

Open Studio: A Phase in Six Years of my Art Education

By

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Abstract

Open Studio: A Phase in Six Years of my Art Education is a true-to-scale reproduction of my graduate studio space, populated by a meticulously constructed life-size, wax self-portrait. Evoking Romantic imagery of the artist in the studio, the uncanniness of the wax figure creates an experience of the type that Mike Kelley has described as “banal [and] emptied of magic.” The figure’s eyes are closed and his gesture is as vulnerable as it is defensive. Almost teetering, but balanced within the space, the work poetically falls apart upon close inspection and reveals a narrative that’s open to interpretation.

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Do any of you have to define yourself? It is very difficult to define yourself. It is even more difficult to reveal yourself.
- Louise Bourgeois.

Introduction

When I look back on older artworks that I created prior to the grad program such as *ROYGBV*, 2009, (Fig.1) and *Trees Singing Saw*, 2011, (Fig.2) I acknowledge how I've had a tendency to make sculptures or installations in order to facilitate some sort of artistic performance. The theatrical and ironic aspects of my art practice are also hard for me to ignore. Rodney Graham's [*The Gifted Amateur, Nov 10th, 1962*](#), 2007 (Fig.3) was an obvious inspiration in the creation of *ROYGBV*. Graham's satirical performance of the artist Morris Louis in *The Gifted Amateur* and the fact that Graham is known to be a University drop out has continued to spark my interests in the theme of the artist in the studio. The ironic register of Graham's influential work has raised a lot of productive questions for me such as: How can I critically engage with the genre of the self-portrait, the role of the artist and studio practice differently? How do myths of artistic originality still play a role in the conception of the artist and art education today? How have the artists, histories and theories that I've researched in art school informed my artistic identity? One of the more recent questions that I've been asking myself is what are the differences in sculpturally representing something from life rather than staging it in a photograph?

I've had an ongoing fascination with the concept of framing and the contextual aspects involved in presenting my art. Earlier works of mine always dealt with the exhibition space or studio space I was provided with and resulted in sculptures or installations made to facilitate some sort of performance. For my thesis, I set out to create

a sculptural installation that framed the idea of my artistic performance without actually having to step in front of an audience and be a performer. I wanted my performance as an artist to happen naturally within the confines of my studio and through sculptural processes. On top of this, it was important for me to return to the self-portrait again because of how relevant self-reflection has been to my experiences throughout art school. The material research involved in figuring out how I was going to reproduce myself as a life-size sculpture involved life casting, mold making processes, and eventually working with wax. This material became conceptually interesting to me as well because of its ambiguous place within art history and its capabilities in providing higher degrees of realism in a sculpture.

The figure's arms and bust consist of beeswax which were then colored with oil paints. The rest of the body is supported by a metal armature, first carved out in foam and then covered in resin to give the body a solid shell. I decided on this method because the body was going to be covered in clothes anyways. The hair on the wax figure is my hair and the clothes were my old studio clothes. Besides my self-portrait, I wanted to also incorporate the Romantic motif of the figure at the window that had preoccupied my research throughout the first year of my studies; and it became a means of linking my self-portrait to the studio space in the Art Barn that I occupied during this time. The following text highlights the historical and contemporary discourses that I took into consideration throughout the process of creating: *Open Studio: A Phase in Six Years of my Art Education*.



(Fig. 1: Ryan Amadore, *ROYGBV*, video still from performance, 2009)



(Fig. 2: Ryan Amadore, *Trees Singing Saw*, performance and installation view, 2011)

The Wax Self-Portrait

The wax figure is used as an example of the uncanny object by Sigmund Freud. Freud explains that feelings of the uncanny are generated “if intellectual uncertainty is aroused as to whether something is animate or inanimate” and if “the lifeless bears an excessive likeness to the living”. (Freud 140-141) Mike Kelley’s return to Freud’s uncanny in the 90’s points out the tensions between high modernist formalism and Surrealist perspectives in art that the uncanny is often associated with. Kelley states: “From the high modernist standpoint, all anti-essentialist work, concerned as it is only with facades, is branded as kitsch.” (36) He also says that this kind “of formalism of conventions” that many artists now are working with aren’t really fixed in “any real base.” (36) Kelley’s perspective and his description of the figurative sculptures of John De Andrea which were based on black and white photographs really interested me:

