MAN AND MACHINE:

AN EXPLORATION IN OILS ON CANVAS

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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BY

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Statement of the Problem

My Creative Project, Man and Machine, seeks to explore and reveal the positive relationships between Humanity and the Machines that Humanity has created. Through the use of tools, ingenuity, and labor we work to shape the world to our design - a task that requires laborious struggle and the use and upkeep of machines. It has been, and continues to be a journey with incredible leaps of illumination as we shape our destiny.

Through dramatic and narrative-inspired representations, this theme was explored using oil paints on canvas, both stretched and unstretched, in a variety of sizes and orientations. The pieces are indicative of moments, eras, or historic individuals, intended to present us a fictional emotive moment portraying the essence of several relationships between Man and Machine. The pieces are not rendered in pursuit of a photographic representation of reality. Instead they utilize abstraction of forms through shadow, over-exposed or merging shapes, gesture, and texture - allowing the viewer to participate in the interpretation of the space and create a more candid and extemporaneous feel.

The “mark-of-the-artist” was celebrated through emotive paint application through a diverse use of washes, glazes, and impasto techniques with a strong influence from impressionistic painting. I worked to create eight compositions which have a sense
of unity while at the same time sought to solve eight different visual problems in unique and interesting ways. It was important to me not to rely upon any compositional formula but instead working to create imagery that consistently challenged me in execution and in concept.

One particular challenge of this series was to create a sense of timelessness and to bestow on all of the created imagery a sense of optimism. In some pieces the machine is dominant, in others it is the figure, and still in another the figure is omitted completely. This variety of size/scale relationships is intended to invite the audience to investigate the concept from a diverse set of angles leading to a more comprehensive view.

In addition, I sought to utilize hue in unexpected ways – avoiding symbolic color assignments and using color as an emotive component of the composition. I sought to find ways to introduce color, not through more traditional color-mixing, but by playing upon the impressionistic use of color mixing or use of transparent glazes.

Throughout the development process I remained aware of several great artists and my use of techniques and compositions was heavily influenced by their paintings.
Although impractical to list all influences on my work, there are a number of primary influences in the creation of these artworks that I should mention. It was interesting to apply artistic themes from the Golden Age of Illustration to a more contemporary problem.

The largest influence in the creation of this series were the vast works of N.C. Wyeth, an early Twentieth Century illustrator. His works were heavily emphasized through my earlier artistic development and have left a lasting impression. At first glance it may be difficult to connect some of these works with Wyeth's paintings but several threads connect our styles.

A similar emphasis of dramatic, or romantic, lighting with a particular emphasis on the figure permeates both bodies of work. Mr. Wyeth consistently uses dramatic light - from an illustrated, practical source or from the sun near dusk or dawn. This serves two purposes: First to allow the relationships between cast shadow and light to over-exaggerate the definition of subtle forms and, second, to delineate foreground and background elements through carefully lit scenarios.

I have found N.C. Wyeth's consistent use of merging shapes an admirable choice.
Merging shapes serve to simplify the visual organization of the picture plane, eliminating non-essential information and strengthening chosen silhouettes of both figure and environment. In conjunction Wyeth repeatedly uses strongly delineated foreground, middle-ground and background elements. This visual organization leads to a clear and quick understanding of the dimensional aspects of a piece eliminating the more gradual portrayal of depth increases the contrast between layers.

Although a common and perhaps over-cited reference, John Singer Sargent brought a much-needed balance to my more contemporary influences. In *Capri Girl* he makes use of scumbling, or dry brushing, in the same composition as wet-in-wet techniques with very gestural brush strokes. This technique can also be seen in his piece *The Oyster Gatherers of Cancale*.

*A street in Venice* provides a great example of his oversimplification of forms in the background, abstraction, and relying upon suggestion to create an environment while not over-rendering the space. Additionally *Artist in His Studio* demonstrates similar gestural paint application revealing the facets of the fabric of Sargent's coat and pants. No attempt is made to conceal this is a painting. Instead, he chooses to accentuate the directional quality of the cloth. This was a common device of his and one which I have adopted in my own rendering of the figure.

