

THE ULTIMATE AMERICAN ICON IS THE ASTRONAUT: WHO IS MORE HEROIC OR MORE ALONE?

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Abstract:

My work is about the human condition and specifically about loneliness and melancholy. Who or what is the subject of that loneliness? While I believe in most art as stemming from yourself, from within and somewhat autobiographical, I am confident that I am commenting on people and humanity as a whole. Loneliness is an inevitable trait of the human condition. I feel there is the search for meaning amongst the isolation and emptiness of the universe that cannot be fulfilled. Everybody can be lonely and inaccessible. Everyone has walls built up around them. This is perhaps more and more true the further technologically advanced we become, relying more on technology and social media for interaction with each other. Through the internet, people can now create alternate ideals of themselves online via real time video games, Facebook, twitter, email, etc. Individuals are putting another protective layer up between them and the real world, creating a buffer, preventing access to them, and what is lost is that face-to-face interaction.

“...Facebook is interfering with our real friendships, distancing us from each other, making us lonelier...social networking might be spreading the very isolation it seemed designed to conquer.”

(Stephen Marche. “Is Facebook Making us Lonely?” *The Atlantic*. May 2012 p62)

There is value and a certain pleasure that comes with being in another’s presence. Everyone carries a certain energy, and when we interact with each other our energies also interact. These are things that you cannot experience through an alternative medium, and the astronaut in his suit can be seen as a metaphor for this barrier that is put up around us.

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BEGINNING:

Until the beginning of graduate school, my work focused around ephemeral issues; I was intrigued by the cycle of life/death/life that continually appears in nature and in most every religion. I kept seeing this cyclical nature of things everywhere I looked and I felt it could be applied to most all aspects of life, from nature to industry. From these ideas came a train of thought about actual beings and objects that had an ephemeral nature to them. Butterflies, jellyfish, bubbles, clouds, dandelion seeds, falling leaves etc., objects that were dictated by forces outside of themselves. There is a child-like wonder in watching a string of bubbles float through the air, or a jellyfish floating through open water, movements dictated by the ocean current. I began to think how much we as humans are just the same as this. How we are dictated by forces outside of ourselves no matter how much we try and control our lives. The astronaut floating in zero-gravity space was a perfect metaphor for this.

When I began using the astronaut in my work to symbolize external forces, I didn't know the scope of development he would go through or if I would even continue using him as a subject. The first time he arose was in a painting I did for a commissioned piece before I entered graduate school. The painting dealt with these ephemeral issues that I had been investigating for quite a while and I saw the astronaut fitting in as a human representation of the ephemeral. I had a tiny little figurine of an astronaut in my room right beside my drawings. I became intrigued by him and I decided to incorporate him into this painting. At this point, I didn't anticipate using the astronaut more but there was something about the figure that intrigued me.

CITY/ENVIRONMENT:

The city is an ephemeral entity. It follows this same cycle that lives and dies and then comes alive again in a new way, dictated by outside forces. Often times the city is referred to as being alive. It is alive when it is filled with people and commerce and movement; the familiar electric pulse ebbing and flowing with the sleep patterns of its inhabitants; manicured landscapes and gardens, showing a level of love and care for the space. It's not just an occupied space but a home, a unique place for the people living there.

Without a population, the city in effect dies. The natural elements are all but gone. Only concrete and brick are left, growing increasingly sterile. The sparsely scattered plants have room to take over and regain their presence. It is left cold and empty. It turns into a ghost town and what is left is the collected memory of the population that once inhabited it. The presence of life gets imbedded within the buildings, relics and monuments from times past. The people that inhabited the space, that called it home, leave behind an imprint of their presence, their energy.

This doesn't happen by choice necessarily. Why would people want to leave their home? Something would have to happen to the place or to the people to remove their presence in the city; something cataclysmic rendering the city uninhabitable or perhaps wiping out the life within it. Past evidence of this is seen in ancient cities all over the world. Great metropolises have existed on every continent and all that is left are the ruins that hint at what was once there. Cities like Petra, Jordan, Pompeii, Italy, or Machu Pichu, in Peru. Great cities and civilizations were wiped out and new cultures often built on their remnants and so replaced them, and this decline may have been due to wars, disease, natural disasters etc.

I feel the current state of things in our ever increasingly connected and globalized society is happening internally rather than externally, that we are causing ruin to ourselves by knowingly destroying and poisoning our environment. It's almost as if we know how to stop the cyclical nature of humanity's rise and fall between eras and societies but we continue in our self-destruction anyway.

