2019

Transmogrify

Dan Johnson

Iowa State University

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Transmogrify

by

Dan Johnson

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Art

Program of Study Committee:
Barbara Walton, Major Professor
Brent Holland
Paul Bruski

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2019

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my wife, Katie.
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I would also like to thank my peers in the program for their critiques and comments, and also the faculty I have encountered in my time at Iowa State University for providing this and more in their commitment to excellence.
ABSTRACT

The exhibition Transmogrify was displayed at the Design on Main from October 29th 2019 until November 9th 2019. The show included four larger paintings on unstretched canvas that were tacked to the walls. There were also over a dozen paintings on stretched canvas, some as individual pieces but several grouped together as triptychs. The subject matter of the work largely centered around natural world objects like trees and insects, but also included several portrait pieces as well. Virtually all the works were heavily stylized in a graphical manner using calligraphic lines typically displayed as black paint markings. This stylistic approach tied into the titular theme of the show, in that all of the subjects were subtly or drastically transformed from what they might appear to be. What might seem to be a portrait at first glance actually was composed of many discrete objects.
CHAPTER 1. ARTIST STATEMENT

My thesis work explored the spontaneously created characters and places that can be found primarily through process-based doodling and gesture drawings that are refined into more deliberated subjects. Part of this process stems from the idea of “transmogrification” which is the tendency to turn abstract patterns as seen in clouds for example into faces or animals within the cloud formations. Using acrylic paint and inks on canvas and board as well as digital drawings and paintings, glimpses into these invented worlds can be discovered. There was also a focus on organic growth as it moves within the work while suggesting a move off the support and into spaces beyond, much as organic life will tend to do.

Given that my art is process based, part of this automatic activity involves mining my own memory and imagination to explore the possibilities inherent in spontaneously generated imagery. The use of line was predominant to illustrate this fascination with invented subjects and even extending into small vignettes or small glimpses into another world. The illusion of depth by using color and tonal variations was both utilized and distorted intentionally, at times providing a sense of realism while also inverting expectations and instead flattening the painting with colors that are out of their natural placement in space. Transmogrify also means to transform in a surprising or magical manner, and that is precisely what I hoped to accomplish with my work. The word also bears connotations of humor and play, as I tried to infuse all my art with this sense of playful if sometimes esoteric comedy.
CHAPTER 2. ARTISTIC BACKGROUND

My artistic journey began before I could talk or write, as I was drawing before I did either. Growing up, I was often in trouble with my parents for drawing beyond coloring books and paper, moving over onto walls, floors and even library books. My parents actively discouraged me from using walls to draw on and quickly realized that I would require lots of other media to work on. I discovered graphite, pastels, watercolors and acrylic paints in grade school but always returned to pen and ink as a favorite. My childhood was made up of comic books even more than is perhaps typical, filling up my closet, under my bed and overflowing into boxes into the basement and garage. I enjoyed the stories of course, but even more so I enjoyed the artwork. Kirby, Ditko and Miller were all favorites and I spent hours studying them all, first tracing the images using notebook paper and a pen, and then recreating the art on my own.

Comics rely heavily upon drawing, and that has always been my first interest and entry way into fine art generally. What I discovered in my own early drawings however was that I could greatly enhance and reimagine the pencil work by adding ink. In comics, this high contrast medium allowed for a more graphic style that appealed broadly to a commercial audience. Discovering ink quickly led me into focusing on ink first and solely as a means of expression. I used disposable pens in great number as well as the more traditional quills and fountain pens. Other fine artists I began discovering in my adolescence included William Blake, Leonardo DaVinci and Hieronymus Bosch. For me, they were all artists who excelled at the use of line as the first and most important element in a work of art. The approach for each was very different, from the sublime cartoons of Blake, to the anatomical precision of DaVinci and then...
further into the surreal juxtapositions of Bosch. I particularly admire Bosch for his astonishing use of subject matter that seems to be generated from his own unconscious mind. Indeed, Bosch is often called the first true surrealist in art with panoramas that still stymie art historians as to what exactly Bosch intended with almost all of his surviving works.

