2005

Personal propaganda project | Seeking an audience

Timothy Marion Nielson

The University of Montana

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PERSONAL PROPAGANDA PROJECT:
SEEKING AN AUDIENCE

by
Timothy Marion Nielson
B.A. Carleton College, 1989

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts
in Fine Arts
in Integrated Arts and Education

The University of Montana
July 2005

Approved by:
Sandy Bolh
Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School
7-22-05
Personal Propaganda Project: Seeking an Audience

Chairperson: Randy Bolton

Propaganda uses communication to serve the self-interests of the propagandist. For this project, art was created to place in front of audiences to satisfy the artist’s creative, intellectual, and personal desires, and to enhance his ability to provide an art education for his students more grounded in real experience.

Efforts were focused in three areas: painting pictures and showing them publicly, creating graphic work for reproduction and distribution, and making connections to artists through professional avenues.

Three series of paintings were produced: Icon Fragments, Doubting..., and The Vanity of the Artist: Looking in the Mirror and Liking What I See. The first two were exhibited in Missoula, Montana, at various locations.

A variety of graphic work was also created, reproduced, and distributed in the form of fliers, posters, cards, and press releases.

Professional relationships were established with Theo Ellsworth, a graphic artist from Missoula, and Jay Laber, a sculptor and professor at Salish-Kootenai College.
PREFACE: THE SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

If art is primarily a form of communication, and if I am, primarily, an artist, then my primary aim must be to communicate. The question becomes, then, what do I wish to communicate, and to whom?

The first part of the question—what do I wish to communicate—is best answered by the artwork I have made for this project. I will describe what I have done, but it is not my desire or intent to explore my choices of subject matter or to divine my deeper motivations in the scope of this project and paper. However, significant clues will be provided along the way through descriptions, titles, and reproductions in the appendix.

The second part of the question—to whom do I wish to communicate—is fundamental to this project and this piece of writing. But the answer was not found. What follows is an analysis of the search to find the message and the means to communicate, and, ultimately, to find people to communicate with.

PREFACE: USE OF THE TERM “PROPAGANDA”

“Propaganda” is a term that has, justifiably or not, fallen out of favor. It is rarely used, and when it is, it is almost always used pejoratively. I believe the meaning of the term itself is actually neutral, and the negative (or positive) nature of what is deemed propaganda has to do with the intent of the propagandists.

The working definition for this project and paper comes from Philip M. Taylor in Munitions of the Mind: “Propaganda uses communication to convey a message, an idea, or an ideology that is designed primarily to serve the self-interests of the person
or people doing the communicating" (7). I have attempted in the
course of the last year, from the summer of 2004 to the summer of
2005, to communicate my ideas through art to a larger audience in
order to serve my own purposes. I use the term "propaganda" for
this paper to make it clear that my motivations for this project
were self-interested. But I will explain how my motivations do
not fit other definitions of propaganda before I proceed, to
avoid misunderstandings of my intent, and to make clearer what my
interests in this project were.

Commonly, definitions of propaganda require a response of
some kind from the audience in line with the manipulations of the
propagandist (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1-5). I did not pursue a
particular response to my work other than I wanted people to look
at it. I wanted to create images with meaty subject matter and
(some) recognizable symbols without editorializing.

Psychologists Anthony Pratkanis and Elliott Aronson
describe propaganda as being effected through the use of symbols
chosen to manipulate the psychology of the individual (Jowett and
O'Donnell, 4). I did attempt to embrace mainstream cultural or
art historical symbols that are significant to me in order to
create personally relevant art that was also viewer-encouraging.
(A work of art that is known or familiar in some way is usually
perceived as welcoming to the viewer). So I indulged myself with
obvious references to Christianity, famous art, and large social
issues. I did this fully aware that I was entering, and
embracing, popular culture, particularly that part of popular
culture labeled "postmodern" that seems to embrace all viewpoints
and references as equals. Unfortunately, in general, I despise
what "postmodern" implies, so this attempt of mine to use popular
culture references was a "sell-out" at some level to manipulate people to take a look. But I was more intent on finding symbols in myself that had archetypal potential than I was worried about "selling out." I wanted to make images that not only communicated something significant to me, but also had the chance to communicate with someone else. So even though I proceeded in this area working with subject matter intentionally accessible to an audience in this society at this moment in history, my primary motivation was not to manipulate that audience into doing or thinking a certain way. My primary motivation was to communicate something to a viewer—someone, anyone—and the medium for that was the subject matter I chose.

Richard Alan Nelson puts a slightly more positive spin on propaganda: "...while propagandists often willingly lie, much of what they create is factually truthful and perceived as interesting or valuable by those who form the target audience" (1). This statement challenges the value of the propagandist nature of my work for this project in a number of ways. I would hope fervently to be working with some form of truth, and I would be delighted for an audience to find my work "factually truthful...and...interesting or valuable." But the "by those who form the target audience" part implies a preaching-to-the-choir, lowercase 't' kind of truth that I am uncertain I want to be a part of propagating. In other words, if this is the more accurate defining statement of my efforts to communicate with a larger audience, I could be more pleased because I am providing valuable information or truthful encouragement to people, or I could be more distressed because I am reinforcing entrenched opinions and serving to justify stagnant intellectual beliefs.
In the end, although I believe Taylor's definition of propaganda is the definition that fits my project and paper most accurately, the definition of propaganda I most aspire to in my work for this project comes from Peter Kenez in *The Birth of the Propaganda State*. He says, "Propaganda is nothing more than the attempt to transmit social and political values in the hope of affecting people's thinking, emotions, and thereby behavior" (4). My transmitting of subject matter, significant to me, drawn from popular culture, images, and history, is merely designed to get people to look. But if they look, they might think or feel something. And if they think or feel something that seems important to them and their lives, they might be moved closer to acting to help create a world that better supports or reflects these thoughts and feelings.