On a more personable level, there is also a relationship between the city and the self and a psychological aloneness that comes from the city environment. You are surrounded by people but alone all the same. The anonymity is overwhelming in its amplitude and the authority of the urban landscape can make you feel insignificant in its scope. There is something uncanny about this feeling from a product of human development. It's different from the sublime

feeling you get amongst nature and the cosmos, in awe at the beauty and overarching expansiveness of it all where your existence can feel at once insignificant and meaningless but also at peace, surrounded by products of an evolutionary and divine development. I see the urban environment as a sort of anti-sublime where there is no infinite grandiose or capacity but where everything is boxed in and contained; where you are trapped by the man-made structures that prove achievement and conquest over nature. It can be suffocating. The sterility of the wasted urban environment reflects and affects the feeling of being alone in the city.

In a way, the city, once it becomes sterile and empty reflects man as the engineer of his self-demise. A city as a place of promise and vitality among the population has turned sour and the hopefulness has transpired to hopelessness, leaving a place of little prosperity where only the strong willed will survive.

This body of work picks up at an apocalyptic point where this has happened in cities all over the world. I'm not explaining what happened to these cities as I want to leave that open ended so that the viewer can form his or her own opinion. What is clear, in my pieces however is that this environment is uninhabitable. It is desolate and barren but familiar. I want the viewer to have a sense of attachment to these spaces. I want them to be familiar enough to conjure feelings of nostalgia and awareness.

TURNING POINTS/DEVELOPMENTS:



'Blowing,' etching and aquatint. 20x28 inch. 2009

As these pieces were developing, the fleeting and ephemeral issues I was working with were coming to an end. I started to juxtapose the ideas of space and this final frontier with a grounded and urban setting, bringing in these ideas of our contemporary landscape as both degraded and uninhabitable and that ideal of living in space.

One of my early pieces in this body of work, *'Blowing,'* was a jumping off point for this idea. This piece incorporated an astronaut holding a flower and 'blowing' the petals/seeds out into the atmosphere. It was precisely the blowing action the subject was involved in that was interesting to me. It is that curious notion as how exactly the astronaut is able to blow on the flower when his head and therefore his inability to blow on the flower is impeded by his helmet. I am very drawn to that dichotomy between the helmet being the thing that at once gives him the ability to breathe but is also what is preventing him from blowing on the flower to cause the seeds to disperse.

I wasn't certain what environment I wanted to place this figure in at first, but after having a realization with *'Blowing,'* I knew I wanted my figure to interact in an urban environment and not a foreign, or alien environment. I wanted it to be recognizably human but still have anonymity and ambiguity and to play on the familiar. That familiarity in the environment helps emphasize this dichotomy between what the figure can access and what he cannot. The familiar environment also forces the questions of how and why. How did the world we live in end up this way and why does this man need a spacesuit to survive?

The open ended-ness to the landscapes and settings provide the viewer with an array of possibilities and circumstances. Was there a war that ravaged the land and ecosystem leaving it ruined in a nuclear wasteland? Or, was it our own undoing, resulting from the environmental neglect and apathy witnessed from the industrial age forward? Regardless of how it happened, it is the reality of the astronaut's situation and he must now navigate it.

Anxious to build on this foundation, I continued to develop and organize these ideas. What came to the forefront was this idea of the hunter gatherer juxtaposed with the astronaut. Man has done so much in advancing technologically that we are able to send people to and from space. In fact, The International Space Station has been permanently occupied since November 2, 2000. I wanted my pieces to question what will happen if and when that technology fails us and we are forced back to our hunter gatherer roots? Will we be able to survive?

'Dragging' was the first print along this line of thought and is really the first piece I made in the series that was to become my final show. Showing the astronaut walking down an alley way, lit from behind, dragging a dead deer carcass that he had just killed. The astronaut has been forced to hunt for his food again but how will he eat it? He cannot access the food yet he needs it to live. This set the tone for the rest of the pieces that were to follow, this idea of inaccessibility. The suit became paramount to this metaphor for isolation as it is what keeps him alive and provides him the means of accessing the world around him, but also prevents

him from accessing the world as well. It is physical barrier between him and the things he needs and wants.



'Dragging,' etching and aquatint. 30x22 inch. 2009

SUIT:

The astronaut began as the human representation of the ephemeral in my work but as I continued to draw and include him in my work I saw him as much more than that. The suit is important. It provides protection but at the same time isolation. It is the inaccessible aspect of the astronaut. He is enclosed in his suit and enclosed in the walls of the city. The structures and suit built to protect him are what also keeps him from accessing his world and surroundings.