My technical skill and style progressed in high school with the invaluable assistance of several great teachers, including the instructor Norm Pagels for drawing and painting. I also found inspiration in more modern artists like H.R. Giger, Wasily Kandinsky and Roberto Matta. Matta in particular utilized a process similar to what I began using, employing a kind of dream-like logic in the subject matter and composition of his paintings. The thin washes of color used by Matta in works like *Science* mirror my own practices in the use of acrylic inks on canvas. The gauzy atmospheric space created by the sparing application of colors evoked an otherworldliness, a surreal new world coming into being. Matta’s use of line is also a source of constant fascination to me, as he uses line not just to contour his subjects, but also to describe movement, volume and space. The path of his lines on this work
seems to parallel the path of his thinking in creating the composition and perhaps even represent thought itself for Matta.

Matta was also influential to me early on for his exploration of what he called “inscapes” or “psychological morphologies.” (Schulman, 1992). In a series of works beginning in the early 1930s and continuing on through 1940, Matta strove to illustrate states of consciousness, a kind of mapping of his own interior awareness, using vivid imagery and ghostly washes of paint.

In *The Earth is a Man*, Matta was symbolizing the creative and destructive forces of nature, where primordial shapes seem to collide and explode. This work was certainly influenced by Matta recently witnessing a volcanic eruption, but Matta transformed the experience into something uniquely his own. I found this approach to art invaluable as I began recreating my own interior spaces. A clear example of this is found in the above image of *Butterfly Domain* which I created in 2019. Matta relied heavily on color to convey his subject, while I use line predominantly, but the results can find similarities.

When I first attended college in 1991, I was not entirely clear that my pursuit would be in Studio Arts because I have also found inspiration and guidance in my work from reading and writing. While it is true that my first four college level classes were all related to studio arts, my focus gradually shifted to literature and creative writing. My undergraduate degree was actually in English and my first graduate degree was in creative writing with an emphasis on poetry. While I do not write as much as I once did, I still find a great deal of connection in what I read to
what I now create visually. A writer that I have long returned to is the German born poet Rainer Maria Rilke.

In the book *A Year with Rilke*, the editors outline Rilke’s grasp of the transient nature of all things and how this is critical to his capacity to praise and to cherish. “In the face of impermanence and death, it takes courage to love the things of this world and to believe that praising them is our noblest calling. It is courage born of the ever-unexpected discovery that acceptance of mortality yields an expansion of being. In naming what is doomed to disappear, naming the way it keeps streaming through our hands, we can hear the song that streaming makes.” (Macy & Barrows, 2009). This idea connects closely to my own views on why I paint and draw, framing it as a way of capturing with a shape the thought, the image, or the idea that I want to hold onto and preserve and hear again.

The next section of this thesis will look in more depth at a few artists that clearly connect to me in terms of style, content and ideology.
CHAPTER 3. ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Takashi Murakami

Takashi Murakami is a Japanese contemporary artist that is known for blurring the lines between high and low art, combining traditional aesthetic of Japanese art with popular culture. Murakami coined and produced the term ‘superflat’, which reflects his own artistic style. His work is graphically similar to my own, although he uses an extraordinary level of simplification to enhance the clean and clear reproducibility of his work. Much of this stylization comes from his deeply rooted manga influences stemming in Japanese culture. My work is fundamentally less “clean and clear” then Murakami’s by intent as I clearly am aiming away from naïve commercialism and blatant kitsch factor.

Murakami actively encourages discourse about high versus low art, and while his statements on this issue seem well intentioned and sincere, it is hard not to observe how he is clearly benefiting from this blend of extremes. It is made more problematic for me by the fact that Murakami does not actually make much or possibly any of his artwork with his own hands. He hires teams of artificers and painters and sculptors who create his vision to his specifications. While this is not unique to Murakami, and even emulates artists like Warhol, Murakami seems closer to a CEO of a factory then he does to an idealized version of an artist as a solitary creator. This is perplexing to me as I am primarily a fine artist who creates all of my own work with my own hands and skills.
Certainly, Murakami embraces commercialism, and his iconic imagery lends itself very well to the kind of products they are attached to as well. Even his standalone art, like the Oval Buddha displayed at Versailles, seem also designed to serve a commercial aspect in their stylized reproducibility. Not everyone can afford the original, but we can all purchase a tiny plastic replica of this gigantic golden monolith. It is simultaneously high art and kitsch. This take on art is a challenge to my understanding of what high art truly is or should be, just as it raises the questions of individual artistic integrity and truth in art, if such a thing is even possible anymore. The issue of uniting or dividing high and low art is very important for me as well. Aspects of my work can be reproduced pretty easily, especially my graphic “cartoonish” style when drawing individual figures contained in larger murals. When I have printed my work in t-shirts and mugs, the imagery certainly carries a certain commercially flashy appeal that sells well to the average consumer.

