

Ben Parks

Thesis Writing

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Artist Statement

My work as an artist. It's hard for me to categorize myself as an artist. My whole life I have tried to find my place in the artist's world. The world that I found myself in was more geared towards entertainment and performance, the former being a favorite of mine, though some may argue the two go hand in hand. I found at a young age that I loved laughter and making people laugh. And, more importantly, it seemed making people laugh came easily to me, though some may argue to the contrary. Having a twin brother and constant companion, we tended to goof off a lot, so I guess I had a lot of practice. And though I was no "class clown," I always loved putting on a show to get a laugh or make someone feel better. I had a kind of creed: "If you're not going to enjoy life, why live it?" So I kind of made it my unofficial mission to help others enjoy life through laughter. Thus, entertainment value was always on the back of my mind, guiding my thoughts, helping me come up with the next humorous quip or, more often, unfortunately (but sometimes, purposely), eye-rolling groaner.

I grew up in a world of music, my father a songwriter, his brother a composer, my mother a singer with her sisters, her father, sister and brother choral instructors. I, myself, grew up singing with my parents, two sisters and twin brother at church concerts, sang recording sessions for the United Methodist Publishing House and attended, with my twin brother, the American Boychoir School in Princeton, NJ when I was 9. We toured the United States singing concerts and staying with local families. We were on an NBC Christmas special "A Christmas Dream" with Mr. T and Emmanuel Lewis and performed two of three major works by Johann Sebastian Bach in Carnegie Hall. Needless to say, I was pretty entrenched in the world of music. However, even while I was at the boychoir, if you had asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I'd say a cartoonist or a comedian, my idols being Jim Davis, of Garfield fame, and Robin Williams. It was during this time that I created my own renditions of the Garfield comic strip. I only created a few of them, but when I did, I tried to make them as humorous as possible, matching the number of panels used and anticipation found in the original strip.

My musical life continued after I left the boychoir. My sister had joined in the local high school marching band, and I had been so wowed by their award winning performance, that I wanted to follow in her footsteps. I went into John Trotwood Moore Middle School playing alto saxophone and picked up bassoon as well. I immediately was accepted into Mid-State concert band, having played bassoon for less than 6 months. I continued singing in choirs as well, but the whole time I was wishing there were more classes available in the day so that I could take art.

I followed my sister into John Overton High School, being a transfer student so I could be in the band. I continued attending Mid-State band (and All-State, my senior year), Festival of Winds and Percussion, marching contests, and Governor's School for the Arts. Once again, my desired school schedule was not allowed. My being a transfer student required me to take certain classes that weren't offered at my zone's high school. I even had to double up classes, taking Health class during band class, only taking tests and turning in assignments. So, once again, art was left behind. However, during high school, I started something new. I began to doodle and draw. It started with a picture of my first love. I had her school picture in my wallet and as I was fawning over it, I thought I'd try to draw it as accurately as possible. The end result was ok, and she really liked it, but I found I really enjoyed doing it, so I continued recreating school photos of friends and giving them to them.

I went into college a Music Ed. major at Middle Tennessee State University. However, after two-and-a-half years, and 4 emphasis changes, I realized I didn't want to be in a classroom the rest of my life. I didn't have the drive to practice, so performance was out of the question and if you don't perform, you teach. So what was I to do? Well, in the meantime, I'd been getting into computers, creating my own website (poorly, I might add), and switched my major to Computer Science. I then dropped out to save money to get married, planning to go back into CS.

