

Title

A Supporting Paper  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of Art  
University of Minnesota  
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There's a strip mall near where I grew up where every business has closed. It happened slowly over the course of a few years. The Italian restaurant was the first to go, never reopening after a suspicious kitchen fire. Next went the hardware store, then the dollar store, and then the bowling alley. The video rental place managed to hang around for another year or two, the smallest storefront in the mall the last one remaining open for business. It had moved there from a different strip mall after its last location had suffered the same fate. I used to walk there to rent video games when I was a kid. Eventually, they closed down too; leaving a massive block of vacant stores set on a parking lot the size of a football field.

I was in high school when that happened. A few years passed before I went back to take photographs and a newspaper dispenser on the sidewalk caught my eye. It was stocked with the current day's copy of the Detroit Free Press. No one had worked or shopped on the entire block for years. Any cars passing through the parking lot were just turning around or taking a shortcut to avoid a red light, or full of teenagers looking for a secluded place to smoke a bowl in the middle of the night. Still, every day, in the wee hours of the morning, someone was coming to remove all of yesterday's news and put fresh papers in the machine.

The world my images exist in is one of memory and traces. The world is semi-autobiographical, based on banal suburban spaces modeled after Metro Detroit. Subdivisions, strip malls, and undeveloped lots off the interstate near the airport are common locales in my imagery. I am drawn to objects that act as stand-ins for human activity or that imply rather than illustrate events: overturned lawn chairs, tornado sirens, and inflatable tube men advertising used cars, often without

the presence of humans. Situations are suggested and pointed to instead of explicitly pointed out. As an avid horror movie fan, I know that the scariest moment in any good horror film isn't the first time the monster jumps into view; it's the few seconds right *before* that happens. Shock and thrills are easy. *Tension* is much more nuanced, harder to achieve, and ultimately more satisfying. Tension, foreboding, dread, and the presence of unseen antagonists are cornerstones of my work.

My investigation of the landscape began with depictions of inclement weather: fog, blizzards, and torrential rain. The effect of these phenomena on our perception of the landscape causes natural abstraction. To paint the landscape in a faithfully representational manner under such conditions results in what appears to be an abstract painting. Predominant color fields of gray and off-white, a barely visible horizon, punctuated by the faint vestiges of light from cars, streetlamps, and apartment windows barely visible through the murk.

I am influenced by the tradition of landscape painting that examines the psychology of the landscape, and, at times, the landscape as antagonist. Exploration of these themes dates back to at least the nineteenth century with J.M.W. Turner's destructive storms at sea and James Abbott McNeill Whistler's *Nocturnes*. In the twentieth century, I view the bleak, desolate cityscapes of Edward Hopper and Hughie Lee-Smith as ancestors in the vein of my work.

Gerhard Richter's photo paintings embody many of the ideas I deal with in my own work. Firstly, the fact that this body of work uses paint to reference black and white photography in a manner that approaches mechanical replication speaks to the concepts of skewed perception and representation of trace matter of a

subject. Richter's paintings of photographs are representations of representations; there are formal qualities of photograph that are unmistakably artifacts of the camera, and the paintings in turn represent these qualities with formal qualities that unmistakably belong to paint and the artist's hand. These paintings are incredibly realistic and at the same time present a stifled, frozen version of reality.

The subject matter of the work is often drawn from the artist's own archive of historical family photos. The ominous, menacing aura lurking beneath banal domestic settings is magnified by history of Richter's relatives in Nazi Germany (*Uncle Rudi*, 1965). A mundane black and white snapshot from the family photo album carries the horror and trauma of Nazi Germany.

My attention now is turned to depictions of the landscape with a human presence, or at the least the suggestion of one. The abstraction caused by natural phenomena is compounded with the abstraction caused by inherently faulty human perception. I am interested in how our memories are distorted from actual events. For example, when you try to picture your own home in your head, how accurate is it? Do you remember every floorboard, how many stairs there are, or how many cabinet doors are in your kitchen? Does it matter? You have a mental image of "Home," regardless of how closely the mental image correlates to Home's physical manifestation.