However, I do not have any way of predicting where such a process might lead from individual to individual, and I do not have the means to direct that process further in any effective or significant way. So as much as I aspire to make propaganda that fulfills Kenez' definition, the variables are too many and the means at my disposal too few for me to believe that I could.
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From the summer of 2004 to the summer of 2005 I worked feverishly to create a larger art community for myself. I did this primarily by creating artworks and showing them to people, but also by trying to make significant connections to other artists and potential audiences.

My major motivations were relatively basic to my increasing self-identification as an artist, and all were accomplished to a degree. I wanted to express my point-of-view to more people, and I certainly did. But my point-of-view was neutralized, or perhaps neutered, to a certain extent by my desire to reach a larger audience. I desired first-hand experience of the personal and intellectual interactions unique to artists’ showing and distributing art, and I experienced these. The interactions were not overwhelmingly personal or intellectual, however. But some were. I needed to establish closer personal and professional relationships with people in the art world to further my own education and ambition, and I did, although this primarily happened with the owner of a coffeeshop and a real estate professional. And I wanted to enhance my ability to deliver an art education to my high school students that is based on real experience of the processes I instruct them about. This part mostly remains to be seen, but I believe that this is an area I had unqualified success in meeting my goal. I know much, much more about what it involves to be a working and showing artist than I did one year ago.

But I believe that my primary motivation was to use my art as a means of making contact with real people. The passion I
have developed for making art has not, in the long-term, brought me closer to people. In fact, it is quite possible that the opposite has been true, or that I have been developing a more significant relationship with making art to fill my lack of significant relationships with people. Going beyond just making art to publicly showing and promoting it has demanded a significant increase in my interpersonal relations.

My attempts to build an art audience were directed down three paths. Most of my energy was spent painting pictures and showing them. I also made drawings suitable for cheap photocopy reproductions so I could reach a larger number of people through devices like fliers, posters, press releases, and cards. And I used my professional position to make art contacts with two artists I admire greatly.

**Personal Propaganda Project—The Paintings**

(Please note that a painting is a unique work of art intended to be seen in person, which makes it a horribly inefficient medium to propagandize the masses, but beautifully effective if attempting to propagandize a person, in person. Because of the nature of painting, no reproductions of the actual paintings will be found in the appendices. Some drawn representations of certain paintings have been included.)

I will begin with the genesis of my desire to communicate with a larger audience. During the school year of 2001-2002, I painted a picture of a very young child who had been burned to a crisp in the atomic blast inflicted on Nagasaki, Japan. I took this as my subject in an attempt to grasp the more heinous
machinations of human society. The fact that my people—the people of the United States of America in the 1940s up to the present day—have generally found that this mass extermination of tens of thousands of innocent children at Nagasaki and Hiroshima was a reasonable and prudent political decision seems impossibly vicious and evil. So I tried to come to some kind of understanding of this by making a picture of this unimaginable horror as personal to me as I could. I attempted to portray the fried body of this young child, who certainly had parents and friends and pets and toys, as respectfully and tenderly as if it were a portrait of one of my own children. I tried to be true to the photograph of the child, or what was left of him or her. I also tried to be true to my feelings and thoughts about a world and a people that could justify such a slaughter, for whatever reasons. And I tried, formally, using the principles of design and my own aesthetic sensibility, to make a good picture, not to feature or hide the atrocity of the subject matter, but to be true to the contradictions in my own outlook on the world—namely, I see the horrors people make and recoil, and I experience the beauty of being a creative human and rejoice. So this picture was my tactile, tangible experiment in trying to deal with the most senselessly terrible aspects of human creativity through making art, the most senselessly beautiful arena of human creativity. My intent in making a painting of such a horrific subject with all its implications was to look squarely at the worst the world had to offer and deal with it. In the end, I had a picture that no one needed to see—it solved nothing and it led to no greater understanding. It was just unpleasant.
In the year that followed the making of this picture, three of my high school students committed suicide, and another three attempted. I started to consider seriously the nature of what I wanted to add to this world that these students couldn’t wait to get away from. Did I really want to inflict self-indulgent, unpleasant meditations about the horrible aspects of human relations, or did I want to make something else?

I decided on something else.

But I didn’t want to put on a happy face, be happy and not worry, make lemonade out of lemons, look on the bright side, find the silver lining, or subscribe to any of those lies, either. Those clichés are like drugs the human body has built up a tolerance for—they might work a little still, physiologically, and they do feel good psychologically, but they wear off fast, and in the end they probably do more harm than good by distracting us from pains we should be feeling.

Then the Creative Pulse happened to me in the summer of 2003, and my direction became clearer. Rather than stand apart and appalled by my culture and society, I would embrace the parts of it I could use to symbolize the issues I felt were important. And I would be able to maintain some aesthetic and intellectual neutrality towards the subject matter because of its popular and clichéd nature, and because I would construct the work to grant the audience license to come to their own conclusions. Instead of exploring the depths of socially constructed horror in my work, I would attempt to uncover the cultural icons and ideals that inspired such great romanticism in me despite my better judgment and skeptical nature. In the Creative Pulse I was exposed to the brilliantly creative nature of ordinary people in
a closer and deeper way than I had ever been exposed to before, and I decided that I wanted to make work that would not rub anyone’s nose in anything. I wanted people to feel welcomed by the subject matter I presented. I wanted to let them think about it without my direction, so they would feel respected intellectually. And I wanted to trust that whatever conclusions they reach would be acceptable, because through the Creative Pulse I came to better and more genuinely welcome and respect so-called ordinary people’s analysis and input. This last desire of mine necessitated my choice of the propaganda direction, because I needed my motives to be pure and concise so I wouldn’t become too involved in anticipating or prescribing a result from whatever audience my work found.

