THE NARRATIVE: A FORMAL EXPLORATION
A CREATIVE PROJECT
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I. Abstract

This creative project is an exploration of the narrative and the forms it has taken in various fields of contemporary printmaking. The narrative will be explored through the mediums of stories, poetry, and images. More importantly, the idea of a narrative will be broken down into its most basic form: storytelling.
II. Statement of the Problem- Significance, Purpose, Rationale

The narrative is the oldest idea in history. It embodies the very nature of history itself. History boils down to telling of the human story. It is one of the oldest traditions still held by man. It is a tradition still alive in the multi-billion dollar industries of book publishing and moviemaking. It has seemingly branched into as many different genres and subcategories as there are stories themselves. I would like to explore the narrative through contemporary art and artist’s books.

Where does limited edition art fit into the greater body of storytelling? By examining my work and the work of others, I intend to explore the relevance and importance of this field of work. Through image and word, I will survey how I, as an artist, can tell a story and spread it through the means of editioning, which are akin to printmaking and bookmaking.

Limited edition art could be defined as art that is not commercially printed and thus is not reproduced in a large quantity. Large is a very general term, so for the sake of coming to a more concrete number, we will say works printed in editions of less than three hundred fit this category. The artist himself generally produces these pieces of art. They are printed in a set amount (an edition) and often numbered. The act of numbering lets the audience and potential buyers of an editioned piece of art know just how rare an object is. A book that is one out of ten is arguably more valuable than a book that is one out of one thousand.

Things have been printed for nearly two thousand years now. Starting with charms being printed from a wooden block to a piece of goat leather, and taking a leap forward with Gutenberg and his printing press, printing has developed into a highly mechanized process. You can even make an inkjet print from your desktop computer. In the world today, almost anyone can print something.
The one common aspect of each of the steps forward is that they have made things faster, easier, and cheaper to print. That is really the problem with limited reproduction art. It purposely prints in a labor intensive manner. It uses techniques which are hundreds of years old and terribly antiquated. It takes years to train a person to be able to do it well, and even then, there is a much greater chance for human error than with their mechanized counterparts. Yet still, this is how these artists chose to spread their ideas.

The ability to spread a message has always been an issue with socially conscious art. Take into consideration Picasso’s Guernica; because of its large size, (over 25 feet in length) it has been difficult to show in a variety of places. Also it is just one painting; it cannot be in more than one place at any given time. Also consider Goya’s Black Paintings; they had to be removed from walls and transferred to canvas just to be put in a museum.

The art of printmaking has been a way for artists to spread their work and ideas to a larger group of people. A person can see one of Goya’s Caprichos in nearly any museum around the world. Printmaking allows an artist to make work with the purpose of it being seen by many.

Bookmaking is another form of printmaking, in which the prints are bound together to create a collection of work bound by a common theme as well as by covers. Through the traditional means of bookbinding, an artist can put his prints together to form a narrative. Images in sequence lead the mind to find connections. Think back to children’s books; they often tell stories with no words at all.

I have chosen to use my experience in printmaking in combination with my interest in bookmaking to make small edition artist’s books. With these books, I intend to draw people into my ideas through the intimacy that is created when reading a book. This intimacy is
something that can often only be achieved during this activity. The experience of having a story in your hands that only you can experience in your head is something unparalleled in other arts. Movies give all of the images to you. Even audio storytelling lends itself to theatrics that will influence the audience.

My goal with these works is to follow this rich history of storytelling and convey a message to be grasped by the audience. I keep the dimensions of my books small to increase this intimacy. Having something as delicate as a book in your hands is often an engaging experience.¹ I hope to use this part of the experience of a book to further influence my readers as I inform them about matters that are important to me such as: environmental concerns, love and the passing of time.

¹ Castleman, 53
III. Review of Influences/Literature

It has been said that the arts are our expression of culture\textsuperscript{2}. At the beginning of my graduate studies, I examined my understanding of literature. At that time, I felt I had a good understanding of fine art history, but little understanding of literature. I would consider literature the next largest portion of the arts, followed by music, dance and theatre. Because literature and fine art have followed a very similar path, I thought it pertinent to start with Greek literature and move my way through a sort of lineage of literature.