Keith Haring

Keith Haring was an artist focused on creating a truly public kind of art that was easily accessible to everyone. He began his career by drawing in chalk in subway stations, creating dozens of works each day that anyone could appreciate. Haring’s process in some ways closely mirrors my own in that he did not use elaborate sketches or even preparatory outlines for most of his paintings. Instead he created his works spontaneously, letting the imagery flow and interconnect as it emerged from his brush. Haring painted first with his hand, and by extension his entire body. He was
not a cerebral or concept-based artist, but rather a mark making artist who was more than anything focused on drawing. For me, this approach is critical to my own art in every way, even when I consciously try to push its primacy aside. Mark making is fundamental to my artistic approach, and I think this can be clearly seen in the work *The Castle Wall*.

Haring was committed to creating public works and created dozens of murals around the world that still exist today. He was also a supporter of public service campaigns and routinely held children’s workshops on drawing. Finally, he established the Keith Haring Foundation, to focus on funding and awareness to AIDS organizations. Haring was an artist who looked beyond himself and his own successes and into a possible future that offered more connection among all people. I hope to emulate Haring in this pursuit to give back to the communities I grew up in and provide art and education to everyone I can reach.

**Joan Miro**

Joan Miro was a Spanish born surrealist who developed a unique alphabet of symbols and images in his work. The delicate black lines in his work contour eyes, fish and stick people. The symbols and figures seen in *The Hunter* here repeat
themselves in much of Miro’s work. Some of these images come from his own life, like the abstracted tree with a single leaf, but these familiar shapes intersect with dream-like inventions and actual script in the lower right. More than even Haring, Miro created a visual language with his dreamy, cursive script and invented visual library of animals and objects.

**Summary**

Much of Miro’s work relied upon automatic drawing, a process similar to doodling that employed very little planning or forethought. His work resists easy interpretation even if his symbols and figures can be decoded and related back to their source. Instead, Miro’s paintings use a uniquely calligraphic style to explore larger ideas of birth, love and death. I relate most to Haring and Miro in this group of artists who used an invented visual language to communicate with their audience. Conversely, Murakami’s work speaks strongly to me in terms of its stylistic approach and emphasis on flatness over dimensionality. Miro’s lines and curves that resolve into new and unexpected shapes seem to speak directly to my own work. Another similarity with Miro for me is that many of his paintings were constructed on flat fields of color, frequently white or sienna, allowing the calligraphic marks to stand out more effectively. His late work used more vibrant colors to enhance emotional resonance, but he never abandoned his inventive use of line to speak and connect.

My work was influenced by all of these artists to differing degrees. In Haring, I see his obsession with process-based work emerging in my own automatic drawing approach. Murakami exemplifies my own fascination with the flat surface of

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**Figure 11. Jazz Tempo, 2019, Acrylic on Canvas, 24”x 36”**
the painting and his graphic style that pushes the boundaries between fine art and commercial art. Finally, with Miro, I found an artist who actually created his own idiosyncratic visual language and a calligraphic style that inspires my own techniques. I will continue to study all of these artists, especially Miro, and try to gain deeper insights into not only their unique methods, but also the ideas and culture which inspired each of them.
CHAPTER 4. PROCESS AND MATERIALS

My paintings are typically acrylic on stretched canvas and unstretched canvas. Stretched gives more structure and also limits what the composition can be in terms of formal composition. Unstretched allows for greater size and changing dimensions and also more play with surface tensions in the fabric. Organic growth in my work stems from my own memory and imagination and means that subject matter will often lead itself around and then off the page.

For paintings, a light drawing on the canvas is the first step that is not a literal description of any subject but simply lines that help to evoke further elaborations when I begin using paint. As shapes begin to emerge in the paint, I do make small adjustments and guide the purely intuitive process towards what shapes seem to be emerging in the swirls of paint. A curbing arc of paint might suggest a bird or cloud and then as I see that form develop I guide it into those more descriptive areas. Larger themes can also emerge during this process, as an aggregate of shapes might become animals or human forms, and thus lead me to see ideas developing about the natural environment or conversely, humanity’s place in the natural world. Many of my works are created from what I saw in Matta’s almost random juxtaposition of colors and shapes that are worked into a clearer resolution using line.