So I created thirteen paintings, each about 72 inches tall by 14 inches wide, combining images and subject matter from mainstream sources that had power and relevance to me. The titles are descriptive enough to explain the content for the purposes of this paper: Doubting Thomas/Cardinal and Nun Embrace, Woman/Holofernes (the Violent Nature of Resistance), Mondrian/Corpse (the Wages of Imposing Order), Head/Foot (a Question of Leadership), Painting/Decapitating (an Artist Creates to Destroy, and 1+1=0), American Gothic/Crucifixion (an American Painting), God/Elephant Man (Fatherhood), The Four Horses of the Apocalypse (or Stars)/Baby Corpse, Boxer/Boy (Boyhood), Beggar/The Thief on the Left (What Comes Down Must Go Up), The Temptress and Thee/Saint Sebastian Penetrated (Sex Sermon), Finial/Finial (the Value of Gallows Humor), and Soth and Wellstone: My Heroes. While these titles might seem tipped towards the dark side, I made every attempt to present the
subject matter with balance. I used bright colors, big shapes, large surfaces, and a relatively impersonal and straightforward painting style to elevate and generalize the images so a viewer could approach the pictures on his or her own terms and not be overly distracted by the artist’s hand painting or pushing.

These thirteen paintings were created as the first field project for the Creative Pulse, and they were shown at The Raven Café in downtown Missoula as a series called Icon Fragments during the month of July 2004 (Appendices pp.26-31). I decided not to attach titles to them in the Raven, to create even more space for the audience to make up their own minds. As I stated before, my propaganda efforts were primarily to make my art contact with real people. The only reward I expected from this was to experience firsthand the entire process of creating work for and placing work in front of a larger audience. This I experienced, and I found great satisfaction in the fact of my having done such a thing—me, an exhibiting artist!

However, the nitty-gritty details of doing publicity and having an opening and getting the work hung were satisfying to have accomplished, but not particularly enjoyable to do. And, somewhat surprisingly, though I had suspected this might be the case, I didn’t care much what other people thought about the work, even while I gained considerable gratification from the knowledge that people were encountering these images I had created. In other words, to display my paintings for the first time in such an ambitious way was satisfying, but I was unmoved by the audience reaction. I found I didn’t much care what they thought.
But I did have a particularly enriching and edifying encounter with one viewer about one of the works, *Soth and Wellstone: My Heroes*. I traveled to Northfield, Minnesota, to present the painting to its primary subject, my former art history professor and undergraduate advisor at Carleton College, Lauren Soth. It was the thirteenth of the series—the Judas or the Jesus, depending on your point of view. It was the outsider in all ways—I made the painting for Lauren Soth, I made it personal, I painted real people that I knew and loved and admired rather than symbolic images, and I was nervous and uncertain and anything but uncaring about how it would be received. But it was received well, he was touched and pleased with the work, and I was a beaming, embarrassed, and proud little boy for the weekend I was in Northfield, because I felt I had done something bold and brave and good, and mostly for someone else. And I had used my art to make a greater connection for me with a real and important person.

The lesson in all this was that I needed to be less neutral and more present in the next body of work if I had hopes of gaining more from the process of putting it in front of an audience. I was already scheduled for an October showing at Butterfly Herbs in downtown Missoula, so I had a reasonable amount of time to make something new, more mine, more risky, more original and personal. I just needed a specific and clear direction to bring some passion to, and Professor Kriley’s week of the Creative Pulse on the topic of leadership gave me just that direction.

I consider myself an anarchist in a general philosophical sense, so I have a tendency to equate so-called “leaders” with
socially privileged manipulators and cynics who use the general helpfulness (or helplessness) of people to get what the leaders want to get and where the leaders want to go. After Professor Kriley’s week of instruction I felt a strong desire to create an iconographic record of marginal historical figures who I believe to be truly important and brave, unlike the usual suspects that get trotted out by educators, historians, and politicians. But I felt that this was a retreat from the propaganda direction I had chosen. I had decided to embrace my culture and my people and my place, not stand haughtily outside and shame people for their lack of a good education by referencing marginalized historical figures. So I decided to take stock of my mainstream heroes, and the first that came to mind was Doubting Thomas, the disciple who had demanded physical evidence of Jesus’ resurrection. I had already featured my own arm as his in Doubting Thomas/Cardinal Embraces Nun (though it should be noted that it is poking for a hole that doesn’t exist), so it was a small leap from the Iconic Fragments series to this. But rather than make another picture of Doubting Thomas, I wanted to look at my own heroes and ideas as a Doubting Thomas, so I would essentially be doubting the people and ideals that I most wanted to believe in.

My next thought was of John Brown, the super-Christian abolitionist who led a slave revolt that resulted in two of his sons being killed, and his own execution by hanging. I have admired his extreme zeal and commitment to doing what is right at all costs since I can remember learning about him, and yet the same book that drove him to arms for a cause I believe to be righteous beyond the shadow of a doubt also drove others to embrace the very same thing that John Brown fought against. And
I think both sides are interpreting that same book correctly, though both in a limited, blindered way. And John Brown taking up arms and killing people and leading his own group to be slaughtered is certainly something to doubt the efficacy, reasonableness, and righteousness of. So I designed and painted a large triptych (three panels, each about 48 inches tall and 24 inches wide) where I attempted to distill the story of John Brown down to my essential doubts. I ended up with a cross-like torso and arms, dressed in a brown suitcoat. The central panel is all John Brown’s torso, with a noose like a necktie, the severed end of the rope floating in an s-curve against gravity like the garment of Christ in a Rogier van der Weyden Crucifixion painting, as if John Brown has been resurrected himself after being cut down from the gallows and left for dead. The left panel is arm and hand holding a rifle, with Biblical verse on the gunstock and selected pieces of John Brown’s last words at the bottom. On the right panel is an arm and hand holding the Bible, with verses visible and readable on the page and more of his last words in a box at the base of the painting. The Biblical verses are intended to be contradictory—one side encourages a man to identify with the slave and the poor and help them to freedom and independence, the other side urges men to obey the rule of law on earth because worldly governments are placed in power by God. The excerpts from John Brown’s last words merely explain his motivations, and offer no apology (Appendix p.32).