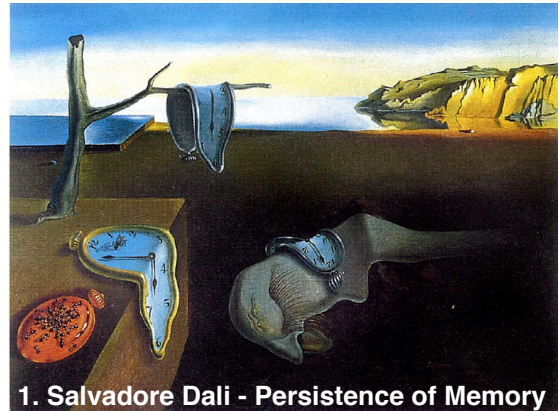
In the meantime, I had always kept an eye on animation. I had read many books on how to create characters, done numerous flip-books, continued re-creating people's school photos in pencil on lined paper, which I gave to them. I was also fascinated by

the Mind's Eye series (and any computer animation I could come across) and was a big fan of Tron. I'd watch Liquid Television religiously, any cartoon I could get my hands on, Disney movies, etc. So when Toy Story came out, I was primed. My then-wife and I went to see it and I was absolutely in awe. I couldn't believe the life that oozed from the characters on the screen. As the credits rolled, my eyes went a hundred miles per minute reading every job title and what people did. My wife and I were the only ones left in the theater. And I said as I read, "Can you believe it? Every person up there had SOMETHING to do with computer animation in some form or fashion." My wife then replied, "You could do that, you know." It was like an epiphany. "Really? I could?" I said. Of course! It all made sense! Why wouldn't I? I mean, I've been saying what I wanted to be when I grew up since I was 7, why not do what I've always wanted to do? So when I went back to MTSU, they only offered animation as a part of a Mass Communications major, but I was finally able to take art classes, as it was required that I have an art minor.

Needless to say, I was "behind the times" when it came to artistic skill and creativity. My teacher in my first class would walk by everyone's work and comment and critique, but when he came to me, he'd look and walk on. If you can't say something nice, I guess. But that was during the "abstract" assignments. One day we were given an assignment where we all got a magazine ad and were to recreate it as best we could. Since my only artistic background included recreating people's high school photos, this came easier for me. Once I had drawn the outline of the girl in my Guess jeans ad, he came by. A month into the class, and my teacher finally said something to me. "Did you draw that or trace it?" "I drew it." "He did. I saw him," said my classmate. Then came the

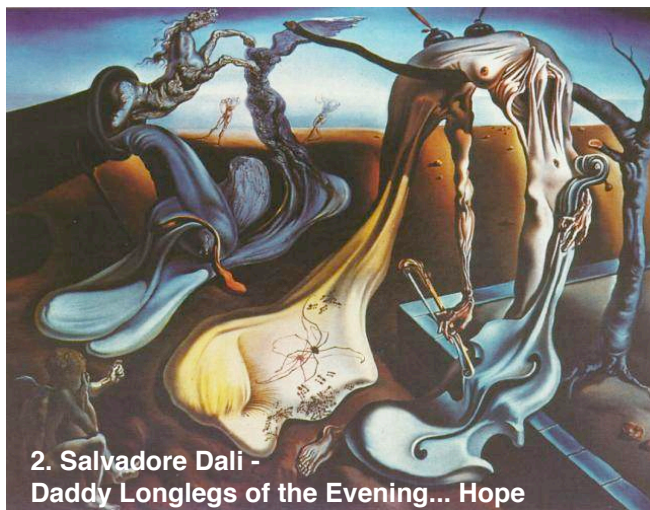
best compliment I could have gotten, and may have ever gotten. “Some people would have taken that picture and drawn the picture. You didn’t do that. You’ve drawn her. Good job.” I couldn’t have been happier. I finally felt that I remotely had any artistic skill whatsoever.

Through the remainder of my undergraduate art classes, I continued to attempt to find myself artistically. I found I was fascinated with flowing shapes in art. Salvador Dalí became a major love and influence of mine. His *Persistence of Memory* spawned research into



1. Salvadore Dali - Persistence of Memory

what else he had done. I became intrigued by the changing form, something solid becoming liquid or cloth, as in his 1940 painting *Daddy Longlegs of the Evening... Hope!* and the 1943 painting *Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of the New Man*, and,



