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LET'S EXCHANGE THE EXPERIENCE

by

JESSE C. HINSHAW

Under the Direction of Cheryl Goldsleger

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to attain an understanding of my work for the viewer as well as myself. These works on paper are visual documents illustrating my ideas and opinions about media and its desire for control. Through research, critical thinking, experience, and exposure to media (both wanted and unwanted) I have created imagery that I feel is exemplary of our forced relationship with advertising. In order to accomplish this I studied my influences, and the origin of my current work. Reading upon realization of those influences further informed the work. Every conceivable influence was studied and analyzed, and those studies are contained in this thesis. Questions of audience, scale, medium, and history were also taken into account as a measure to make this thesis cohesive. As an audience for advertisers we must constantly be aware of how our sensitivities are being played upon.

INDEX WORDS: Simulacra, Baudrillard, Manipulation, Television, False mirrors, Commercial, Advertising, Consumer, Struggle, Façade, Believe, Corporations, Prints, Culture, Conversation

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JESSE C. HINSHAW

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In contemporary culture we have to constantly contend with coded images and messages that appeal to, as well as create, our desires. Advertising and the news media tattoo our brains and brands our identities with their agendas of control and subservience. My work addresses this forced relationship through manipulated images of my own. Instead of merely citing these insidious messages, I compose situations that show a hyper realistic example of this interaction between advertiser and consumer.

I can trace my initial skepticism of the voice of advertising to when I was 7 or 8 years old. As a child, I recall my father purposely positioning himself close to the television to watch the nightly news. Before the days of the remote control or the mute button, my father would reach up to turn the volume off during the advertisements. The same was true for the radio. As the disc jockey's voice interrupted the music, his hand would pinch the knob, returning the car to silence. His reasoning for this was born from "much of the illogical, insulting and patently false statements, premises and promises on most television ads." My father's suspicious nature made him inclined not to trust commercials. Nothing said in these ads was taken for granted. "I am rarely prone to accept many claims at face value until I have confirmed it for myself as much as possible." The lack of truth contained in advertisements fostered skepticism and doubt with my father. This example speaks specifically to television, but all forms of media are suspect in their claims and images. We use the word media to describe how we receive information, whether from radio, a billboard, our cell phones, or television. Although my father is not as fearful of media manipulation as I, he helped me to understand at an early age that advertising messages

should not simply be understood as truth based on the fact that it says so. We must constantly decide for ourselves what to believe.

Figure 1. *Whisper*, lacquer transfer with graphite, 2008.

Chapter 2: False Mirrors

To simply say that my work is about media is far too broad a statement, one that does not clarify my ideas. Specifically, my work deals with the attempted relationships between conglomerate and consumer. Through advertising, in virtually every form, corporations (both small and large) begin a dialogue with their potential consumers. These "dialogues" are presented as stagnate or moving pictures, and sometimes text, that present situations as if they are real, as if they mirror typical life. These mirrors are actually very distant from what we know as reality. Corporations from Coca-Cola to RJ Reynolds use tactics to portray an

overwhelmingly false picture of what their products do. The actors in these ads are exuding pleasure, smiles plastered on their faces as they enjoy the product as if it is a gift from the gods. Reality remains distant and hidden. You'll never see a Coca Cola ad showing someone at the dentist's office because of too much sugar water, a person more thirsty after the Coke was consumed than before, or someone on a scale, disgusted with his or her own obesity. None of these scenarios will ever be played out in a Coke commercial, even though they are can be direct results of the consumption.

Figure 2. *With A Disgusted Eye,* giclee print with graphite, 2008.

Arriving at one's own conclusions about the information that is dispersed through various avenues of communication is a constant struggle. Answers to questions of authenticity and truth in advertising are met with hostility and complacence, effectively squelching one's voices and discouraging one's questions. One set of figures in these prints are muted, a blank white mask

covering all but their eyes. They are allowed to see, but not to speak. Their mouths are absent, making it impossible for the figure (consumer) to voice his or her opinion. The advertiser is not interested in this opinion, as this could have the potential to change the methods of production. Instead, the retailer/advertiser projects its ideas on the public. The consumer does not need to know why something should be purchased, only how this acquisition will take place. The unmasked figures in these prints represents the voice of the corporation, a strong and seductive force. Each print is an isolated event displaying how each of us is singled out while an identity is created for us. Our desires become products of what we are shown to desire.