I finished Doubting John Brown’s Arms just in time for the Butterfly Herbs show in October of 2004. As there was not enough space for all of the Icon Fragments, I narrowed down to seven the number of those I would hang, along with the three panels of John
Brown. In doing this, I realized I had, loosely, a "fatherhood" theme going, so I titled the show *Icons for a Postmodern Father*, further recognizing my place in my cultural setting, even though I find the general grab-bag postmodern ethos (or lack of any) distressing (Appendices pp.33-35).

In *Butterfly Herbs*, with less work hanging in a more intimate environment, the paintings were easier to focus on and I regained some of the aesthetic pleasure from them I had lost in the course of their hanging at the Raven. And I felt that *Doubting John Brown's Arms* was a good painting, my first, and on an ambitious scale. The feedback from viewers was also more reflective and positive, and generally more interesting. I even overheard someone on the street, who was unaware that I was the artist, suggesting to his womanfriend that she go in to the store and look because "...it's interesting stuff, and different."

But once again I found myself very quickly losing interest in caring what people thought of the work. However, when my show was at the Raven I went in there a total of three times to check on things during the whole month it was up. At *Butterfly Herbs* I had a constant desire to go see my work because it looked so good in there, and because—whether anyone recognized it or not—*Doubting John Brown's Arms* was good. Unqualified good.

After this show I was contacted by the Missoula Aids Council and asked if I would contribute a work for them to show and sell to raise money for their group. An artist who had seen my show and thought that I might have some work that would suit their purposes had referred them to me. I had already begun another larger triptych called *Doubting Noam Chomsky's Vision*, Noam Chomsky being a heretical but mainstream intellectual I
admired for his blistering and profoundly logical critiques of American foreign and domestic policy and Western notions of history. I decided to interrupt that work in order to continue the *Doubting*... idea by doubting labels, and for the purposes of the Missoula AIDS Council I would doubt the label "HIV-positive."

So I tried to personalize that label—how does my culture respond to someone labeled HIV-positive, what parts of that do I buy into, consciously or not, and what could I do to illustrate all of this? HIV-positive people, in my experience, are either pilloried with the label, because it becomes a kind of scarlet letter that separates such people from so-called decent society by calling attention to their perceived immorality, or it qualifies people for sainthood, because not only does an HIV-positive person have to deal with the widely perceived "tragedy" of being gay, but they have to die a terrible and tragic martyr's death because of it too. And then I ran across a picture of an everyday-looking man wearing a T-shirt that said "HIV Positive," and I thought of how brave this was of him, and how strange it is to be considered brave for sporting a relatively common medical condition on a T-shirt. I imagined what it would be like for one of my kids to have to wear that label, and I had my triptych: three painted representations of T-shirts proclaiming the wearer HIV Positive, with arms alluding to a cross shape a la *Doubting John Brown's Arms* and the crucified Jesus. On the left panel, I made working medieval stocks by hinging two pieces of plywood together and cutting a hole for the neck of the HIV-positive person to be publicly identified and punished. On the right, I hung an empty picture frame so the viewer could imagine a heroically tragic HIV-positive person to memorialize there. And
in the middle I painted a picture of my five year-old son Tom wearing the HIV-positive label.

*Doubting Labels: HIV Positive* was by far my most successful work from my propaganda viewpoint. The subject was vital and contemporary and exceedingly broad. It received a great amount of exposure to a large audience. Because it was well received by the people at the Missoula Aids Council, it was displayed prominently at the Dana Gallery for a month and at Bernice’s Bakery for the following month (both businesses are in Missoula). The image was then reproduced for the cover of the invitations the Missoula Aids Council sent out for their annual fundraising party and auction, and the Council still has the work hanging in their offices (Appendix p.36).

It was also a gratifying work to me emotionally because I made it such a personally relevant work by including my son Tom in it. It was successful artistically for two major reasons. One, because I boldly and successfully constructed it using truly unrelated media, something that I had never done before. And two, because for the first time my work was placed in a setting that encouraged comparison with other excellent artists’ work, and my work not only held its own, it stood out in its ambition, clarity, and originality.

However, despite that I recognize the success of *Doubting Labels: HIV Positive* on a number of levels, it was also an excellent lesson about what is involved in reaching a large audience. The advantage this work had over all of my others is that it had a clear and accessible message, it stood apart from other work in the same genre because of its size and mixed media construction, and an organization picked it up and promoted it
because it served their purposes. The flip sides to these apparent advantages are not positive qualities. The clear and accessible message also speaks to the shallowness of my experience with the subject, and ultimately to the shallowness of the work itself. But this allows the work to be acceptable to a broader range of viewers because their experience is more likely to be as shallow as mine. The size and mixed media construction have an impact, but they also make glaring my technical deficiencies, both as a rushed painter and an inexperienced carpenter. But big is easier to see, and moving parts in a painting are different and attention-getting. And an organization interested in communicating to the general public is not going to use an intellectually demanding and truly challenging work to put on their party invitations.