I also had the good fortune to stumble upon a fantastic book, *Everything I Know*
About Painting by the contemporary oil-painter Richard Schmid. His books have been a constant source of inspiration throughout the course of this Master of Arts Program.

In Mr. Schmid's work I can see the potential synergy of my strengths and my goals as a painter. I enjoy in his work a strong gestural component, much like John Singer Sargent, that allows for works to have a great sense of beauty without being over-rendered. I enjoy being able to see the mark and process of the artist within their works.

The painting Doctor Roger, a life-study of the bust of a gentleman with glasses, is particularly interesting to me. The artist utilizes heavy wet-in-wet brush strokes in impasto fashion, conveying a strong sense of confidence and adeptness. I also appreciate his technique of physically painting without the constraint of the represented depth of the rendered scene. I have worked hardest to integrate this technique, removing the notion of painting in the order of depth presented in the scene and intentionally flattening the entire composition into abstract shapes. It allows me to work back and forth more freely from foreground to background regardless of layering or glaze order.

In Promenade, Mr. Schmid expertly uses neutral colors against more saturated areas in order to push the contrast of saturation of his selected hues. He also uses directional brush application to represent large flat planes, pushing forms into flat, abstracted, fields reminiscent of the work of Mark Rothko.
My final influence comes from the contemporary and award-winning illustrator, Gregory Manchess. His oil paintings have previously attracted me but it has only been through the last year as I began exploring oil paints to portray a representational space. I admire the confidence portrayed in his brushwork and stark compositions.

His piece *Uphill Riders* carries a strong silhouette and the use of a wide variety of trapped negative spaces. He also uses through value, but not hue, to merge smaller shapes and to create interesting intersections of forms described fully elsewhere in the composition.

*Woodworking Hands* is a beautiful close-up image of a pair of hands holding a chisel and working a piece of lumber. The application is accentuated by his simple, confident brush strokes which define the surface of the hands in a chunky and somewhat chiseled manner. Once again this technique brings the viewer into greater participation with the image as they assimilate the abstracted rendering technique and mentally construct the hands.

Finally his painting *Skypeople* does a fantastic job of integrating warm colors into shadow areas to add variety and depth. An energy is carried throughout the entire picture-plane as he overcomes the usual perception of warms in front, cools in back to optically mix them throughout.
Influence was also drawn from World War II propaganda art. Common through many pieces is a use of strong silhouette. Figures or elements are completely blackened or reversed-out in order to heighten the contrast. Additionally, the use of non-objective colors and interesting color schemes heighten the sense of drama. The simple yet vibrant pallets stray from more conservative color choices and add a sense of romance to already dramatic compositions. Contrast of size and scale is another common thread throughout propaganda art which I sought to emulate and vary throughout.

From these diverse influences I have found a synthesis of many of my goals in painting: abstraction as a tool of simplification, a gestural, and loose, quality, confident brush strokes, strong compositions, and dramatic representation.
Description of the Artworks

Foundry

In this painting a young woman stands in a foundry, harshly illuminated by the fire over which she works. She dominates the composition as she twists, to offset the heavy male component in the other paintings. The lighting accentuates the folds in her clothing against the cool and darkly rendered machine looming behind her. The curves of the female form are repeated in the exposed gears of the machine, unifying the woman with her task. Above, beams of light stream through the thick and arid atmosphere.
Gutenberg

In this oil painting, Johannes Gutenberg presides over his legendary press, inspecting a fresh print. The composition, dominated heavily by warm tones, lends itself to a feeling of antiquity, while the soft yet direct lighting focuses our eye upon the figure in a fashion reminiscent of sacred representations of saints. The furnishings and environment blend seamlessly into each other as the appear and recede through transparent shadows. Perspective and depth are thoroughly and accurately explored in this worms-eye view of Gutenberg's fictionalized studio. This painting is also the only work in the series to exhibit the figure placed behind an object and also a primarily monochromatic composition that partners with the Microchip painting.
Artificial Heart