The suit is integral to the astronaut's survival; it is what keeps him alive, providing protection from the harsh environment of space. But he isn't in space; he is in an anonymous urban landscape. Is it because of a toxic environment? What is it about this familiar environment that required the use of a space suit to stay alive?

Building on the issue of inaccessibility and the physical barrier between the subject and his environment, I began to think about what the astronaut would be feeling and experiencing. What it would feel like to be trapped inside of the suit. At this time I was exposed to a lot of early psychoanalytical theory in the course, Visual Intersections: The Uncanny, that I took in Fall 2010. (Graybill, Lela ARTH 6810 Fall 2010) One passage by Sigmund Freud struck a chord with me and I felt this fit the conversation I was starting. Freud talked about this idea of *melancholia*, how it is a state we all experience at one point or another. From this I began to recognize that I wasn't just depicting a character I found interesting but I was starting to place myself into his shoes.

I had the epiphany that the suit was much more than just a physical separation between a man and his surrounding but also a representation of the psychological barriers that we put up around ourselves. That we all have these sort of suits around us as a form of protection and as a barrier as well.

Freud states that melancholia, along with mourning, is a reaction to a loss in his 1917 essay *Mourning and Melancholy*.

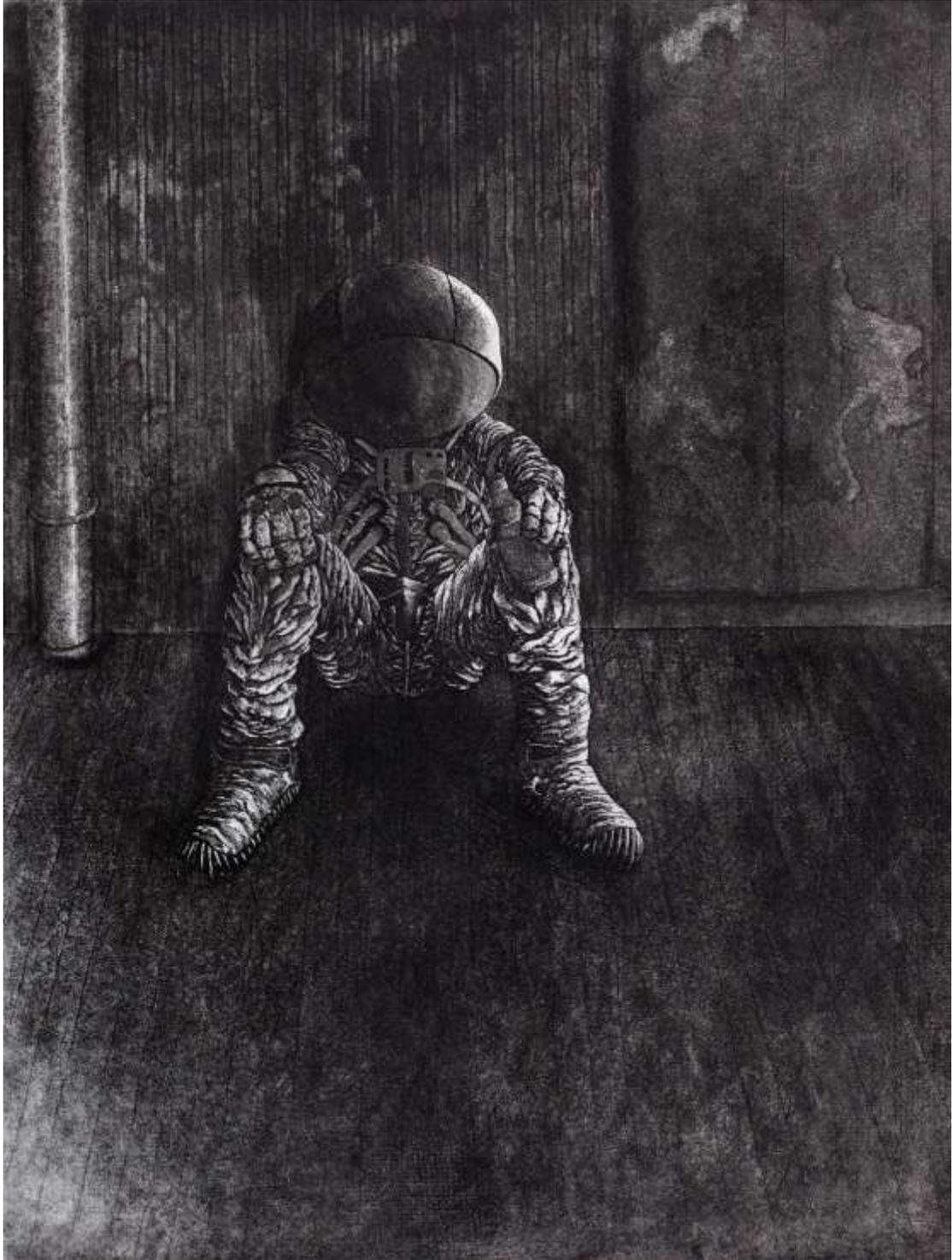
"In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and

morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished.”

Freud, S. Mourning and Melancholia. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works, (1917) 237-258 (p.245)

In a state of mourning, the subject acknowledges his or her loss and is able to move on. In a state of melancholy, however, the subject refuses to let go and internalizes the loss in his ego and furthers the state of sadness and depression in a cyclical manner. It results into an empty ego and what is left is the hollow shell of what was once there.

Seeing the spacesuit as a metaphor for the suits we all wear to protect ourselves and the idea of the subject being reduced to a melancholic state, alone, marooned on the earth that was once his home, I was able to start developing a loose narrative to this story. However, it is a narrative without direction or resolution. Like Freud says of melancholy being a state of psychological emptiness and ruination, so is the life of the astronaut alone in the post-apocalyptic atmosphere. The suit provides that space for decay without being seen by others just like our bodies can hide what's in our hearts and minds. We cannot see what is within but we can still get a sense of the internal subject from the actions and movements he makes.



Melancholia II,' etching and aquatint. 15x22 inch. 2010

I wanted to capture the feeling of this chronic emptiness and loss in my pieces and to provoke the feeling of inescapability, that the figure was trapped in his suit and his environment. There is the cyclical nature of the astronaut's situation, being trapped in his suit, unable to escape, fueling the increasing loneliness. The melancholic condition comes from the layers upon layers of entrapment afflicting the astronaut, enclosing him within himself and providing no relief from the turmoil of his inescapability and inaccessibility. There is a certain humility to isolation of the astronaut, that of being alone. There is no room for pride in his situation and the ego has no room for stimulation or growth and instead dims into remission.

The suit is also metaphor for the technological advancements of humanity as well. The rapid technological advancements of the past 50, 20, and even 5 years have been incredible and exponential in scope. There is no sign of slowing down, and I can only wonder what is on the horizon. I see this rapid acceleration like a bomb, where an eventual explosion will occur. While this threat is more metaphysical, it is still a very real concern. It mirrors our minds and psyches that must adapt with technological expansion at the same rate and that there may very well be a tipping point psychologically and mentally as well.

Loneliness is an inevitable trait of the human condition. Everybody can be lonely and inaccessible. Everyone has walls built up around them. These walls can be physical, as well as emotional, psychological, and spiritual. We are afraid of what can harm us and take measures of protection. Since childhood we have been harmed in one way or another and appropriately have taken protective measures against these things. These could range from altering appearance to fit into certain groups and cliques, to more extreme measures such as the use of drugs and alcohol to mask emotional pain. The suit represents the protective barriers placed around us.

I use the hunter/gatherer motif as a way for the astronaut to survive this situation. He must do whatever he can to survive. In this way there becomes an interesting dichotomy between the astronaut representing humanity at its most advanced and the hunter/gatherer as man at his most primal and primitive states. I feel that with all the advancements throughout human history, the core issues still remain and are ongoing. The human condition hasn't changed and people are still inherently searching for the same answers to the same questions. There is an inevitable isolation, search for purpose, and fear of death that all humans experience.

In an acknowledgement of the smallness and humility of man, American Astronaut James Lovell on the Apollo 8 mission described the emptiness of outer space as,

"The vast loneliness is awe-inspiring, and makes you realize just what you have back there on Earth." The Apollo 8 Christmas Eve Broadcast http://nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov/planetary/image/apollo8_xmas.mov December 24, 1968.

I also started addressing issues of deterioration and how they fit into the themes of loneliness and inaccessibility that I was exploring in my work. I saw deterioration as the next step in the process, a deterioration of the person due to his condition and how that mimicked the deterioration of the landscape and environment around him. I also began to investigate the

physical deterioration of my etching plates to mimic the deterioration of the astronaut as well as of the city and landscape he was occupying. This is explained more fully in the *Process* chapter.