While I was working on *Doubting Labels: HIV Positive*, I accepted a commission from a friend, Sheena Comer-Winterer, who wanted some large-scale work for three walls of a conference room in the Prudential Real Estate office building she owns and had just had remodeled. Her only demands were that the work be relatively large and have “home” as the subject. I decided to do a triptych titled *Doubting Labels: Home*, and I worked up a design that showed, very simply, the Missoula valley mountain skyline uniting the three panels, with a simple homestead dominating the left panel, a not-so-dominating teepee in the right, and a pine tree filling up the middle. The concept was not full enough, however, and over weeks and then months I continually lost sight of why anyone should care about this picture or how it should look aesthetically to serve the subject matter. So I turned the panels over and aggressively reduced the elements of the “home”
painting I most admire—American Gothic by Grant Wood—and altered them in an attempt to portray a female-centered idea of home instead of the male-centered idea of Grant Wood's masterpiece. The major change was turning the upward-pointed and phallic gothic arch of the house window to an embracing and rounded romanescque-inspired one. The results were rejuvenating, to the point that I finished the very abstract *Amerikan Romanesk* and I eliminated the homestead and the teepee on the other side, finished that, and sold the work to Sheena as a two-sided triptych (Appendix p.37).

The final painting in this series (at this moment) is the previously mentioned *Doubting Noam Chomsky's Vision*. This work is made up of three panels, each four feet tall and about two-and-a-half feet wide. The work is focused very close-up on Noam Chomsky's glasses. Inside each lens the shapes are clearly delineated, flat, and not painterly like the shapes outside each lens. The glasses form irregular metallic gold haloes for each eye. In the left panel outside of the glasses is a numbing repetition of black and white generic tombstone shapes, while the part we can see inside the glasses is a numbing repetition of generic Christian cross-shaped tombstones. The middle panel has an altered reference at the bottom left from Thoreau about how behavior perceived by society as good he finds bad, and in the painting the viewer is urged to "repent of good behavior." The right panel is eye and glasses and face.

This work I am the most uncertain of. It was difficult to maintain passion for after the initial drawing stages, and even now as it hangs, satisfactorily finished, at the Bear’s Brew coffee shop in a small showing titled *Doubting...*, which includes
Doubting John Brown's Arms, Doubting Thomas/Cardinal and Nun Embrace, and a self-portrait, I am puzzled by it (Appendix p.38) I believe it is possible that my puzzlement is a sign of real artistic success. Doubting Noam Chomsky's Vision is a dominating visual presence because it is so large and the focus on the subject is so tight. The painted shapes are large and simple enough that it is possible to go back and forth fluidly between the representational aspect of the picture and the completely abstract nature of picture-making (everything in a painting is, after all, just line and shape and color). The content of the painting is so simple and straightforward that meaning can be gained from reading the words, knowing something about Chomsky, or just contemplating the nature of the whole.

But it is also possible that my puzzlement is a sign of misdirection. My lofty and romantic goal of making neutral work that welcomes and respects the viewing and analytical skills of the audience may instead be an intellectual façade disguising work neutered of passion and real direction.

To combat this, my latest painting series is titled The Vanity of the Artist: Looking in the Mirror and Liking What I See. This series is based on a number of scratchboard drawings I've done about my being an artist (Appendices pp.39-42). In part, I am motivated to do something lighter in tone and smaller of size than the work I have been describing. But it also is to take stock of where I am at, in a tangible way. Right now, I am very impressed with myself and what I have accomplished as a working and showing artist. This is amusing, but it is also a defining fact of this moment in history, to me, certainly as much as political, religious, or public health issues are. So, at the
end of this large-scale personal outreach project designed to enable my art to propagandize the masses, I choose to make a series about me, to amuse an audience of one.

Personal Propaganda Project—The Drawings

During this past year my primary artistic emphasis has been on making and showing paintings. A traditional painter cannot be a serious propagandist however, because of the nature of painting. Traditional paintings take a lot of time to make, they don’t reproduce well or cheaply, and they usually demand layers of work and subtleties that an effective propaganda artist would not have time for. (The exceptions to this are graffiti artists who have adapted their painting techniques to the time constraints and scale and location of the surfaces they paint on to create a form of painting suitable for effective large-scale propagandizing. However, the level and variety of technical skills necessary to be effective in this arena are considerably beyond my abilities at this time.) So I supplemented my painting propaganda efforts with the reproduction and distribution of scratchboard drawings that I made for a variety of specific reasons, but always for the overarching project goal of making art contact with a larger audience.

By the way, this section of the paper will be considerably shorter because I spent considerably less effort and much, much less time producing and propagandizing in this area. Yet it is very likely that these drawings I am about to describe have been seen by many more people than my paintings. It is also likely that these works have been examined more closely and thoughtfully because the small scale allows them to be held and handled, and
because it is easier to examine something in private or in hand than something in public.

With one exception, all of the works I discuss here were made using scratchboard. Scratchboard is white paper covered with a very dark black ceramic layer that must be scratched off to create a drawing. The quality I find most useful about scratchboard for my propaganda efforts is that the dramatic contrast between the white of the paper and the black of the surface layer make for wonderful reproductions. Every mark made in the drawing is white, everything left alone is black. "Gray" doesn't even exist in scratchboard; "gray" is just a trick of leaving enough black amidst the white marks. So the photocopy machine has no decisions to make when reading a scratchboard drawing. It reads just like text.

To be a more effective propagandist for this project, I made graphic work, using scratchboard, for three basic purposes: to encourage a political action, to promote my painting propaganda efforts, and for personal causes.