Literature and art follow a very similar path because they are both results of the development of agrarian society. By not having to follow herds of animals to sustain a community, societies were able to afford more time to the development of culture. Culture has always existed in the lines of oral stories, but these were only retained by elders. Now with the absence of a constantly moving society, there became more “down time” and as a result more time to devote to the development of intellectual pursuits. Written language was developed to chronicle the stories previously retained by storytelling.

The Greeks were not the first society to write these oral traditions or develop a system of writing, but they were the most influential in the development in Western society. Because I am most influenced by Western society, I chose not to follow the Sumerians or other Eastern cultures who were writing earlier. A common piece of advice offered to writers is, “write what you know.”

\footnote{Edman, 34}
I started with Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Greek literature is where the western tradition of the narrative really gained a foothold. Reading these works was an interesting endeavor. The Greek history is rich and pervasive. These works are a history of myth and legend in which the great Greek poets are chronicling the great legends of wrath and conquest.

These works could easily be compared to contemporary movies in which the hero makes a mistake that sends him down an epic path of peril. They fit very easily into the conflict, climax, and resolution story format. For this reason, I think these Greek works have been easily grasped by the masses over the years. These stories are so accessible they are often taught at the high school level. This same accessibility has become very important to my own work. I want my work to be read and understood.

I continued through history reading books such as *Metamorphoses*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Frankenstein*, *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *1984*, and *Slaughterhouse Five* to name a few. What I noticed throughout this survey of literature is an evolution of content and prose. What I thought was even more interesting was how this evolution followed the evolution of art.

Just like the Greek literature, most of art started out as a form of adding a tangible aspect to myths and religions. Whether it was Greek, Roman, or Jewish culture, there seems to be a strong tie to the idea of honoring their god or gods. The early temples, such as the Parthenon, were adorned with beautiful friezes to honor and illustrate the stories of the gods. A good reason for this was a large part of society at that time was illiterate. These sculptures explained in images what the common man or woman could not understand by reading. Literature was not always specifically religious, but often followed the ideas of morality that were stressed by the rising power of the dominant religion of the time. Looking at Shakespeare’s body of work, it often followed morality and superstition. *Romeo and Juliet*,...
follows the story of two young lovers who are caught in the middle of a family feud. Only through their deaths, the feud is resolved. I see this as a great link between the very strict consequences often shown in Greek literature and the much deeper level of storytelling involved in contemporary literature.

But concerning my work in particular, the start of Modernism is where the relationship between writing and art really starts to become intertwined. With Modernism, and more specifically Cubism, artists started working hand in hand with poets and writers of their time. These artists and authors often lived in artistic communities. Due to their close proximity and similar interests many of these artists and authors became friends.³

Cubism, for example, was a movement both in visual art and literature. Gertrude Stein and Max Jacob are examples of two authors who combined their Cubist style writing with artwork by artist such as Juan Gris and Pablo Picasso. This is one of the earliest collaborations in the book format to create a genre of books referred to as Livre d’Artiste. The term retains its French spelling due to the fact that it gained a great deal of momentum and enjoyed a good deal of success in Paris. Many of these books were commissioned by either the poet or an independent publisher such as the very influential Ambroise Vollard.

* A Book Concluding with As a Wife has a Cow, is a book of poetry in which Stein describes different objects from several different and sometimes disjointed points of view. On the adjacent page, there would often be a print by Gris that shows the same object drawn and dissected from several different angles. Both of these works pull apart the same object in similar ways, but work in entirely different arts.

³ Stein, 57
This tradition continues after World War I when many artists have returned from war and are having similar revelations as to how they see the world. Many of these artists and authors moved back to Paris and continued to live in these communities. Andre Breton was a very influential writer who was deeply connected to the idea of the subconscious. As Surrealism continued, writers and artists continued to make books together. This tradition remained very strong up until World War II. The war forced most artists out of Paris and away from their collaborators.

During this time very few artists pursued both writing and illustrating books. Vasily Kandinsky was the most important and active of these artists. He created the pivotal book *Klänge*. This book took him five years and includes 56 images and a poem about spring. It is a very important book written in the Dada manner. It uses greatly abstracted images to work as a place for the brain to start putting ideas together by utilizing expressive strokes.