'Smoking,' etching, aquatint and chine colle. 40x30 inch. 2011

SHADOWS:



Shadow III,' screenprint. 22x28 inch. 2011

In my final semester I began to fully utilize the concept of shadows, and what they represent in my pieces. In these prints, only the shadow of the figure is shown. His pose still carries that same notion of melancholy and is trapped in the same urban landscapes as the figures in the etchings. The shadow is a representation of the astronaut, even though he is not physically present.

In Jungian psychology, the shadow is a representation of the unconscious and the repressed ego. The shadow represents those dark manifestations people carry with them and confrontation of the shadow can lead to melancholia as those secrets of downfalls of the ego are brought to light. Confronting your shadow leads to a descent down into the darkness of your psyche. The shadow pieces represent this aspect of the astronaut and his confrontation with his melancholy and inaccessibility. The shadows are cast onto a deteriorated wall. They represent the imprint left behind by the population, in a physical manner like the 'shadows' burnt onto walls in Japan after the bombs were dropped (actually the ashes of human remains). The shadows are also representative in a metaphorical manner, of the collected memory imbedded into a space.

"Unfortunately there can be no doubt that man is, on the whole, less good than he imagines himself or wants to be. Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is."

Jung, C. "Psychology and Religion" In CW 11: Psychology and Religion: West and East. (1938) P.131

My shadow pieces also engage the viewer with the shadow extending from the bottom of the page as if it was the viewer's own shadow. I want the viewer to have the realization that they are the protagonist in these pieces and that this subject matter of the human condition is universally experienced.

PROCESS:

The physical process of etching correlates with my concept for this body of work. The working and reworking of the etching plate mimics the astronaut being worked over in his environment and in his psyche. The deterioration of the plate imitates the psychological deterioration of the protagonist in his doomed situation as well as emulates the physical deterioration of the city environment. The deeply etched plate provides a tangible synthesis between the ideas of deterioration and the physicality of it.

It was in the print, *Warming I*, that I first utilized a physically deteriorating etching plate. The astronaut is huddled over himself trying to warm his hands with his breath that he obviously couldn't feel, also reminiscent of the common position one would pray in. The suit is no longer enough to support the astronaut. He needs to look to outside factors for help. The bottom of the plate is etched away, creeping up into the space of the astronaut, pushing him further into himself. The physically etched plate is yet another factor invading his space and forcing his introversion. The windows offer a glimpse into the world outside the trapped urban environment but the outlook is not much better. Barren trees, tightly grouped together mimic the idea of the life less and trapped environment the figure finds himself in.



'Warming I,' etching, aquatint and chine colle. 25x35 inch. 2011

For the environments of the astronauts, I etched and re-etched textured layers for the walls and surroundings. I was trying to achieve this sense of the multiple layers that are built up in an urban environment after years of redevelopment and reuse. It is also representative of the multiple layers built up around the astronaut. Some layers are more visible than others, but all are present and important to the figure as a whole.

One of my earlier pieces of experimenting with these layers was my first *Melancholia* piece. It was the first piece where I completely surrounded the astronaut in the enclosed space. The astronaut was sitting on a ledge, tucked into a bleak corner of an anonymous concrete building with his head hung low and arms lazily resting on his knees with his hands mimicking the drooping head. I had just started using a new method of soft ground etching and I was testing out its application. I discovered that it withstood to the mordant for much longer than a traditional, ball ground. Through this, I realized that a much deeper etch was possible, enabling a rich and varied number of textures to be embedded into the plate.



'Melancholia,' etching and aquatint. 8x10 inch. 2010

Warming II more fully realized this idea of the multiple and varied textures. I was able to create a deeply textured plate with subtle nuances in the walls behind the figure. In contrast to the *Warming I* piece where the mordant ate away the plate into the space of the astronaut, I introduced the shadow that was also being used in the series of screen prints I previously discussed. The shadow in this piece towers over the astronaut, haunting and entrapping the astronaut. Unlike the *Warming I* piece, the slightly open doorway offers a glimmer of hope, or at least not a total sense of confinement. A bright light mimics the light coming out of the fire barrel the astronaut is using as a source of warmth. That sliver of a space indicates that a similar source of warmth and life lies beyond the doorway. Is it the escape the astronaut is looking for?