Transubstantiation

The work shown below, Transubstantiation, was lightly sketched out on an unstretched canvas and then painted using acrylics and acrylic inks. The painting Transubstantiation was developed over the process of several weeks until a point was reached where nothing more could be added or altered to the piece. Large unstretched canvases like this are finished by sealing the edges and metal grommets are installed to allow for ease of installation and then these pieces are hung as tapestry.
The subject matter of this work resembles a dreamlike world where figures alter, come apart and reassemble into new forms. An arm becomes a pillar to hold up an enclosure of disembodied faces. The title of the piece closely relates to this idea of how one seemingly obvious item can transform into another entirely. Connecting to this idea of conversion, a yellow alien form, somewhat resembling a child in proportions, spreads its arms out in supplication. The slender yellow forms near this alien seem to also be undergoing a kind of alteration as some seem more humanoid while others are attaching themselves to the machine in the center of the piece.

Transubstantiation is a piece that evokes the hellscapes that Bosch envisioned, a world that maintains its own internal logic even as it defies all connection to traditional norms. There are not always clear or logical conclusions to be drawn about the relationship of say the small figure pressing a red “on” button towards the far right of the work and the existence of plants seeming to become people on the far left. The influence of Matta more than Bosch can be felt in how the work comes to represent a kind of inscape of my own that maps out only the internal logic of my own awareness.
Finally, *Transubstantiation* is a piece that highlights a fundamental starting point for me and my work, which is drawing. The drawing must always come first, and only then is color added to the work. The lines are drawn entirely with acrylic paint, typically using bone black or carbon black in a fairly liquid mixture and are applied using small round brushes. I pay close attention to the weight of lines throughout the drawing, and often retouch and redraw these lines to find the most effective balance for the work. As the detail included here shows, line weights move from very fine and light interior spaces to a very heavy and dense contour.

One clear issue that arises with these inscapes is that while they contain their own self-sustaining interiority, the meaning of such pieces can sometimes seem opaque to a broader audience. After all, while this kind of psychological unspooling on a canvas may be useful to myself, what relevance can it hold for anyone not familiar with my deep dives into mining my own unconsciousness? I do not always understand some of these works myself, much to the consternation of peers who press me to more clearly explain what is happening in my paintings. Pressing me to analyze my own work has allowed me a clearer focus on moving forward with new work, but much of it still puzzles me even as the subjects and themes become more explicit. All of which raises a deeper question: how can I not know what I am doing?

![Figure 13. Transubstantiation, [detail]](image)
The answer to that question may be found in examining what triggers the creation of my work. I found some clues to this in a brilliant TED talk by Elizabeth Gilbert who called the creative spark within artists a kind of “daemon”, or a disembodied spirit that visits artists and provided guidance and motive force. This is meant as a metaphor to at once free the artist from a creative onus to produce, but it also allows a distance for the artist to set oneself apart from the resulting work as well. This idea is similar to what Mary Oliver in her book *Upstream: Selected Essays* called the “third self”. Oliver says that, “Certainly there is within each of us a self that is neither a child, nor a servant of the hours. It is a third self, occasional in some of us, tyrant in others. This self is out of love with the ordinary; it is out of love with time.” This third self, Oliver holds, labors towards priorities which are not concerned with ordinary life in any way. This inner “other” is committed to the creative vision and to nothing else. Communion with this third self is found only when the creative pursuit is engaged and the artifact of a finished piece of art is thus the result.

**Chicken on the Run**

Part of my intent in creating work using intuitive gestures and doodling with seemingly no clear motive is to enhance the exchange of ideas with this inner self that speaks no other language. I realize that this metaphor of another self is not a literal expression, but it is a useful way for me to approach creating my work even if it is not at all useful in helping me to
understand my own work. Analysis of the work after it is complete is one way I have found to gain a clearer picture of what this mysterious self is up to. I compare my process in a way to working with a blindfold on my analytical self. My major professor, Barbara Walton, suggested it was like moving myself to the passenger seat and letting the process drive the car. Part of what is compelling for me as an artist is that I do not have a clear vision of what will be produced by jumping straight into the process of making it. In fact, if I do have a clear mental picture of the result, I will have almost no compulsion to carry the work out, which is a bit of a paradox for me as well! An example of this process that details both its advantages and disadvantages is found in the work *Chicken on the Run*.