My effort to encourage a political action revolved around the November elections in 2004. I was very concerned about my country's rapid descent into outright fascism, but I felt that my efforts would be less futile if I focused more locally with any effort I might make. So I decided to take action against the most egregiously discriminating issue on the ballot—CI-96, the constitutional amendment to prohibit legal recognition of homosexual marriage. I created two fliers, each with Uncle Sam pointing at the viewer urging a "No" vote. I stapled copies of these to poles and bulletin boards around Missoula as the election neared (Appendix p.43).
The initiative passed.

But I never assumed that my little art propaganda project would win over fifty percent of Montana voters to the side of righteousness. I again must state that I undertook this project to serve my own self-interests. This particular effort served three purposes. Number one, I found that I was able to make activist art that was crassly specific and satisfying visually. Number two, I was able to do what I love to do—draw and design—and satisfy my sociopolitical conscience at the same time. And number three, I announced to the world, which is full of gay people, my students, a few of whom are gay, and my family, one of whom is conservative Montana Supreme Court Justice, that this issue was of particular importance to me. This project was one very, very small step for humankind, but the first of many large steps for me, I believe, because it was so easy, so individual, and so fun to be satisfying my conscience, my need to make art, and my desire to see my art in public all at the same time.

I also did three scratchboard drawings to promote my paintings. The first was drawn using three of the Iconic Fragments paintings and reproduced to invite people to the show at the Raven Café (Appendix p.26). I also submitted this invitation to the Missoula Independent and the Missoulian in hopes that they would reproduce the images in their calendar sections. They did not.

The second was a drawing of the Four Horses of the Apocalypse (or Stars)/Baby Corpse that I did specifically for the Missoula Independent calendar section to promote the show at Butterfly Herbs (Appendix p.33). I even tried to exploit a connection I had to a former student of mine who was working as a
graphic designer there, and I tried to bribe the calendar person by writing that they could keep the drawing as a gift whether they used it in their pages or not. They didn’t use it, but they did keep it.

And the last drawing I did was of *Doubting John Brown’s Arms* to promote my efforts to wrap up this whole project neatly by exhibiting some of my work in Havre, Montana, during my 20th high school reunion, where they only know me as a jock (Appendix p.32). I aborted this plan, but I reproduced the drawing to use as a fold-up flier to hand out or mail, and as a poster to tack up around town, to promote the *Doubting*... show currently on display at the Bear’s Brew coffee shop. I also submitted it to both the *Missoula Independent* and the *Missoulian* hoping they would print it, but again they did not.

Finally, the graphic work I made for personal causes provided the most audience feedback, because the people I make art contact with in this area are usually people I have other kinds of contact with, too. So because I made the picture for the front of my brother’s wedding invitations and designed the temporary tattoos they gave out at the ceremony, the people there could talk to me about my work in a less stiff environment than an art show (Appendix p.44). The annual family portrait I made (these were actually small acrylic portraits) and reproduced as Martin Luther King Day cards were sent to people who are friends and relatives, and they often respond to the artwork in some way to me (Appendix p.45). And the “thank you” card for people who made especially important contributions to my nephew Perry’s family as he underwent brain surgery and radiation treatment this spring primarily went to people in the Missoula community whom I
have some contact with, and I have already received some feedback from a couple of them (Appendix p.46). But as satisfying as this work is, because it usually addresses needs that are close and especially tangible, the feedback from an audience of friends and relatives is excessively positive, encouraging, and gentle, and ultimately unreliably honest.

In the end, the graphic work served the propaganda project primarily as support of my efforts to show my paintings to a larger audience. But being able to draw for this project also gave me a necessary refuge when the paintings stalled or my passions for the large-scale work faded, because I could always be productive. This was important to the success of my propaganda efforts, but it is also vital to my continuing needs as an artist beyond this project. Because my life is full of children, a wife, a job, people, and other things, I need to create spaces in my time to make art, and these spaces are often not sufficient for great ambitions. Drawing allows me to be an artist and a good father and husband, and because of my experience with activist art, it might even help me become a good citizen.

**Personal Propaganda Project—The Artists**

The final part of my attempt to reach out to a larger community of people to serve my own artistic interests was to use my position as an art teacher at Missoula Sentinel High School to gain meaningful contact with Missoula area artists I admired. I focused my attention on two artists during the 2004-2005 school year—Theo Ellsworth, a young local graphic artist, and Jay Laber,
a sculptor who teaches in the art department at Salish-Kootenai College in Pablo, Montana.

I invited Theo Ellsworth to speak to two of my classes. In the winter of 2003, I had the good fortune to come across his self-produced antiwar book, _A Cautionary Tale_, which I thought was an understated masterpiece of graphic literature, moving and relevant to me because it made a universal political statement in a very intimate and personal way. He accepted, and while his presence wasn’t dramatically enlightening, my contact with Theo has created a friendship between us and has given me contact with an anarchical collective of artists here in Missoula that are currently involved in self-publishing and creating a “free school” that revolves around creative work and socially active thought and action. I have yet to take advantage of this connection in any specific way, but I feel that I will be able to in the near future, and that it will be mutually beneficial.

I also contacted Salish-Kootenai College and organized a field trip to there for three of my classes. My primary goal was to connect with Jay Laber, the sculptor whose work I most admire, in an art education context so I could not only meet him but also perhaps gain some insight into his work and see if we had some common interests. The trip happened, and Jay did give us a tour of the campus and the art department. Unfortunately, the context provided little more than superficial interactions, and surprisingly little of that was art-related. I did gain a greater appreciation and knowledge of the college, however, and if I care to deepen my interaction with Jay or other artists connected to the reservation, I have taken the vital first step in that direction.
Even though my efforts in this category were small, the professional outreach that I undertook seemed to hold more promise for making significant personal connections to specific artists here in the community than my efforts to make and show and distribute work have. I believe that is because I contacted artists to hear them and see their work, which served their needs. If my propaganda efforts continue in a serious way, I need to figure out how my artwork can function to serve other people's needs better. In other words, if I want my art to foster some real communication, which necessarily involves give and take, rather than just transmission, I need to decide what I have to give.