Horror and science fiction in literature and film influence my practice just as heavily as painting or other contemporary fine art. The science fiction work of Philip K. Dick often deals with themes of memory and personal reality at odds with facts and collective shared history. His 1966 short story "We Can Remember It for You

Wholesale” tells the tale of a man who has always dreamed of visiting Mars (it is worth pointing out that in the world of this story, visiting Mars is a plausible, if uncommon occurrence). He discovers a company that specializes in implanting fake memories, which customers will not realize are fake after the services are rendered. He is skeptical at first, until the company’s CEO explains to him that if he doesn’t realize his memories will be fake, it will be just as good as actually having been to Mars:

“Okay. It’s been my life-long ambition and so I see I’ll never really do it. So I guess I’ll have to settle for this.”

“Don’t think of it that way,” McClane said severely. “You’re not accepting second-best. The actual memory, with all its vagueness, omissions and ellipses, not to say distortions- that’s second-best.”

(Dick 308)

I think of the images I create as being similar to implanted memories. Things are exaggerated, obscured, altered, diminished, and omitted in an attempt to recreate a mental image rather than a factual one. Scenes are often set in a mostly empty void, with a distant horizon and seemingly insignificant details in the background to denote that they are set in the context of a larger world.

Sigmund Freud’s 1919 essay “The Uncanny” discusses the fear of the familiar versus fear of the unknown, or the idea that things which are known and repressed cause fear when they resurface. Freud posits that humans have always carried with

them fear of death and reminders of mortality, but says that “here the uncanny is too much mixed up with the gruesome and partly overlaid by it.” In opposition to “the gruesome,” better examples of the uncanny discussed in the writing are doubles and automatons and the fear of mental illness and epileptic fits:

Here the layman sees a manifestation of forces that he did not suspect in a fellow human being, but whose stirrings he can dimly perceive in remote corners of his own personality.”

(Freud 172)

The subjects of my work often evoke the uncanny while avoiding the gruesome. A tornado siren is a familiar, visually unexciting object so commonplace that it stirs no reaction from a native Midwesterner who has seen one every day of his or her life. Passing one by on the commute to work, it may as well be invisible. However, when an image of a tornado siren is the lone identifiable object in a picture plane, imposing, as it is larger than the body of the viewer, it evokes the uncanny. The picture is static and mute. The siren may or may not be sounding, and if it is, the storm not visible in the picture may be out of frame or behind you. The dread and the uncanny sense of the mere possibility of impending doom strike a different set of nerves than a gruesome image of a tornado laying waste to a town would.

In “Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation,” Gilles Deleuze writes about the uncanny and the out-of-frame horror in the work of Francis Bacon, in particular his series of paintings of screaming popes:

This is the meaning of the formula, “I wanted to paint the scream more than the horror.” When he paints the screaming Pope, there is nothing that might cause horror, and the curtain in front of the Pope is not only a way of isolating him, of shielding him from view; it is rather the way in which the Pope himself sees nothing, and screams before the invisible. Thus neutralized, the horror is multiplied because it is inferred from the scream, and not the reverse.

(Deleuze 34)

The genre of the horror film, when at its best, works on this level of inferred horror. One of the finest examples of an unseen malicious presence is Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979). It is not until over an hour into the film that the alien is seen in its entirety. For much of the film, the creature is stalking the protagonists, who are aware of its presence only through of radar readings, mysterious puddles of slime, and the trail of victims aboard the spaceship. The titular alien is now a major pop-cultural icon, but at the time of the film’s release, audiences didn’t know what was hiding in the shadows through most of the film. I wish I could have a memory implant to forget what the alien looked like, then watch the film again.

The uncanny is always present in David Lynch's work. The antagonists and the sites of horror in his films are not typical of the horror genre; he foregoes haunted houses, cabins in the woods, and masked, mutated escaped lunatics in favor of middle class suburban homes, Hollywood movie sets, and villains which are, at least seemingly, human. He commonly uses the presence or absence of electricity as an indicator of good and evil. In *Eraserhead* (1977), flickering lights announce the arrival of the "Lady in the Radiator." The appearance of the infamous "cowboy" character in 2001's *Mulholland Drive* is similarly foreshadowed by the sudden turning on of a single harsh, buzzing light bulb. In line with Francis Bacon's "painting the scream more than the horror," light bulbs become threatening beacons of premonition.

The use of wide-open spaces and the selection of banal or mundane events, location, or objects relates to the inconsistency of memory I engage with. I often find that my memory of a conversation I had years ago may be very vague; I remember who I was talking to and the topic we were speaking about, but I can't remember any of the exact words, what day of the week it was, or the clothes I was wearing. But, I often remember details that have nothing to do at all with the *primary thing* I am accessing the memory for. I'll remember that a plastic bag was blowing down the street, or that I ate a turkey sandwich earlier that day.