2. Salvadore Dali - Daddy Longlegs of the Evening... Hope

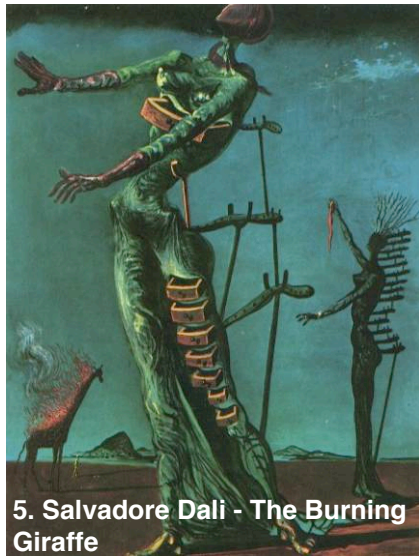


3. Salvadore Dali - Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of the New Man

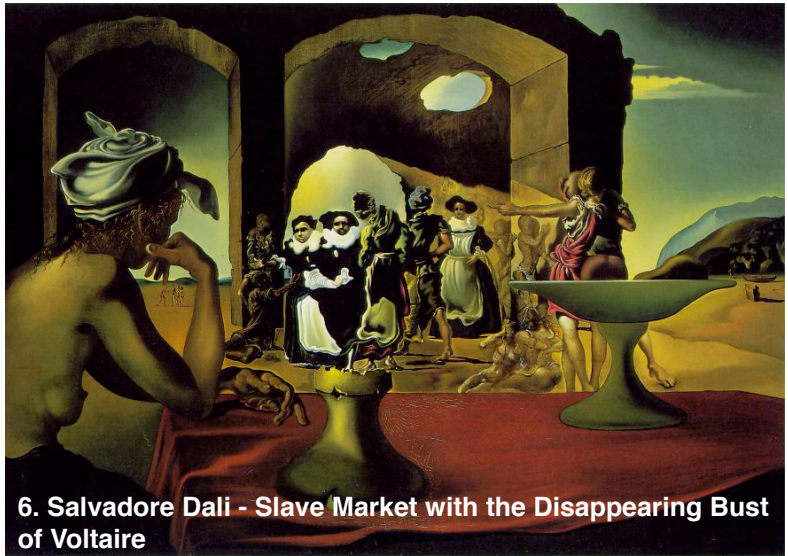


4. Salvadore Dali - Hercules Lifts the Skin and Stops Venus for an Instant from Waking Love

inversely, something liquid becoming solid or cloth, as in the 1963 painting *Hercules Lifts the Skin and Stops Venus for an Instant from Waking Love*. In addition, Dalí's use of infinite space in art, i.e. putting drawers in a woman's abdomen, as in 1937's *The Burning Giraffe*, or using people or objects to create the silhouette of a form, as in 1940's *Slave Market with the Disappearing Bust of Voltaire*, really opened my eyes to how simple, and yet complex, art really can become.



5. Salvadore Dali - The Burning Giraffe



6. Salvadore Dali - Slave Market with the Disappearing Bust of Voltaire

My artistic influences continue to focus on changing form and infinite space. One such artist is Rob Gonsalves, best known for his illustrations for children's books. His pieces, *On the Upswing*, *Tabletop Towers* and *Written World* really push the boundaries of infinite space, not only making you second guess what you're seeing, but by taking you back to childhood pretenses of swinging higher than a house, building actual



building-block cities and literally walking through the pages of a book to escape to another world. This type of art really combines all of my interests, the surrealist shape-shifting, the worlds within worlds, the telling of a good story and the importance of entertainment value.

When I started my thesis, my focus was on realism. I have always been fascinated with special effects in film where you can't tell the difference between what's real and what's generated. As I delved more deeply into the realm of computer animation, I discovered I was amazed with fluid effects and cloth simulation. The idea that a human being has figured out mathematical formulas that generate a virtual ocean blows my mind. I get great thrill from creating a shell of a T-shirt, adding collision and gravity and

clicking play to watch my female form twist and turn generating folds in cloth. I can only equate it to a child's fascination with the everyday happenings of a world he/she is just coming to understand. I find myself tweaking setting after setting just to see how the cloth falls this time, throwing nail constraints on a flat plane that hovers over a sphere waiting until I begin the simulation, and then moving that sphere around to see how long the cloth lasts before it slides off to hang there, suspended. And as taxing as it is on the computer, I still find myself waiting just a few minutes more to see how RealFlow's liquid bounces off of the other side of the glass. This focus on realism, ultimately, became an obsession.

