GOOD GIRL

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GOOD GIRL

by

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A THESIS

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I have always had a narrative sensibility, drawing from memory, stories, and personal experience. Perhaps it was the abundance of story telling and gossip I absorbed growing up. The dominance of women in my family had a profound influence on how I created narratives in my earlier work. They remain core influences, and through them I have developed further, reaching out past linear narrative and specific story to focus on the psychology of internal and external experience.

When I began my MFA it was the first time in two years I was getting intensive feedback on my work. What began was an extensive dialogue about why, over all other modes of expression, I paint. Not only do I paint but, like others, I take on the task of trying to be a relevant figurative painter at a time when, as everyone likes to say, it has all been done before. (Despite this argument I have chosen to continue making paintings and investigate the continued resurgence of narrative and figuration in art.)

Not only has it been done before, it has also been done better. One of the least successful paintings I created during my first year of graduate school was a 2' x 3' canvas of a man with a rabbit mask climbing the stairs after two young girls. One girl looks coyly back at him while the other hides around the corner with a wine bottle in hand. You could see in one glance that the girl with the wine bottle was going to hit the rabbit man over the head. It was the most obvious of linear narratives. There was nothing left for the
viewer and that was not what I wanted from the work. To make matters worse the physicality of paint was problematic. As unconvincing as this painting was, understanding its failures remains an important moment in my education.

During this troubled time I was also making drawings. I pinned my drawings lovelessly in the corner of my studio or left them closed in a sketchbook. I regarded drawing as tool for the development of the paintings. But, now my paintings had their set of problems and the only option was to look toward the far corners of my studio. The drawings offered freedom not hindered or covered by layers of paint.

It was time to listen to the responses of others and realize that, for the moment, the drawings had something to offer beyond a study. I took the uncomfortable steps toward leaving painting for drawing. Painting was abandoned for charcoal, graphite, erasers, and a dab of watercolor. The difference was an epiphany.

Delicate shifts in line weight and subtle areas of tone were the first things allowed on the baby blue paper I had purchased. The surface was seductive and responsive. No canvas, no uncontrollable brushes covered in oil paint. I was equipped with the immediacy of drawing that could disappear with the rub of an eraser. The figures emerged from the middle-toned fields, not as components of spelled out narratives, but single entities conscious of the viewer with a subtle indication of space. There was room for invention and story beyond the surface, a lesson clarified after studying Vincent Desiderio’s ideas on narrative.

When my primary body of work switched from painting to drawings, I also began to respond to surfaces such as lithography stones and the wood grain of birch plywood. The wood grain inspired a less defined space, adding predetermined texture. Watercolor
was allowed to soak in to the surfaces due to its transparency and inability to cover up line. Everything was pastel and soft. My figures loved being suspended in this open field of space. Their emotions became more intense (strong, confrontational, weak, whiney and vulnerable) as they existed alone with the viewer.

My work evolved at a steady pace from painting to drawing and was still continuing to evolve by the end of my second year. What I didn’t understand at the time was that my work was evolving right back to painting. The reason, in retrospect, was the richness of color and light.

The catalyst for the return of paint was the news that I had received funding from the Hispanic Scholarship Fund/McNamara Creative Arts Project Grant. Suddenly there was no excuse for not taking risks. I had received funding for all the materials needed to make, process and document my work for a year. There is definitely something that happens when you know you can complete a body of work without financial setbacks.

Scale became my new concern, moving away from the smaller intimate works. I created larger 5’ x 4’ images on panel, beginning by drawing the singular figures on the bare surface and then painting a color field around them. Areas of the figure, such as the clothing, became opaque while the body remained the natural wood surface.

The color that surrounded the figure created an aura that emphasized the character’s demand for attention. The larger scale enabled me to bring the viewer into the space of the figure. The expansive surface demanded a more physical response to the work. What began to change was the idea that I couldn’t continue to stay with the single figure on a pastel, empty background much longer. How was I going to evolve this time?
How could I continue to present new narratives? Slowly and subtly, I began allowing the paint to cover more of the surface.

A friend walked into my studio at the end of my second year and shouted, "You’re painting again..." It was almost a statement of concern. I felt guilty, as if I was reverting back to a dangerous addiction that would inevitably lead to my demise. Addiction or not, color and paint became the answer to my questions.

Perhaps it was the initial guilt of wanting to make a painting again that prompted me to shifted back to small panels. Whatever the initial motivation, heightened coloration began distorting the sense of comfort, echoing the psychological within the images. The intimacy of the small panels in relation to subject began to make sense. In addition to paint, I had made a choice not to depict the entire figure, or the figure at all. I discovered a simple object or a part of the body had the ability to reveal a complex and meaningful narrative. I was no longer trapping the singular figure in empty space.

At this time touch has become an important addition to the work, particularly on an intimate scale. This work depicts intense moments of touching with tight compositions and minimal space. They imply a metaphorical and visually tactile approach to the intimate, delicate, and uncomfortable nature of touch. The smaller work sets up a dialogue with the larger work on canvas, which, in contrast, has the expanse of space and defined setting where the characters interact with others, their space, and the viewer.

The elements of drawing, the possibilities of a narrative beyond the figure and the effects of scale on the reading of an image have all manifested itself in the creation of new narratives. All of the challenges and experiences over the last three years of art
making have only contributed to my ambition, experimentation, and the unwillingness to settle. The work has just begun.
Erika Anderson
Image List

1 – Underwear, 2007
2 – Dreamer, 2008
3 – Submission, 2007
4 – Bunny Girl Sister, 2007
5 – Surrender, 2007
6 – Retreat, 2007
7 – Experiment, 2007
8 – Rear Study, 2007
9 – Point of Awareness, 2007
10 – Good Girl, 2008
11 – Gaze, 2008
12 – Lush, 2008
13 – Fresh Flesh, 2008
14 – A Little Touch, 2008
15 – Absolutely Flabulous, 2008
16 – Pleasingly Plump, 2008
17 – Pinch, 2007
18 – Pinch II, 2008
19 – Dominance, 2008
20 – Gallery View, 2008
21 - Gallery View, 2008
22 - Gallery View, 2008
23 - Gallery View, 2008
24 - Gallery View, 2008