard-wired into us as proper inhabitants of postmodernism: we must keep playing the game. It is futile—but endlessly fascinating.