**Personal Propaganda Project—The Conclusion**

Completing this project has caused me to recognize that I have fulfilled my dream of becoming an artist. This is a surprising revelation, even though I have been working towards this end for some time now. And it is a fact that I am an artist now, with no qualifications—I have made a body of work, I have hung work, I have shown work, I have made the world better with my work, I have sold work, I have work hanging at a nonprofit, I have work hanging in a business conference room, I have posted activist guerilla art! That is very satisfying.

But I also feel like I am not at the end of anything. This experiment I began last summer is still in the beginning stages. I am not done with anything, nor do I see any light at the end of this tunnel the Creative Pulse led me into. There are other artists I need to connect with, there are drawings to be made, and there is a lot more doubting to do.
This is a good thing in general, I know. But I would appreciate some results from this experiment.

I would like to know if reaching out to working artists is really going to help me know more and be more, or if being an artist is like being short. I don’t reach out to short people just because I am short, too.

I would enjoy a letter from someone that said something like, “Your Uncle Sam poster made me go out and vote against the neo-fascist agenda,” or, “I don’t normally read my mail, but that drawing you put on that wedding invitation really made me take notice.”

And what would really give me some closure about why I make pictures and then try to get people to look at them, would be for someone to somehow relate that after they looked at my art they felt less alone than they did before. Because then I would know I was less alone, too.
References


Self-Portrait, acrylic, 2005
Tim Marion Nielson
ICON FRAGMENTS: PAINTINGS BY TIM MARION NIELSON.

A CELEBRATION OF SOME KIND.
AT THE RAVEN,
WEDNESDAY, JULY 14, STARTING ABOUT 6:30.
NOTHING IS FREE, BUT EVERYTHING IS RELATIVELY CHEAP.

Icon Fragments invitation,
scratchboard, 2004
Tim Marion Nielson
ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I am Tim Marion Nielson. I painted these pictures.

I like to talk about what I do, and why, at length, but I don't want to distract anyone from looking.

If you would like to know more, I can be reached at 433 Blaine, Missoula, 59801, or at 721-9014.

Thanks for looking.

Artist Statement for Icon Fragments, 2004
Tim Marion Nielson
about these Icon Fragments

... fragments of fragments, pieces of altarpieces, thirds of thirds of triptychs. It's a cop-out. But haven't icons always been partial—splinters from the One True Cross, a Saint's fingerbone, the sweaty traces of the Savior's face on Veronica's kerchief, ...
I have looked for icons in the archaeological remains of my 20th century. I don't believe in postmodernism—I believe in a world of simple and objective truths. So I expected to find simple and enduring images of stained glass clarity to paint and show to you. Yes, I expected mystery—what good would an icon be without that?—but I also expected wholeness, pictures full and finished and neatly framed.

Instead I found fragments of fragments, pieces of altarpieces, thirds of thirds of triptychs.

Apparently this is all I have to offer. I suppose, though, that icons have always been partial—a stone from the world before this one, splinters from the One True Cross, a Bodhisvatā’s bone, the sweaty traces of the Savior’s face on Veronica’s kerchief...

Explanation for Icon Fragments, 2004

Tim Marion Nielson
Knowing where and who you are is usually achieved through a process of elimination—you need to find out who you’re not and where you can’t (or won’t) go. When you live in a culture that does not acknowledge its boundaries and limits and works to deny you such knowledge through intellectual intimidation, fear-mongering, and misguidance, but mostly through blatant and wholesale denial, then, in this place, how can you know where or who you are? Sure, there are clues in the carefully preserved icons of the past on which the confusion of the present is built. But where people of the past had a whole picture to look at—a more coherent and complete mythology to bind and free their minds—you have to play archaeologist and piece together scattered shards to be able to examine the cultural artifacts of your present. The icons of today come incomplete and piecemeal, their fragments embedded willy-nilly in everyday images while key portions gather dust in out-of-the-way places. You have to sift through a lot of shit to find the shards. If you’re lucky, you find a couple if pieces here and there that fit together.

I would make the whole picture if I could.
Remnants of My 20th Century

I have sifted through the archaeological remnants of my 20th century. These paintings are the most coherent and the most complete images I could find. They seem to be icon fragments, or at least that is what I call them. They seem to hold meaning and mystery. But mostly they just seem to refer, like footnotes from much more ambitious artworks. They appear to be pieces cut from a larger cloth.

But since I have no faith that the larger cloth exists, I just paint the pieces.

Explanations for Icon Fragments, 2004
Tim Marion Nielson
Doubting John Brown's Arms,
scratchboard after painting, 2004
Tim Marion Nielson
Four Horses of the Apocalypse/Baby Corpse, scratchboard after painting, 2004
Tim Marion Nielson
"ICONS FOR A POSTMODERN FATHER"

Exhibit at Butterfly Herbs

The Artist
I am Tim Marion Nielson.

The Motivation
I am the father of 3 young children. These pictures came from a desire to relate important stories and ideas to my children, with ambiguity.

Why the Ambiguity?
The stories and ideas illustrated here are important and world-revealing to me personally, and they are of subjects that relate to the broader cultural context my children will grow up in (I think). So these stories and ideas (I’m betting) can be important and relate to my children too. However, the powerful forces—religious, capitalist, institutional—that shape the broader cultural environment use these same stories and ideas to manipulate and indoctrinate for their own dubious purposes. As I am certain that I have been manipulated and indoctrinated by these things myself, I cannot trust even me to direct my children’s interpretation of these images. So I attempt ambiguity so the lessons of these stories can be decided rather than directed.