My thesis piece, too, became consumed with realism. I got the idea for doing my story after flipping through one of my wife's art books. I found a painting that really hit hard, the 1882 Jean-Léon Gérôme painting *Pygmalion and Galatea*. I thought to myself, "What a powerful painting!" Immediately I was flooded with questions about the story behind the painting, as I had not yet researched the story that it was based on. I marveled at the passion that I felt pouring from the image and began to formulate my own idea as to what the painting was about. I conceived this picture in my head of a man who has just lost his wife and is at her grave-site. He goes back to his studio where he proceeds to sculpt the form of his late wife. Upon completion, it's so life-like, that he begins to cry at her feet. His tears fall on the foot of the statue and, in a flurry of dancing light, begin to bring her to life. They ultimately embrace in the kiss found in the painting.

Although I definitely had a workable story, I thought I should research the actual background of the painting and found Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. I decided that I should try

to retell this story in its original setting, as all other versions I had found never tried to meld the factual location of the original story with actual historic references. I studied the ancient ruins of the Temple of Aphrodite, Cypriot artifacts of vases and lanterns, how they built their houses, how they worshipped the Aniconic Stone as their representation of Aphrodite, and even had a Greek translation of a prayer to the goddess. However, due to time constraints and my realization that there are just some things that I can't do yet, realism has become less of a priority with me for this piece. In addition, during my independent study in story-boarding this past semester, my teacher reiterated time and time again what I already knew from all my reading, the importance of a good story. As great as it would be to recreate this story in its original setting, the story Ovid presented to the world originally just didn't make for an interesting, and most importantly entertaining, story. I had to rethink my work. I brought the story to modern times, something I was against all along, made a more entertaining story infused with elements of ancient times and redesigned my characters.... twice. My focus now has moved more into the entertainment value of my story with a more stylized look.

In the end, I came to the conclusion that what I really needed for my thesis piece to work, and work well, was what I had attempted to do back when I was eight-years-old working on those Garfield comics. I needed to create a piece of art that was entertaining, that told a good story. I needed to stick to that mission that I had set out for myself so long ago, not obsess over perfection. Realism is not nearly as important as a good story. I need to be the entertainer that I have always tried to be. I know that now.

As I continue through the rest of my degree, I realize that this is just the beginning. I have so much more to learn in order for my total skill to get to the level I would like it to be. However, I may have already learned the most important part of it all, who I am as an animator. I know what I can do and I know my limits. I know where I am and where I need to go. I know the next step. I have gained the confidence in my abilities to be able to continue on the road I started on back in 1996 after watching Toy Story. And that confidence is what I was really hoping to get most of all from this degree. Am I an artist? Maybe not. Not yet. But what I do know is, I am an animator.

List of Illustrations

1. Salvadore Dali, Persistence of Memory,

http://www.fantasyarts.net/Salvador_Dali/Persistence_Memory_Dali.jpg

2. Salvadore Dali, Daddy Longlegs of the Evening... Hope!,

http://www.dali-gallery.com/html/works/1940_01.htm

3. Salvadore Dali, Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of the New Man,

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4. Salvadore Dali, Hercules Lifts the Skin and Stops Venus for an Instant from Waking

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5. Salvadore Dali, The Burning Giraffe,

<http://www.physics.miami.edu/~chris/art/dali/giraffe.jpg>

6. Salvadore Dali, The Slave Market with Disappearing Bust of Voltaire,

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7. Rob Gonsalves, On the Upswing,

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8. Rob Gonsalves, Tabletop Towers,

<http://www.artcentergallery.com/gallery/rob-gonsalves/rgon2005b-tabletoptowers.jpg>

9. Rob Gonsalves, Written World,

<http://www.artcentergallery.com/gallery/rob-gonsalves/rgon2005b-writtenworld.jpg>