In Baudrillard's *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,* the author describes this practice as a "deprivation, manipulation, and controlled recycling of [our] subjective and collective values." He goes on to talk about the various signs and symbols that advertisers utilize for the "sanctification of a glorious agency called the body that will become for each individual an ideological sanctuary, the sanctuary of its own alienation."[1] In order to survive, corporations intend to mold us into their desired likeness.

Fashion is one of the various avenues that corporations use to impose identities onto us. The absurdity of fashion advertising and its failure to relate to our lives has been very influential in this work. The often irrelevant imagery disseminated in printed form is presented as factual and important. Through this absurdity corporations turn fashion into a marketing tool, masked as a personality descriptor for consumers. The following excerpt explains the paradoxical nature of fashion and its function both for consumer and for manufacturer:

> The fashion apparatus operates on the basis of a primary contradiction: it claims to fabricate within you your being, your individual sense of expression, while at the same time forcing you, through its freedom of choices, to conform to the market uniformity of seasonal products; what is produced here is alienation, alienation from self and one

[1] Baudrillard, Jean. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign.* Telos Publishing. 1981.

> another because of the way fashion negates life, by becoming the dominant repository of what it means to live and to have a "life-style." [2]

Inventiveness and creativity aren't necessary components in convincing a consumer of the merits of a product. Blatant lies are exercised with regularity in print, in the news, and on television. It is a difficult idea for us to get our head around. Aren't there policies and laws in place insuring truth in advertising? If there are, it is clear that no one is held to these standards. Think of the Newport cigarettes ad campaign of the 80's and 90's. That slogan was "Alive With Pleasure" and typically featured a man and woman having the time of their lives, whether it was playing in a park or hiking a mountain, there was always a permanent smile on their faces. We know now, and we knew then that "Alive With Pleasure" couldn't be further from what cigarettes offer you. Nevertheless, you could find this lie in all forms of printed media. Marshall McLuhan saw ads like this as "subliminal pills for the subconscious in order to exercise an hypnotic spell."[3] Even when the ad is very obviously a lie, once the idea is presented as truth it must be argued against, even if the idea is a ludicrous one. This "mirror" that corporations manufacture isn't a mirror at all, but a ridiculous façade that traps us. *Tailored* (fig. 3) illustrates how we are being sized up by corporations and groomed to be model consumers.

Figure 3. *Tailored,* lacquer transfer with graphite, 2008.

[2] Emberely, Julia. *Body Invaders: Panic Sex In America.* St. Martin's Press. 1987.
[3] McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media.* MIT Press. 1994.

Unfortunately, advertisements and commercials extend into all parts of our world. Money raised by commercial advertising makes it possible for news, sports, festivals, and transportation (to name a few) to exist. Even a high school yearbook can't exist without its sponsors. Advertising's prevalence is so widespread that we have to always be on guard. In *Behind* (fig. 4) the masked figure is approached abaft unknowingly, scrambling and cringing at the same time to try and perceive what is taking hold of him. He is limited in his view, and vulnerable to whatever force the advert decides to administer. The white space around him serving to illustrate isolation, the figure is ultimately powerless to what (or who) comes at him. He can only hope to react to what comes at him. This bombardment of projected ideas is inherent in most of our daily lives. Nearly anything that provides information now has a

Figure 4. *Behind*, lacquer transfer with graphite, 2008.

sponsor, and this participation gives that sponsor privilege that others do not have. Privilege to have their side of the story heard first, regardless if it is factual or not. News channels are guilty

of sensationalizing, editing, and ignoring what goes on in our world. Magazines "feature" products that have been paid for. Radio invites the right people who have paid the right money to join them in conversation. They are all slaves to these advertisers, and their broadcasts directly reflect this. In the meantime, we take a reactive role to these advertisements, and must constantly be on our toes in order to filter all that we are taking in. *Reclaim* (fig. 5) illustrates the masked figure being pushed out of the frame and neglected, while a magazine personality overtakes the space. We are left bound, struggling to fend for ourselves.

Figure 5. *Reclaim*, giclee print with graphite, 2008.