So, these seemingly insignificant details function to place my images within a world that exists outside of them, that exists in spite of them, with other implanted memories materializing off-screen behind the tree line or the neighbor's fence. In a



way I am more interested in what is potentially going on outside of the picture plane than what I choose to show inside of it.

The landscape of the Midwest, and especially Southeast Michigan where I grew up, is often the basis for the sites of my fabricated memories. The urban and suburban landscape of Metro Detroit is full of suggestions of past trauma and anticipation of what could come next. Exploitative “ruin porn” images of abandoned buildings in Detroit have had coffee table photography books and Tumblr blogs dedicated to them in recent years (Andrew Moore’s “Detroit Disassembled,” Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre’s “The Ruins of Detroit”). I want to avoid participating in this kind of work coming from Detroit (the gruesome vs. the uncanny). However, my aesthetic is still very much informed by the architecture, palette, and overall atmosphere of the region.

There is always an undercurrent of paranoia in Detroit unlike anything I’ve experienced living anywhere else. Heavy steel bars cover the windows and doors of homes and businesses, cars parked on the street have club locks on their steering wheels (most people I’ve met in The Twin Cities have never heard of a club lock), and the cashiers at McDonald’s stand behind bulletproof glass. You never leave anything that looks like it might be worth more than \$20 in your car, never leave your bike outside (a lock isn’t enough), never leave your door unlocked. The environments represented in my paintings reflect this atmosphere of paranoia.

Just as interesting to me as the inner city ruins of Detroit’s past are the examples of stalled progress in the suburbs. For example, there is a new neighborhood development in the suburban community of Macomb that has been in

progress for years but never finished- I don't know if the developers ran out of money or if they started building houses and nobody was buying them. Whatever the case, there is an entire neighborhood of houses stalled in various stages of construction- wooden frames covered in Tyvek house wrap, barren concrete foundations, and still other lots that are nothing more than a big hole in the ground with a mound of gravel and a "FOR SALE" sign. There is a fascinating analog between these homes and the infamously blighted buildings in the city, which exist in the state of completion but at opposite ends of their life span.

As well as memory, I am fascinated by other phenomena that suggest some trace essence of a thing without actually *being* the thing. The "nuclear shadows" that exist in Hiroshima and Nagasaki are one example. When atomic bombs were dropped on those cities in World War II, the energy released was so great that some surfaces which were not close enough to ground zero to be completely vaporized were permanently darkened or bleached, with the silhouettes from people and objects in front of them absorbing the energy. The result was a permanent "shadow" of the obstructing object being burnt into the surface behind, some of which still exist today. The shadows are a physical manifestation of past trauma, freezing a split second of unfathomable destruction. They are haunted. They carry a sense of dread usually associated with something which is yet to happen, but have crystallized the sensation for decades *after*.

Nuclear shadows have similarities to the body casts left in the lava flow at Pompeii, and even Plato's cave allegory. Ghost stories, x-rays, and the image you see

with your eyes closed after staring at something for too long also influence the way I approach representation.

Stephen Gammell's illustrations for the series of children's horror anthologies "Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark" were an early influence on my aesthetic sensibilities. His haunting drawings are caked in fog and haze, with figures fading in and out of focus, dripping and leaving ghostly trails. The stories and illustrations in the series are often quite shocking, disturbing, and violent. As important as the formal qualities of the drawings is what he chooses as subjects to illustrate stories. The stories in the books are variations of standard regional ghost stories collected from folklore, usually including some kind of ghost, monster, escaped lunatic, etc., and often end in the gruesome death of the stories' protagonists.

The easy choice for illustrating such stories would be images of dead bodies, dismembered body parts, or gruesome monsters, which Gammell does sometimes: the illustration accompanying the story about a young girl who has a spider lay eggs inside of her face, which subsequently hatch and explode from a gaping wound in her cheek made a big impression on me at age seven. I still cannot believe that these books were in the collection of my Catholic elementary school's library. Parents and teachers eventually became aware of the contents of these books' illustrations, and subsequent printings have included different, much tamer artwork. It's a shame that the next generation of children will not grow up having the same nightmares as I did.