The realism of black and white documentary photography is the obvious referent. This photographic sense of truth captured in the moment is beautifully undermined here, simply through the process of literalization. When the photo is actualized in sculptural form, truth is dispensed with. The photographic ‘essence’ of the moment takes on the cheesy pseudo-historical feel of every cheap roadside museum. De Andrea and Duane Hanson were some of the first contemporary sculptors willing to make works that evoked the banality of the wax museum. The literalness of the wax figures found at Madame Tussaud’s is one emptied of magic. (Kelley 36)

The way Kelley sees De Andrea’s sculptures undermining photographic truth and the wax figure being “emptied of magic” was what I wanted my work to express in relation to the self portrait and studio art education. Kelley’s book on the uncanny also re-introduced me to artists like Charles Ray, Paul McCarthy, Robert Gober, Maurizio Cattelan, Ron Mueck and Duane Hanson. It was through these artists that I found my inspiration to work with lifecasting techniques.

I eventually decided to use skin-safe alginate and silicone rubber to make molds of my body that I then filled with molten beeswax. The hardened pieces of beeswax body parts that resulted from this process were uncanny, to say the least. The subtle translucency of the wax creates a very realistic flesh look and the fact that it can be coloured with oil paints made it a convenient material for me to work with. I also became very appealed by wax's liminal place within art history. Beside its uncanny or psychological associations, its connection to phenomenology was discovered through Roberta Panzanelli's following explanation of wax:

Change is inherent to the nature of wax and necessary to most artistic practices that employ it. Wax subverts the expectation of immutability generally associated with sculptural media. Its ambiguities create a sense of instability as viewers try to reconcile its binary oppositions: warm and cold, supple and solid, life and death, ephemeral and permanent, amorphuous and polymorphous. Its history has what Georges Didi-Huberman calls a certain phenomenological and psychological *viscosity*. (Panzanelli 1)

The inside/outside discourses that wax symbolizes coincides with the window, the studio and the self/other binaries that have also preoccupied my research. Paul Thek, Kiki Smith, Robert Gober and Charles Ray's work became a primary part of my research for how their work often deals with figurative sculpture, inside/outside discourses and the self-portrait. Paul Thek's [*The Tomb*](#), 1967, (Fig.4) Kiki Smith's [*Untitled*](#), 1990 (Fig.5) and Robert Gober's [*Untilted Leg*](#), 1989-90 (Fig.6) contributed to my decision to use beeswax. Charles Ray's artwork was a crucial element of my graduate research for the way he often focuses on the self-portrait as subject matter. But there was something about Ray's work that stood out to me as different than the other figurative sculptures that I've mentioned and who are associated with the uncanny.

His early self-portrait photographs in his studio where he is physically relating to minimal sculptures and objects seemed to engage with Michael Fried's criticisms of "theatricality" in the "Minimalist/Literalist" artwork. I love his photographic series titled [*Plank Piece 1*](#), 1973 (Fig.7) for the awkward situation of staging himself pinned to the wall of his studio space by a plank of wood. I've always had a fascination with West Coast Minimalism and find it intriguing to consider Rays' unusual relationship to this history. Ray's [*Self-Portrait*](#), 1990 (Fig.8) is essentially a mannequin that he made to look like himself and it inspired me deeply. I find his decision to allow for the artificiality of his self-portrait to be present reveals a sense of humility and is also extremely expressive. It was through this piece that I was influenced to allow for the shifts in the material reproduction of my sculptural self-portrait to be present. I didn't set out to create a trompe l'oeil effect. It was important that the realism of my wax self-portrait would fall apart upon close inspection. I felt the best way to achieve this was by allowing for the intentionality of my hand in its creation to be revealed to a certain degree.