'Warming II,' etching, aquatint and chine colle. 25x35 inch. 2011

My piece, *Overlook* is a culmination of these ideas and techniques. Although not the last piece created, it is meant to be an open ended stopping point for this body of work. It shows my astronaut figure on the edge of the top of a building overlooking the landscape, only there is nothing there. He has entered through that bright light at the top of the stairs from the *Warming II* piece. The paper is left blank and the astronaut instead is looking out over an empty space, the hollow void of the city and landscape. Instead of the downtrodden and lonely demeanor of the astronaut, he is instead standing with confidence, in a manner of conquering the environment. He has defeated the barren landscape as well as his psyche but his kingdom is non-existent. He must start over now from scratch. The image on the plate is completely cut out and I am utilizing the blank open area of the paper as the space the astronaut is looking into.



'Overlook,' etching, 36x44 inch. 2011

I utilized screen printing as well, incorporating a great subtlety and detail unique to the process. I found that using a similar layering system to the aquatints and soft ground etches in the etchings, I was able to build up a surface of very transparent inks that harbored a unique but comparable feeling of depth as the etchings. If on the copper plates I was working into the plate, on the screen print I was building up a physical layer on the paper. I wanted these surfaces that I was creating to mimic the abandoned urban landscape that has undergone countless layers of paint and use through its lifespan.

I am influenced by those buildings and brick walls that have layer upon layer of paint peeling off, revealing a storied history and vibrant life underneath the deadened surface that now holds precedence. Layer upon layer of paint and material and the subsequent wear and tear brought on by the different uses leaves behind an imprint of the population inhabiting that space. An old brick building in Chinatown, New York looks and feels a lot different than the new City/County Building does in downtown Salt Lake City. A sense of history and emotion aligns with a space where it has been inhabited and used while a newly constructed place feels almost sterile.

I wanted my screen prints to mimic some of those similar emotions and through the layering process I was able to build up and create pieces that harbored a physicality to them. *Alone II*, was a piece I created earlier, that utilized such a great number of layers that I was able to go back in and remove parts of the image with sandpaper that had become too opaque and come away with a more resolved and completed piece. I wanted to place my astronaut into this setting in a similar fashion as the *Melancholia* pieces and went a little too bold with the colors in the final layers of the figure. What resulted was a far too graphic and illustrative figure more reminiscent to a bold clip art figure placed over a subtle landscape. Because I had so much information on the page, I was able to come in with fine grit sandpaper and steel wool and reduce the figure to a ghost-like shadow of what was once there, which I felt led to a more successful piece.



'Alone II,' screenprint. 25x20 inch. 2010

Another piece created in this manner was *Shadow I*. Learning from *Alone II*, I approached this print more delicately and built up layers in an even more subtle manner. The result was a colorful, though somewhat muted, urban landscape. Once I introduced the shadow of the astronaut into the print the sense of history I was looking to gather in the walls was effectively showcased. The shadow was just another layer on the wall, etched into the landscape after the physical body has deserted it.



'Shadow' screenprint. 20x27 inch. 2010

Color played an important role in these pieces as well. The layering and separation of the colors creates depth and new textures as the layers build on each other. Screenprinting has a unique ability to combine this multitude of transparent layering through its relative ease of registration. I found I could alternate colors and screens in a variety of manners between the individual pulls of the squeegee and create a set of unique prints.

EPILOGUE:

Our social, cultural and personal contact defines our experiences of being human. It is an existentialist, human condition argument for the 21st century. As people, we search for purpose and fear death. It is an inherent part of humanity. A sense of complacency prevails in our greater collective attitudes. It's as if we've gone too far and can only slow the process down but not repair it. I see this potentially leading into an overarching sense of apathy. This idea is nothing new, it is a metaphor for contemporary life, similar to the relatively new idea described by philosopher Alan Kirby as 'pseudo-modernism.'

"the triteness and shallowness resulting from the instantaneous, direct, and superficial participation in culture made possible by the Internet, mobile phones, interactive television and similar means: "In pseudo-modernism one phones, clicks, presses, surfs, chooses, moves, downloads."

Kirby, Alan "The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond". *Philosophy Now*. Nov/Dec 2006 (58).

Everything is at our fingertips. There is almost no information that isn't accessible with the click of a button. The phrase 'Google it' is now a ubiquitous term that is used to access nearly any piece of information out there via the internet. The need to learn anything new is potentially fading when we have this resource available instantaneously, even on our mobile phones. Our lives and culture are increasingly based on this platform. We are part of the internet age and that is the suit we wear as a protectant. We are accessible through our media and our online selves, our 'avatars,' but there is also a clear barrier separating us from each other, preventing and negating that face to face interaction. The internet and social media becomes our space suit.

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