However, the illustrations that are most effective are the ones that give us just a hint of the horror contained in the narrative; a shoe, a shopping bag, an empty hallway or staircase. Of course the images function differently in conjunction with text. The ominous power of suggestion of a barren hallway in an old farmhouse is made less mysterious by text on the next page telling the tale of a vengeful ghost who lives there- going back to the idea of a horror film being more effective before you know what the monster looks like, the more open-ended drawings are, in some cases, better if you don't read the story.

When I do include human figures in my imagery, they exist somewhere between an individual personality and a generalized ghost image. They are translucent, melting, and seem only partially grounded to their surroundings. My source imagery comes from a variety of sources. My own photographs and videos, images found on the Internet and in books, and locales viewed on Google Street View are combined in the construction of my images. I try to identify which elements of an image can be generalized and which ones need to be specific to create the atmosphere of a memory.

The way I collect my source material is analogous to the way I ultimately use it. Pictures that I have taken first hand relate to the elements of memory that are specific but flawed. Those less significant elements that I have referred to as "stock images" are often quite literally stock images taken from the Internet. A chain link fence will always look more or less the same, which is perhaps why things like unimportant chain link fences can be recalled more clearly than the details of a

significant conversation that happened next to one. It isn't important that my image contains MY chain link fence, if the memory of one will be the same for anyone.

My use of banal suburban spaces speaks to Freud's idea of the uncanny. Chain-link fences, as well as white plastic lawn chairs, another common motif in my recent work, and other pieces of suburban detritus, are familiar objects to most Americans. The uncanny familiarity of these objects adds an ominous touch to the environments they are situated in. An otherworldly greyish wasteland feels closer to home when it's inhabited by things you have in your backyard.

In *Memorial Day* (2014), a man is standing in a back yard under a lawn umbrella, with a wooden fence and a neighbor's house visible in the background. The figure is the focus of the image- if it is meant to be a memory or "nuclear shadow" of this man in a backyard, then his environment only needs to denote "back yard," and not a *specific* back yard. The fence and the neighboring house are represented in a stripped down, generalized form, almost the way one would quickly draw a fence or a house when playing Pictionary. They act as mental stock images, a memory that they were there but that their specific qualities were unimportant to the focus on the figure.

Meanwhile, the figure's features are distorted but not generalized. There is the implication that this is a specific person, but the detail that would exist in a photograph or first-hand observation is obscured. Employing these different modes of representation for different elements in the image are meant to parallel the inconsistency of memory- the less important elements are not specific, but don't have to be. The primary subject is depicted with a flawed attempt at specific detail.

My working process reflects the same processes of memory and suggestion that inform the content of the work. Elements of drawings and paintings are usually rendered to a somewhat straightforward, representational manner, and then degraded. A face in any given piece, which appears to be ghostly and melting, was most likely fully rendered and then wiped away, smeared, and painted over. Much like a degrading mental image, the “Actual” existed first, and is then acted upon. I find it difficult to make those kinds of marks directly onto a blank canvas or sheet of paper. By starting with complete renderings and acting upon them in this way, I create an analog between my paintings and the subjects they present; they are ghosts, ruins, and memories of paintings, not the other way around.

Photographic sources are consulted sparingly, and usually only during the early stages of a piece. I find myself needing the source material to get the representational framework, much like in the above face example. To make an image of a tornado siren, I would not get the same effect from drawing one out of my head as I would from referring to multiple photographs of sirens; I get a feel for what general characteristics are shared by different sirens, and the slight variations in design seen in different regions or time periods or from different manufacturers. In other words, it is part of the process for achieving the “Pictionary” or “stock image” mentioned previously. Once I have achieved a suitably recognizable rendering, the process of distortion and degradation of representation happens based on my response to my image and my materials.

A wide array of ideas, , materials, and processes influence the world that exists in my work. Sparsely populated, littered with empty lots, depleted suburban

subdivisions, and chain-link fences tracing the confines of sites where things once were. The entire world feels like the outskirts of somewhere else. The newspaper vending machines are restocked every morning at 3 a.m., but you'll rarely catch a glimpse of anyone reading the news.

## Works Cited

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Dick, Philip K. *The Philip K. Dick Reader*. Secaucus, N.J.: Carol Pub. Group, 1997.

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*Eraserhead*. Directed by David Lynch. 1977. Film.

*Mulholland Drive*. Directed by David Lynch. 2001. Film.