The Window and Self-Reflection

At the start of the MFA program, I was fascinated with Romantic motifs in art like the sublime and the figure at the window. The most obvious historical examples that I can think of are David Caspar Friedrich's paintings [*Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*](#), 1817-18 (Fig.9) and [*Woman at a Window*](#), 1822 (Fig.10). The narrative of these oil paintings interest me because of how they represent a figure absorbed in an intensely contemplative activity. Rosalind Krauss's theories about the self-reflective properties of the window in

her essay “Grids” greatly expanded my understanding of the window’s symbolic qualities in modern art. Krauss explains the window eloquently in the following quotation:

As a transparent vehicle, the window is that which emits light—or spirit—into the darkness of the room. But if glass transmits, it also reflects. And so the window is experienced by the symbolist as a mirror as well—something that freezes and locks the self into the space of its own reduplicated being. (Krauss 58-59)

I found it intriguing to compare the experience of standing in front of a window to looking into a mirror. Krauss’s comparison of the grid to the window indicated to me another metaphorical layer: the window as a symbol for the modernized or institutionalized aspects of life. I felt that these ideas in relation to Krauss’s notion of freezing and locking “the self into the space of its own reduplicate being” (58-59) produced a complex visual scenario and highly self-conscious narrative in my imagination. I became interested in the ambiguous characteristics of the window and how it related to notions of inside and outside, self and other, nature and artifice.

Charles Ray

Around this time it also became apparent to me that in working with my figurative self-portrait that the body language of the figure in relation to its space and the objects around it could evoke another layer of empathatic response in a viewer. One thing I focused on was creating a realistic feel to the contemplative act that I wanted the figure to express. It became important to me to provide an opportunity for not just an uncanny experience but also to allow for an embodied experience of the work to unfold. Michael Fried’s recent analysis of Charles Ray’s artwork in his book, *Four Honest Outlaws* became a starting

point for me in considering the phenomenological aspects at play in my work. I found a lot of similarities to Ray's work after reading Fried's following explanation:

The performative aspects of Ray's early art-making went hand in hand with an emphasis on the body, an emphasis that is usually seen in the context of the phenomenological slant associated with Minimalism/Literalism as well as with certain Post-Minimal figures such as Bruce Nauman, Dennis Oppenheim, Chris Burden, Dan Graham, Vito Acconci, and early Richard Serra. (Fried 71)

Fried points out that Ray was a student of Anthony Caro's and sees this as a Modernist "foundation" to his art education. After discussing an artwork of Ray's that doesn't actually incorporate the human figure titled [Table](#), 1990, (Fig.11) Fried states:

Ray's vision, as exemplified by *Table*, is other-wise; one might say that he has made a speciality of subverting that structural logic as if from within while seeming to leave the appearance of ordinary object-likeness more or less intact. However, this too has much more to do with Caro's precedent – dialectically, as it were – than with the work of various artists Ray is often held to resemble: Duane Hanson, for example, or Robert Gober, neither of whom seems to me in his class artistically or philosophically. (I think of both as tainted by Surrealism, a quality Ray tends to avoid like the plague it mostly is, not that is all there is to the superiority of his work to theirs.) (Fried 87)

Mike Kelley's acknowledgement of high modernist judgements towards surrealist art and Fried's defence of Charles Ray's formalist characteristics became a compelling discourse to me. Fried disregards Ray's association with the Los Angeles sculptural scene that surrounded Mike Kelley's artist-curated exhibition, "The Uncanny" in the early 1990's. Fried's argument for the reasons why he thinks Charles Ray's art is contrary to the uncanny makes me wonder why an artist's work really has to be pitted into one aesthetic camp. In fact, it inspires me to blur these rigid distinctions and find a sense of equilibrium between these aesthetic discourses. I admire how Charles Ray's work can straddle these two discourses, making his work difficult to categorize. I found inspiration

in how Fried described his practice as “the basic proposal of which involves remaking something that already exists” and how his subject matter of everyday objects like: scaled up toys, trees, and human figures, made Fried walk on some tenuous aesthetic grounds in order to revive the winded high/low debate that he sees in Ray’s work. Ray’s “reproductions” intrigue me because of how they not only subvert something banal and everyday but poetically reveal their structure.

Courbet’s Realism and Self-Portraits

Dealing with the theme of the artist in the studio shared a thematic relationship to Gustave Courbet’s, [*The Painter’s Studio: A Real Allegory of a Seven Year Phase in my Artistic and Moral Life*](#), 1855 (Fig.12) and I based the title of my grad piece on this painting. Michael Fried’s book titled *Courbet’s Realism* discusses the allegorical aspects of this painting and many of Courbet’s “Early Self-Portraits” as well. Fried’s analysis of Courbet’s tendency to paint self-portraits regularly throughout his career resonated with my current work. It was very interesting to see how Fried repeats himself by using the same phenomenological terminology like “de-valuing the gaze”, “embodiment”, “intentionality” and “lived experience” that he used often to describe Charles Ray’s work in *Four Honest Outlaws*.