This postmodern condition is a frightening one. This era is one that thrives on the creation of loyal customers, customers that reply to the images put in front of them. "Post-modernity is no longer an age in which bodies produce commodities, but where commodities produce bodies."[4] Our bodies are seen as a blank canvas, one which brand names and lies can be projected onto for monetary gain. Feelings of manipulation, interrogation, and confusion are

[4] Faurschou, Gail. *Body Invaders: Panic Sex In America.* St. Martin's Press. 1987.

played out on paper as these figures struggle and panic during their interaction with the advertisers. It becomes difficult for us to decide what to listen to and what not to, and all the more taxing to decide what is true and what is false. *Conversation* depicts a figure bound in a chair in the middle of an interaction. The masked person sits and listens as the unrestricted man talks. What is being said doesn't matter, it is the situation that is of importance. Relaxed laws against media control and monopolies make scenarios like the one in *Conversation* (fig. 6) very plausible: as we sit, we are told what is going to happen, not allowed to voice our opinion. The models used in these prints administer a complacency, generally issuing a cold seduction to the masked figure he or she is interacting with. Even though the idea of identity is projecting from them, they themselves remain systematic and somewhat generic. "In these frozen figures, flawless skins, blank stares, there is no pain, no fear, nothing moves, and nothing could move these invulnerable figures bereft of affection and expression.[5]" Their desire and ambiguity becomes ours, and we are left to figure out just who we are and what parts have been mediated and sold to us.

Figure 6. *Conversation,* lacquer transfer with graphite, 2008.

[5] Faurschou, Gail. *Body Invaders: Panic Sex In America.* St. Martin's Press. 1987.

The prints mentioned thus far are my thoughts on mediated experiences visually manifested. Aesthetically they are created for a gallery setting. Our voice that I feel is so squelched by media is still not completely heard in the painted white wall setting of the gallery. I wanted to find another venue for these prints. Wanting to explore various approaches to this body of work, I experimented with moving this masked character more into the advertising environment. Inserted into selected advertisements, the masked character interacts with the mediated scenes, directly confronting the perpetrator. As the figure moves away from the isolated print and into the full color environment of the glossy printed page he experiences this forced interaction in a different vernacular. Instead of merely being bound and mocked, he is mirrored, surprised, trapped, and trampled in these works. To push the idea of environment even further, these prints were enlarged to 68”x47” and installed in advertising kiosks in public places. Instead of characters being removed and rearranged from their respective adverts, now the masked figure is placed *into* them. The placement of these prints in public places them in their natural environment to be experienced by consumers. This removes any stigma or expectations that come with a piece hanging in a gallery. Now the work can be experienced in its pure form.

Figure 7. *Reflections*, giclee print, 2009.

Chapter 3: The Medium

Printmaking has been called the most democratic form of art. Its purpose is to create multiples, to reach more people than any other form of printed art. The medium has a very direct relation to the subject matter that I am currently dealing with. The whole purpose of advertisements is dissemination through mass production, getting a message or feeling seen by as many people as possible. Printmaking also allows an artist multiplicity in their art, allowing groups as well as individuals to access an artist's work. With the advent of digital printmaking this becomes even more of a reality. My prints are reproducing the reproduced, albeit in an altered fashion. My process in creating these images is intrinsic to the work itself. As I transfer images from one vessel to another, so too are the corporations sublimating their realities onto and into us. Printmaking as fine art is a method that lends itself to multiplicity, and to dissemination. Magazines and newspapers practice this process as well (though on a much larger scale) in order to reach as many buyers as possible. I constantly refer to Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard for their insights into the nefarious goals that advertisements

Figure 8. *Calculated Constraint,* line etch, aquatint, soft ground etch, 2008.

set out to achieve. Their writings and theories have had a strong impact on me, and have served to confirm much of the skepticism with which I approached media. McLuhan spoke so much about media, and coined the term, 'the medium is the message', that is now embedded into our culture and conversations. He spoke of the offering of a second hand experience by advertisers, and the detrimental effect that this can have. Baudrillard's insights into the simulacra are crucial to my work as well. His book *Simulations* is one that I constantly refer to for understanding and questioning. Though both of these men were first and foremost theorists, they have had a huge impact on my work and the art world in general.