The Guiding Moral of These Paintings
The overt lessons of stories are (almost) always less important than the covert ones you discover for yourself.
ICONS FOR A POSTMODERN FATHER

The Artist
I am Tim Marion Nielson.

The Motivation
I am the father of 3 young children. These pictures came from a desire to relate important stories, with a neutrality about why they are important.

Why the Neutrality?
The powerful forces at work in society—religious, capitalist, institutional—that shape the broader cultural environment we live in use these same stories to manipulate and indoctrinate for their own purposes. I do not trust those forces to act in the best interests of anyone's development. As I am certain that I have been manipulated and indoctrinated through these stories myself, I cannot trust the value I place in them. Yet I still find their subjects important and world-revealing, and their images continue to resonate and assert themselves in my work. (I do not seem to be alone in this as the stolen nature of much of this imagery should attest). I attempt neutrality in these pictures so the lessons of these stories can be decided rather than directed.

The Guiding Moral of These Pictures
The overt lessons of stories are far less important than the covert ones you discover for yourself.

The Pictures
I would prefer to paint the whole picture, but the fragments here are truer to my understanding of these stories. The juxtaposition of imagery from different sources in the same picture is intended to relate stories to each other, because a story cannot stand unique and hold any great value. A great story needs to feed our understanding of other stories, and of our own.

Details
I can be reached at 721-9014, or at 433 Blaine Street, 59801, if you have questions or comments, or if you are interested in buying any of these works.

Explanation for Icons for a Postmodern Father, 2004
Tim Marion Nielson
The Missoula AIDS Council

presents

POSITIVE CHANGE

An evening to benefit the Missoula AIDS Council.
Appetizers, cocktails, and a silent auction
6:30 pm until 9:30 pm
with dancing to follow.
Saturday, April 2nd at Studio F4

Suggested Donation: $20 per person or $10 living lightly.
Please call 543-4770 for more information.

Artwork by Tim Nielsen

Invitation, Doubting Labels: HIV Positive, mixed media, 2005
Tim Marion Nielson
I have sketches and a collage where I have re-worked the great painting by Grant Wood, *American Gothic*. In my work, a woman has taken the place of Grant Wood’s man. She holds a baby instead of a pitchfork. To her right is her mother. The architecture behind is broadened and softened. And the attic window’s arch is rounded, wide, and romanesque, unlike Garth Wood’s pointed, narrow gothic one.

My first thoughts about this project—to create 3 paintings with the theme of “home” for Sheena Comer-Winterer’s conference room at her Prudential Real Estate offices—were about the evolution of “home” in the Missoula valley. The paintings on the back sides of *Amerikan Romanesk* are about that. But in the process of doing those works, the idea of “home” being about family and parenthood—and particularly motherhood—was an idea I couldn’t shake. So I quit trying to, and I turned my already painted boards over and started new on the other side.

I immediately turned to my ideas about changing *American Gothic*, but as interested as I was intellectually in making that painting, I wasn’t as interested in seeing it. So I attempted to reduce the elements of that work radically until they became completely formal considerations visually. In other words, I tried to translate the intellectual components of my ideas into shapes and paint and color.

The results of doing that are *Amerikan Romanesk*. Reductions of this kind are a struggle, and the end abstraction is open to broad interpretation, or none at all. That’s OK with me. But I write this because not only am I a painter, I am an art teacher. In art, process is important and transparency is educational. And there is always much more to any art than meets the eye. Always.

*Explanation of Amerikan Romanesk, 2005
Tim Marion Nielson*
Thomas was a believer, and that is why he doubted. He believed that Jesus' message was real, that his faith was true, and that is why he had the courage to challenge the resurrected Jesus. Thomas' desire to undo the awful death of his most loved friend was countered by his need to live a life grounded on truth. As hard as it must have been, this meant Thomas had to doubt the very thing he wanted to believe most of all.

Not often enough, I dream about my Dad. He died a little over eight years ago. In these dreams, he and I do the most mundane, unremarkable things. I try not to challenge him in any way; I just try to stay there, in the dream with my Dad, as long as I can. I am afraid if I question anything, or do anything at all that acknowledges his death and absence, he'll realize his unreality and disappear.

But because I am so passive in these dreams, when I wake up my experience of them feels especially insubstantial. I want these dreams to be more. More real. I want to be able to be there for my Dad—not just him for me—even if it is only a dream. And I have so many questions that need answers. But I am not brave enough yet to ask; I am not brave enough, yet, to find out I am only dreaming.

I try to be braver when I am not dreaming. I doubt because I believe.

Tim Marion Nielsen
330 McLeod
Missoula, MT 59801
406-721-9014
Self-Portrait as Girl with Artificial Limbs,
scratchboard basis for Vanity of the Artist series
Tim Marion Nielson
Self-Portrait: Beauty Contestant, scratchboard basis for Vanity of the Artist series
Tim Marion Nielson
Evangelist Contemplates Ape, Eve, My Birth, scratchboard basis for Vanity of the Artist series
Tim Marion Nielsen
The Artist: A Study in Repression,
scratchboard basis for *Vanity of the Artist* series
Tim Marion Nelson
You can discriminate. Not the law. Vote NO on CA-96

"Everyone is equal under the law."

PLEASE VOTE NO ON CA-96.

"No on CA-96"
scratchboard, 2004
Tim Marion Nielson
Wedding Invitation, scratchboard, 2004
Tim Marion Nielson
Annual Nielson Family Martin Luther King Day Card,
acrylic, 2005
Tim Marion Nielson
"Perrystrength" thank you card, scratchboard, 2005
Tim Marion Nielson