The Painter’s Studio suits the fact that my graduate artwork is also being exhibited in relation to an art school. There is a touch of humor in the fact that the stories behind this painting of Courbet’s tend to usually be focused on his contention toward his academic judges. The painting was rejected to be shown in the *Exposition Universelle* and was shown instead in his own exhibition called *The Pavillion of Realism*. I’m giving

myself way too much credit to say that the circumstances for my graduate exhibition installation is comparable to Courbet's painting, but I like to pretend that in some way they are connected through the closeness they have to academia. It also introduced me to Fried's analysis of Courbet's early self-portraits. Which he describes as follows:

I suggest that the peculiar inexpressiveness of Courbet's self-portraits is most accurately understood as the product of an attempt to evoke within the painting his intense absorption in his own live bodily being – his bodily liveness, as twentieth-century phenomenologists would say... he seems to have been driven to express in and through the medium of the self-portrait a sense or intuition or conviction of his own embodiedness that he could not have expounded in words. (Fried 64)

Fried discusses Courbet's painting the [*The Wounded Man*](#), 1844-1854 (Fig.13) and states that the intentional ways Courbet dealt with the painting of the hand that rests on the blanket in the foreground of this painting evokes phenomenological concerns. He states that "it is his body *as actually lived*, as possessed from within, that has been given expression" and the hand's ambiguous gesture of grasping the blanket "firmly but not too tightly" allows Fried to project himself into feeling the embodied state of the man in the painting. He concludes that the "ambiguity or doubleness" of the hand's gesture reads as though it is "directed simultaneously outward toward the world and inward toward its own lived physicality" and Fried saw this as a prominent characteristic of Courbet's self-portrait paintings. (Fried 65)

It is also very important to point out that in *The Wounded Man* the figure's eyes are closed which according to Fried allows for the viewer to project themselves into the character's lived experience. Fried describes Charles Ray's mannequins in a similar way. He suggests that Ray's figures don't engage with the viewer's gaze because of how they stare off into space or are absorbed in a contemplative activity and that this to Fried,

allows the viewer to project themselves into the work. Alternatively, he warns the figurative sculptor today that if the viewer catches the figure's gaze, that empathetic projection would be aborted and the result would seem merely uncanny. Fried's description of the eyes in [Man with the Pipe](#), 1849 (Fig.14) also contributed to my decision to present my self-portrait with its eyes closed:

Although his eyes are partly open, the whites are lost in shadow, a characteristic touch, which, as in other pictures we have considered, devalues the gaze. The overall impression conveyed is of a state of somnolence that has nothing to do with fatigue and everything to do with the evocation of a "primordial" or *somatic* order of activity – the automatic processes by which the body sustains itself, by which it lives. (Fried 76)

In leaving the eyes closed on my figure, I hope to also invite viewers to project themselves into the work and identify with the psychology of my self-portrait. In other words, I hope that the viewer could in some way empathize with the confusion and pressures that I have felt throughout my studio art education.

It is also the awkwardness of my self-portrait's gesture that I find a connection to the embodied state of mind Fried sees Courbet's self-portraits expressing. At first, the stance strikes me as being defensive and similar to Friedrich's portrait of himself standing on the edge of a cliff, in *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. Yet, it is vulnerable and self-reflective—not just because of the eyes being closed, but also in the awkward gesture of the artificial body, which allows for a viewer to also relate to the psychological narratives at play in the work. Louise Bourgeois' statement that I used in my introduction about the difficulty in revealing yourself holds a lot of weight for me in this regard. Conveying an open-ended scenario that speaks to the challenges in expressing one's interior landscape to others and the realization that it might just scrape at the surface.