I have found that cultural critics have had a stronger impact on my work than artists. Technique and style are important to me, but it is the voice of writers like McLuhan and Baudrillard that have given my work true direction. Bill Hicks, a popular comedian until his untimely death, is another personality who has informed my work. His skepticism and questioning of the societal structures set in place and the healthy distrust of people in charge of these institutions was eye opening to me early in my development as an artist. He proclaimed himself "cursed with vision" because of the hesitation and displeasure he was met with for his dubiety with what is presented to us as truth. He took it upon himself to present people with opposing theories and to expose truths to his audiences. He was met with much ridicule and criticism for this. *Keep Them At Bay* (fig. 9) illustrates Hicks' proposed reality; how the few can have the ability to control, and their simultaneous awareness and disregard of those that feel captive.

Hicks often referred to the USA as the "United States of Advertising" after he was pulled from a slot on David Letterman at the last minute due to "unsatisfactory content." He later discovered that his content was not profane (as it had been approved already by the network) but

that the message conflicted with advertisers during the program. It frightened him that advertisers could have so much power over what information and ideas are accessible to the

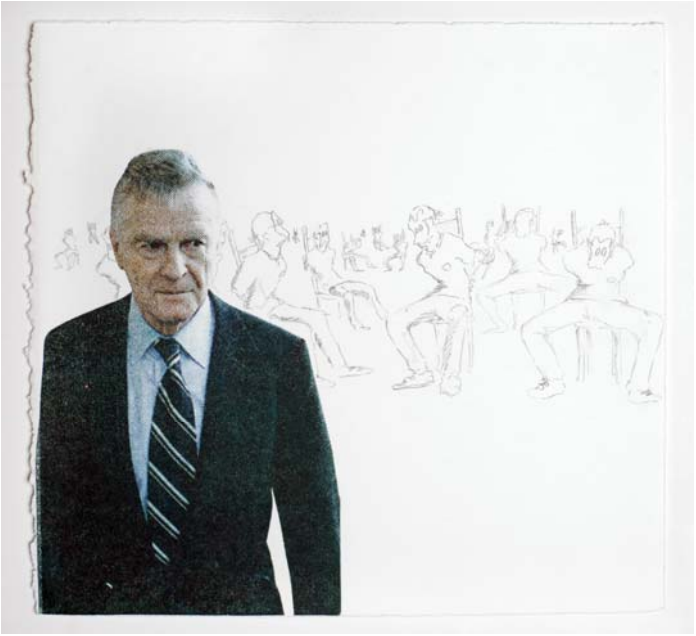

Figure 9. *Keep Them At Bay*, lacquer transfer with graphite, 2008.

public. I share this fear. The prints in *Let's Exchange the Experience* attempt to discuss this situation. The prints are not meant to be a solution, but a more accurate presentation of this interaction. In each of these prints, the masked figure is put into situations that are foreign, restricting, and frightening. This masked figure, meant to be a sort of everyman, interacts with advertising images out of force, not choice.

Chapter 4: In Closing

The goal of the printed page is not content, but sales. The more ads that are sold, the more money can be made. The goal of the ad is pure content, not substance. Each ad is put together in such a way to direct thought. The more ads per magazine, the more these false environments and situations become realities. My goal with this body of work is to find creative

ways to expose this conversation. Doug Stanhope said it best on stage during his performance in Austin, Texas in 2002. "Good things don't have to tell you they're good, you'll figure it out on your own."[6] This is what I want my art to be about. Taking this idea and extending it to all forms of media. Ideas need to evolve, and right now we are all at risk of those ideas being subverted by advertising. Letting our guard down enables these ideas, some subliminal and some direct, to enter our sphere of thinking and change our perception of reality.

[6] Stanhope, Doug. *Word of Mouth*. DVD. Sacred Cow Productions, 2002.

INFLUENTIAL MEDIA

The following is a comprehensive list of books and multimedia that were integral in my research for this thesis and body of work.

1) *Simulations* by Jean Baudrillard
2) *Arizona Bay* by Bill Hicks
3) *Rant in E Minor* by Bill Hicks
4) *Panic Encyclopedia* edited by Arthur Kroker
5) *Manufactured Consent* by Noam Chomsky
6) *9/11 Truth* by 911truth.org
7) *Qualitative Media Analysis* by Walter Altheide
8) *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* by Walter Benjamin
9) *Dj Muggs vs. Sick Jacken – Legend of the Masked Assassin* produced by DJ Muggs
10) *POPaganda: The Art & Crimes of Ron English* by Ron English