*Alien*. Directed by Ridley Scott. 1979. Film.



## Jim Hittinger MFA Portfolio 2015 Image List

1. *Sunbather*, 60x84", oil on canvas, 2015.
2. *Devil's Night*, 60x84", oil on canvas, 2015.
3. *Search Party*, 18x24", oil on paper, 2015.
4. *Parking Lot*, 18x24", oil on paper, 2015.
5. *Half Mast*, 60x92", charcoal on paper, 2014.
6. *Sinkhole*, 60x92", charcoal and acrylic on paper, 2014.
7. Untitled, 9x12", watercolor and gouache on paper, 2014.
8. Untitled, 9x12", ink on paper, 2014.
9. Untitled, 9x12", ink and gouache on paper, 2014.
10. Untitled, 9x12", charcoal on paper, 2014.
11. Installation View
12. Installation View
13. Installation View
14. Installation View
15. Installation View











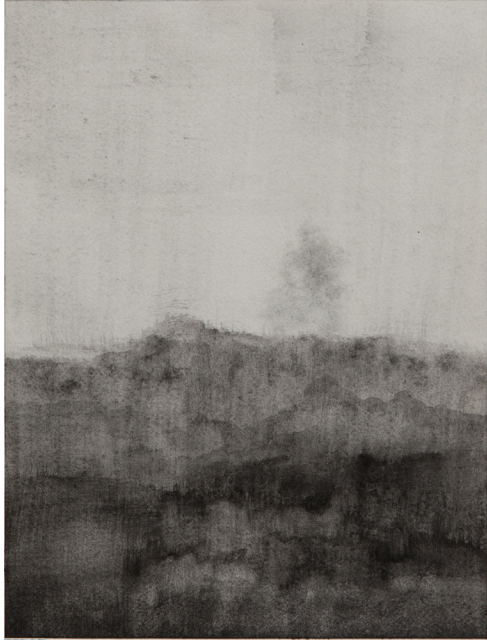
























## **Jim Hittinger**

### **Education**

- MFA, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. 2015.
- BFA, Wayne State University, Detroit. 2012.

### **Selected Exhibitions**

#### **2015**

- "Stool Sample," The Midnight Brigade, Minneapolis.
- "Underlined Action (MFA Thesis Exhibition)," Katherine E. Nash Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

#### **2014**

- "Collective Visions," Ellen Kayrod Gallery, Detroit.
- "Blinking Fresh," Quarter Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.
- Gallery Hangman, Minneapolis.

#### **2013**

- "The Chosen," Detroit Artists Market, Detroit.
- "Actual Size Biennial," Whitdel Arts, Detroit.
- "Minty Fresh," Quarter Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

#### **2012**

- "Tetrachromatic Realities," Whitdel Arts, Detroit.
- "Biannual All-Media Exhibition 2012," Detroit Artists Market, Detroit.
- "WSU Undergraduate Exhibition," Wayne State University, Detroit.

#### **2011**

- "Actual Size Biennial," Whitdel Arts, Detroit.
- "Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit Members Exhibition," Whitdel Arts, Detroit.

#### **2010**

- "That DAM Box Show Two," Detroit Artists Market, Detroit.
- "Journeymaker," The Depths Gallery, Chicago.
- "DAM Scholarship Awards Exhibition," Detroit Artists Market, Detroit.
- "The Final Cut," Whitdel Arts, Detroit.

## **Teaching Experience**

- Graduate Instructor (Instructor of Record). Intro to Drawing. University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Summer 2014, Fall 2014, Spring 2015, Summer 2015.
- Teaching Assistant. Introduction to Contemporary Art and Theory. University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Fall 2013.
- Teaching Assistant. Intro to Painting. University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Spring 2013.
- Teaching Assistant (Grade Book Responsibility). Concepts in Visual Art. University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Fall 2012, Spring 2013.

There's a strip mall near where I grew up in suburban Detroit where every business has closed. It happened slowly over the course of a few years. The Italian restaurant was the first to go, never reopening after a suspicious kitchen fire. Next went the hardware store, then the dollar store, and then the bowling alley. The video rental place managed to hang around for another year or two, the smallest storefront in the mall the last one remaining open for business. It had moved there from a different strip mall after its last location had suffered the same fate. I used to walk there to rent video games when I was a kid. Eventually, they closed down too; leaving a massive block of vacant stores set on a parking lot the size of a football field.

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