The large figure on the left of the piece serves as my avatar, a version of me that details my own anxieties about making art and what it means to be an artist generally. The avatar has his arms removed and replaced with chickens, bound to him by strings of DNA. Chickens are stereotypically not seen as intelligent or as especially aesthetically pleasing animals. This “Art Me” is standing on a small mountain, but it is made of not just rocks but a discarded tire and assorted garbage. A storm is issuing from the figures head which also seems to be on fire, possibly with too many ideas, but it could also represent a kind of fear of burning too brightly. Larger meanings become more entangled and more opaque as one moves across the painting from left to right. A subterranean being is pushing a thermometer up into an orifice that belongs to a columnar being that is simply an eyeball at the top. A flying chicken is delivering a worm to a resigned being that
accepts the gift with a simple word, “Fine.” If it is a story, it is a disjointed nonlinear narrative that disperses rather than coheres. If chicken is in the DNA of my avatar, then why is it giving up its catches to a disappointed authority figure? Asking these questions allows me a new path towards revisiting these ideas even if this work itself is a kind of colorful failure in coherence.

**Summer Nightmares**

All of this raises the larger concern: does it need to make sense? If the narrative collapses into digressions or noise, is that such a bad thing? Dreams are often held together by their own internal logic that does not often hold together once we awake. The piece entitled *Summer Nightmares* illuminates this issue for me in a startling way. The central figure seems to be a deer but it has the jaws and teeth of a wolf or fox. It is at once frightening with its expression and yet also appears to be decaying, splitting apart into bones and tissues. This figure is flanked on both sides by an assortment of figures, including a pregnant woman, two grey upright figures one of which is sporting knives in the back, and an array of marabou storks. Thematically the figures are referencing birth and death and are linked in one piece to explore the path of all life. The tiny mouthless figure found on the far left of the work is childlike in form, but isolated in a garden.
area, while other smaller figures seem to be workers in hard hats affecting repairs on the world. Admittedly I have no clear vision of the work before it is made, and I can only begin to piece it together as the work progresses into a finished drawing. As I revisit this piece in the next weeks, I will begin a more careful revision of the larger themes of growth and decay and try to determine how I might more clearly unify these ideas.

**Cityscape**

Beyond an examination of subject matter, it is worth studying the style present in most of these paintings. The use of a strong contour line is predominant, echoing the stylistic approach of comics and cartoons. But these lines do more than encompass their respective shapes, they also suggest a kind of calligraphic markings, which leads me to think of a new language being made, a vocabulary of curving marks and repeated circles. The piece shown here, *Cityscape*, is emblematic of this move towards a visual language where marks are repeated and interwoven in a dense composition. This work did not begin as a city seen from above, but it resolved into one as it progressed. Layers of transparent grey and opaque white were added to the line work to provide a sense of density and distance.
**Alien Caves**

The work here, *Alien Caves*, is a clear example of an inscape that was formed by accident and chance. The color was applied first, poured on as a liquid and allowed to pool and mix randomly without my intervention. After the color dried, I worked spaces back into the canvas using white paint and then added tiny forms of ambiguous life forms in various shapes. Each of these open spaces was filled with forms and then colored directly with high key values of yellow and blue. The evocative biomorphic shapes around these spaces form the landscape for this alien world.

**Run, Rabbit, Run**

My latest artwork has included a foray into digital media, utilizing a touch sensitive tablet and drawing stylus. One of the works created with this approach was the work seen here, *Run, Rabbit, Run*. This piece shows a rabbit mid-leap and in profile with limbs extended in a fairly naturalistic style. Emerging from the center of the rabbit however are the
shapes of a horse, a pointing finger and a frowning face looking to the rear. This surreal imagery suggests that the rabbit is somehow metaphorically transforming itself, possibly through giving birth to these new forms or conversely by absorbing them.
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

When I started my MFA program at Iowa State University, I was still composing primarily figurative drawings with a solo subject as the focus. As my coursework ensued, I found myself exploring very different subjects and incorporating mini-narratives into my work as well. I expanded into trying out sculptures in clay and wax and even into trying to create a children’s book in my final term. I learned that I can use materials and processes that go beyond my initial practices. I learned to think far more critically about my own work to better understand where my art is headed. I also began to trust my own gestural processes more even as I gained a broader appreciation of utilizing more formal planning in my compositions.

I am currently working on a children’s book and a graphic novel that use figures taken from my larger paintings. This book will focus on the adventures of a red mushroom named Henry and his search for acceptance. The graphic novel will be focused on other mushroom characters that have yet to be determined. I also learned a great deal about the nature and practices of academia. I accomplished a great deal in my time at Iowa State and will take the critiques and advice from my peers and faculty with me into my artistic journey ahead.

Figure 20. A Savior, 2019, Digital Image
REFERENCES