The Open Studio in the Gallery

My art education has always been framed by the studio. The romantic and modern conceptions of the artist's studio is something which many contemporary artists challenge or focus on as actual subject matter. It can double as both a private space and public place for artists to exhibit their work. A large component of the grad program involved participating in studio visits, "open studios" and "open critiques". From my time spent working for artists in Vancouver such as Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham and Stan Douglas my conception of the studio was expanded early on. Many of these Photo Conceptualist's studios resemble film sets more so than the stereotypical painter's or sculptor's studios proliferating popular culture. The most notable being the recreation of Constantin Brancusi's studio at The Pompidou Center and Francis Bacon's at the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin. Beyond this, it's also hard not to acknowledge Lucy Lippard's famous text 'Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object',¹ that mapped out Conceptual Art's radical movements in the late sixties and seventies outside of the traditional parameters of art production. In other words, contributing to my general understanding that studio art practice is not a fixed or stable thing and drawing attention to the fact that my relation to it as an artist is constantly changing. I feel that all of these factors create an extremely ambiguous notion of the studio today and it shares a very close relationship to the slippery notions of one's self that the artist must grapple with.

Philip Zarrilli states that the studio acts

As a paradoxical place where it is impossible to hide, and where our experience and our 'selves' are always reflected back to us, the studio offers a place for the

¹ Lucy Lippard's book titled *Six years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972; a cross-reference book of information on some esthetic boundaries* New York: Praeger, 1973.

unremitting examination of such everyday questions of experience. Perhaps our task, then in the studio, is to ‘practice metaphysics’, i.e., thoughtfully to tease out in our specific modes of embodiment the assumptions and presuppositions about the body, mind, ‘self’ and ‘action’ that are at ‘play’ there, informing what we do and how we do it. That means systematic exploration of the nature of the body/mind, our consciousness and our ‘selves’, not as an empty ‘academic’ or intellectual exercise, but as an active experience ‘on the edge of the absent’ – that place where we ‘risk’ losing our craft and ourselves. (Zarrilli 107)

My thesis reveals the subconscious influence that Photo Conceptual art practices from Vancouver have had on my practice. Jeff Wall’s image and self-portrait photograph titled: [*Picture for Women*](#), 1979 (Fig.15) is an interesting recreation of Eduard Manet’s painting: [*A Bar at the Folies-Bergere*](#), 1881-1882 (Fig.16) and I appreciate his inclusion of himself, the camera and the studio in the photo. Wall’s tendency to re-create historical paintings inspired me to loosely re-create Friedrich’s romantic composition of the figure at the window in my grad piece. Stan Douglas’s obscure scouting photographs such as: [*Journey Into Fear: Pilot’s Quarters 1 and 2*](#), 2001 (Fig.17) which depict his film sets also inspired me to reproduce my studio as a set within the gallery. I feel that the staging of the studio in the gallery and the stepping back to examine the studio and my self-portrait from the outside that takes place was crucial to the installation of my thesis work.

Daniel Buren’s essay: “The Function of the Studio” also expanded my interest in the studio beyond being just a framing device for my self-portrait, but also as a space where artistic practice is always in a state of flux. He states that:

In the studio we generally find finished work, work in progress, abandoned work, sketches – a collection of visible evidence viewed simultaneously that allows an understanding of process; it is this aspect of the work that is extinguished by the museum’s desire to ‘install’. (Buren 88)

The concept of the studio aided in determining how to “install” my self-portrait in the gallery and in questioning the differences between photography and sculpture. Not just

comparing and contrasting the physical differences of a two-dimensional image to a three-dimensional object, but thinking about how these mediums relate differently to the notion of truth. Taking a photo of myself in my studio could express similar concepts, it wouldn't however reveal the same complexity of self-consciousness and vulnerability that my sculpture conveys. The labor intensive and time consuming processes involved in creating my sculptural wax self-portrait resulted in an object that isn't flawless. It operates as a metaphor for the self-conscious qualities of my art practice and the difficulty I have found in truly revealing myself to the subjective interpretations of others. Challenging myself to capture the actual weight of my lived experience as a wax sculpture subverts the folk etymology of the word "sincere" because it is most definitely not "without wax"² But ironically still manages somehow through the sincerity of my artistic intentions, subtle self-deprecation and the ambiguity of my self-portrait to convey an honest expression of my grad school experience. Although it is a static art work installed in the gallery it evokes to me the feeling of a journey still waiting to happen.

² Referring to the definition of *sincere* and the words relationship to the figure of speech "without wax", which was used to describe perfect or flawless sculptures in Roman and Greek art. See urban dictionary definition:
<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=without+wax>

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