We overlook a pair of surgeon's hands as an artificial heart is prepared to be inserted into the chest of a patient. The surgeon's hands reach from above, a reference to God, returning life to a man. The composition places the patient seemingly upside down, conveying a sense of weightlessness to the viewer. Several cast shadows cascade and intersect from the skillful hands over the still form of the patient.
Automation

This piece, composed as a triptych, exhibits a roboticized car factory in the only composition devoid of any human presence. This is to bring about the question of the relevance of man after his machines have replaced him—asking whether man even has a place in labor. The harsh, overhead lighting and dark environment serve to present a purely utilitarian space without the fragile presence of man.
Microchip

Just as merging shadows are often utilized through several paintings in this series, the Microchip seeks to explore the opposite of that concept: merging highlights. Over exaggerating the brightest areas of light creates new interesting white spaces. In addition this piece focuses on contrast of scale by juxtaposing one of our smallest machines, the microchip, against a human face portrayed several times larger than life. This is in correlation with other paintings which present the machine as a subordinate element to a dominant figure.
Aircraft

By the romantic light of dawn another of the Wright brother's machines takes flight as a figure runs along by it's receding form. The figure is rendered with emphasis on merging shadow shapes, strengthening his silhouette against the pastel sky. The figure was designed to be cropped in a unique way, accentuating a extemporaneous feel to the image in contrast to the more staged poses in the other art works.
Crane

A medieval crane looms over us as it is used to hoist masonry elements up to a cathedral in construction. The sky darkens as the day ends, revealing a dim lunar surface repeating the curvilinear elements present in the stonework of the cathedral. This is the only painting that occurs at night as well as presenting the figure as a diminutive element.
Tractor

In this American scene a concerned farmer, pausing from working his field, is confronted by the boiling storm clouds bringing much needed rain to his crops. His weather-worn tractor stands behind him, resolute in the face of the approaching tumult. The farmer's body twists as he surveys the scene, heightening the drama in his torso. This piece is unique as it makes heavy use of transparent washes for large areas of the canvas, something not seen in such large quantity in any other painting.
Conclusion and Exhibition Statement

These pieces were created using a basic process of laying in a loose wash of paint thinner and pigment with a rag to block in the basic forms and hues. Following this, figures and environments were sketched in using oil pastels, a discovery made during the Tractor painting, that is easy to work over and is also easily removed with thinner. Following that step, choices were made to utilize multiple glazes (or further washes) to build up transparent forms or use of thick paint with a palette knife (working from large awkward tools into smaller detail brushes) as each painting neared completion.

Created between June and November of 2008, each painting took nearly 25 hours spread out over the duration of the project. I took care to not complete any piece until shortly before the completion of the project, allowing me to work back into the pieces and compensate for technical or stylistic advances that were made over the seven month process, promoting a sense of unity in paintings that originated several weeks apart.

This series was an incredibly challenging set both technically, creatively, within a quick time-line. It was exciting to continually revise this set of images over a long time. This allowed me the luxury of spending a lot of time on research and the conceptual process. Along with revising the concepts for each painting it was very exciting to
repeatedly look at the series as it grew and have the time to rework upcoming paintings in
order to push contrast and variety in the series as a whole.

A secondary challenge in this series was to successfully integrate within the same
composition both mechanical and organic elements. The theme of the series came from
my intentions to tackle weaknesses in my artistic repertoire namely representationalism
and mechanical elements.

To succeed in creating believable images it was essential to find extensive
amounts of visual reference for each of the time periods and mechanical advancements.
In addition for two of the paintings digital three-dimensional models were built to
simulate perspective and lighting in complex environments. Following that reference
photography was shot of models to match the perspective and lighting of the modeled
scene in order for me to composite the separate reference in a single painting. This was
the first time that I had followed this process and helped me achieve success integrating
mechanical and biological elements.

Only in January of 2008 did I begin painting in oils, and I am extremely pleased
with my progress. My previous experience was in acrylics and was not representational.
This program has been the most physically and artistically challenging experience since
my undergraduate and has spurred on great artistic growth.


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