The tradition of Livre d’Artiste continues through the present day. It has slowly dwindled as artist communities have separated and the ability to communicate over great distances has lessened the probability of that closeness happening again. I believe close proximity of artist and author bred an incredible sensitivity to art and word.

I am most interested in the genre of artist’s books. To briefly define the term, an artist’s book refers to a book that has been written, illustrated, and often produced by the artist. The best known early book artist was William Blake. Blake is considered to be one of greatest English poets and a very accomplished visual artist. His career has always been interesting to me because of his early training in engraving. He served an apprenticeship in engraving which later proved invaluable as he used similar intaglio techniques in his illuminated works. These

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4 Becks-Malorny, 24
illuminated works were etched very deeply with both poetry and imagery created by the artist and then later hand printed to give each image an original look.

Blake is largely considered to be the first artist to handle all parts of producing a book’s content. Like many artists, Blake was not a famous or appreciated artist in his own time. Both Blake’s imagery and poetry have been very influential to me. I chose a section from *The Echoing Green* that shows an interest in the relationship between nature and life that is often echoed in my own work.

Till the little ones, weary,  
No more can be merry;  
The sun does descend,  
And our sports have on end.  
Round the laps of their mothers  
Many sisters and brother,  
Like birds in their nest,  
Are ready for rest,  
And sport no more seen  
On the darkening Green.

Clearly, this work demonstrates a strong connection between the stages of life and the setting of the sun. I believe there to be a strong connection between the passing of days and seasons and the passing of our lives. Each seems to fall into set patterns. Just like leaves falling in the Autumn, our bodies begin to fall apart in our twilight. The darkness of light has been used as a metaphor for death by writers such as William Shakespeare, Leo Tolstoy, and Robert Frost. In several of my works, I have made similar comparisons. Here is an excerpt from my artist book *grandfather tree*:

Fall has set on my grandpa’s old hickory tree  
It is becoming what it will become  
So am I, so are you  
Just don’t tell me what I will have to be

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5 Bindman, 406
Blake integrated his text much more completely with his imagery due to the process in which he made and printed his books. We both show a similar interest in writing, illustrating, printing and binding our own books. Blake is considered to be the model of this type of publishing. This is a tradition that has been followed for many years, and I continue today.

There was a pretty large gap between Blake and the Livre d’Artiste artists. Though I have never found an exact reason for this, I believe the biggest reason is because of the amount of commissioned work artists were receiving and the expense of printing equipment. Only publishers and professional printers could afford to purchase such equipment. During the early twentieth century there were several publishers who were connected to artists and wanted to share in what they were producing.

Ed Ruscha is the last book artist I would like to discuss. He has been an important influence on my books. His first book, Twentysix Gasoline Stations, is a work that draws me in because of its simplicity and the intimate relationship of type and image on the page. Even though the words are just describing each station, the way they interact with their corresponding images works very well. This relationship style has become very important in my own work. I also appreciate this book because it is completely self-published. Some even consider it the first modern artist’s book. I was fortunate enough to see a copy of this book in San Francisco.

Twentysix Gasoline Stations was actually editioned three times in an attempt to keep the price of the book down. Ruscha’s intention seems to have been to maintain a sense of mass production. While I am less interested in mass production, keeping my work affordable is very important to me. In a world where it is increasingly easier to read books on digital readers, I

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6 Bindman, 7
7 Drucker, 11
want to maintain the importance of books on paper. A book on paper with original artwork in it has a much more intimate feeling than a digital reader with a scan of an artwork.

There is an intertwining history of literature and visual art. Over the last century, artists and authors have become much more aware of this relationship. I believe there is a great future ahead in the book arts. As more and more schools are developing programs, there has become a greater demand for handmade books. This history will become greater and more diverse as the coming decades pass. I believe book arts may very well become a large part of this evolving art world we live in.
IV. Description of Artworks

My thesis work consists of four large etchings and three books. I also created other smaller pieces to support my capstone work. The four etchings are eighteen inches across and twenty-four inches tall. They are part of an ongoing series I have entitled soil.

