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A Walk Through Shadows

by

Nicholas Sheldon

A Thesis

Presented to the faculty of

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In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Major: Art

Under the Supervision of Professor Karen Kunc

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A WALK THROUGH SHADOWS

Nicholas Sheldon, M.F.A.

University of Nebraska, 2019

Adviser: Karen Kunc

“A Walk Through Shadows” is an investigation of dream states and their emotional and psychological effects, which I have been exploring for this past year with large-scale black and white copper plate aquatint prints. Each work is a response to the surreal and bizarre nature of dreaming and the themes and topics that seep from my own subconscious. Each work allows for the examination of the fantastical and the absurd with imagery that can suggest universal concepts from life and death, to love and war.

These prints break from the traditionally printed square plate centrally placed on the paper, to a more dynamic arrangement of cut plates composed and printed in relationship to the negative space of the paper and to each other. Through the use of a tonal range from rich blacks to middle grays, to the lightest moments, the values of ink are set off and warmed with the white of the paper, referring to a historic lens through which we gaze. The dark of bone black ink alludes to a place devoid of space and time; the subtle greys create an “in-between-ness” of depth and dimension, giving the images form and nuance. The paper itself plays with the surface flatness and pristine materiality, in contrast with the depth of ink.

My process begins with a dream that needs to be explored, either a single moment or several from the dream that I develop through a digital collage approach. I seek images and create in various computer programs, layering and manipulating images in such a way as to let a multitude of ideas combine into one. I chose images to interact, while allowing for unaccountable variabilities, setting up unpredictable outcomes, and spark moments of spontaneous creation uncontrolled by my original narrative. I then react to these moments of visually engaging compositions and images, attempting to find a balance between abstraction and the recognizable. I feel this is important to my working process and reflects the nature of dreams, that are unpredictable, seemingly unprompted, and yet where I can experience and provoke moments of genuine reflection to take place.

The stages of processing the image to achieve an etched copper plate that can print with the quality of impression and clarity I seek, is an additional way for me to analyze and learn of the dream images and contributes to the meaning and intent. From my computer composition I break the image into layers and print out separations as digital transparencies. I use the transparencies to expose a silkscreen stencil, and then print ink through the screen onto the prepared copper; this ink serves as an acid resistant ground. The plates are physically prepared with sanding, then polishing, then a layer of rosin cooked onto the surface. Then the plate is bitten in the ferric acid

bath to difference depths, and with the different separations in stages. At every stage I wrestle with the element of human nature, of imperfections..... not enough sanding might leave a few scratches, a small area doesn't get polished enough, too much or too little rosin can affect the depths of ink in the plate. My effort reflects the imperfection of the human existence and shines through each preliminary proof taken and in each good impression pulled. I now recognize the effect of my discipline and practice, and how each part of the process pushes me farther and farther from the vision in my mind to what the work ultimately becomes: a printed actuality that means even more and something greater than the original impetus.

My works mean to reflect on this dynamic of process and life's meaning, of how we plan our days and try to control what happens in our lives, yet we cannot know what tomorrow will bring until it happens. This understanding and openness to uncertainty is parallel to the printing of these prints, as I move the plates around to test compositions on the paper, and how I can wipe the plates in various ways. But I cannot know what will happen until all is run through the press and I reflect on its being.

Through these prints of multiple images, combined collaged-like on top of each other I create surreal moments of darkness, aggression, empathy, and passion. All of these things create a portal to view how we dream and our

perception of reality, asking the viewer to question their sense of what is real and what has meaning.