The soil series holds its basis in the work that I explored as an undergraduate. I spent a great deal of time learning various techniques within the intaglio field. The soil series utilizes the techniques of engraving and line etching to create outlines of the figures and imagery. It uses textures developed from soft ground and aquatint work to add dimension and value.

The first piece is titled soil. It shows a human figure that seems to be buried to the middle of the head. The figure is mostly blacked out with only a small portion of his leg remaining the earthy tone of the page. The figure is purposefully made without gender to give it a more universal feeling. The darkness of the figure gives it a very ominous feel. In the earth there is a cross-section of a tree’s roots. The roots reach almost as deep as the figure does.
This piece was the first in a series that explores the relationship people have with their surroundings. This etching represents the depth of our relationship, but the seeming lack of understanding. The darkness represents a lack of enlightenment.

The second piece is entitled soil II. This piece has a great deal of texture happening both in the ground and in the figure. Again, the figure is mostly dark, but this time the figure is lighter throughout. The figure also has a white hand instead of a white leg. The background also has a pipe coming up from it.

This piece shows the destructive nature of our “handiwork.” I put more texture in the person to show that the mess created in the ground also shows through to the people who make it. This piece was designed to be much more hectic and messy than the first.

The third piece is entitled soil III. It features another genderless body, but this time it is in the fetal position with its whole body in profile. The body lacks any sort of texture this time. The background is very dark with violent swirling textures.
In this piece I explored the possible malevolency of the earth. In the planning stages, I thought mostly about “The Old Man and the Sea.” The book explores the struggle of a poor old man versus the apparent apathy or even maliciousness of nature. I thought about the inherent dangers the world places on us. The struggle of man against nature is as old as man itself. I drew the figure as an adult because I did not want it to have the pure innocence of a baby. Instead, I wanted to show the struggle the world gives us regardless of our actions against it. I wanted to show that the lines of good and bad are not as clear as ecologists may suggest.

The final piece exhibited in this series is soil IV. Similar to the first two it returns to the format of a figure facing forward with his head halfway to the ground line. This figure is completely blackened. The background seems to be some sort of desert scene with the bones of a bird buried next to it. The ground has multiple strata of earth created by different textures.
This piece exhibits death. The complete blackness of the figure represents the complete lack of enlightenment or understanding of mankind. The skeleton of the bird next to the figure in a desert represents death. The figure is in a completely sedentary pose in the sedimentary rock. This represents the lack of action over time and the consequences it can lead to. This etching tells of a cautionary situation.

The second half of my thesis exhibition explores book forms. I used several different types of forms that work with the individual content of each book. The subject matter of these three books stays along the same line as the prints described above. For these books, I did both complex bindings and explored the idea of not binding the books at all so they remain a long piece of art to hang on the wall. This brought about some questions. It made me think about the qualities that make a book and fine art similar. It also made me think about a third option, which is a broadside. A broadside is a piece of paper that has both images and words printed on
it, but that is usually used as a poster or advertisement. For the sake of classification, I am unsure where my work falls.

The first work I would like to explore is canopy. Canopy is a piece designed to hang on a wall, but able to be folded into a book. I used the techniques of engraving and chine collé. Engraving is a technique where you use a sharp instrument to cut into the surface of an etching plate. Chine collé is a Chinese technique where the artist glues down paper while printing to create large swatches of color or texture. It is essentially collage done during the printing process.

The piece is about the removal of trees to build buildings. The print has a long string of words that are interrupted by a water tower. The water tower shows the letters, “tville” wrapping around the edge. My goal with this was to show a universal desire for man to build things. I like this piece because it reminds me of the Tower of Babel story in the Bible. The story of the tower is about mankind building this huge tower to show its power, wisdom, virility, etc. Today, even small towns build water towers to fulfill a need, but often to also work as a status symbol. The larger and more ornate your water tower is, the greater your town must be. Mankind is always building things that are bigger and more architecturally impressive. I do not believe God will smite us and scatter us across the world, but I do think there is a definite cost for all of our progress. The real cost of this progress is the resources that are used up.

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8 Genesis 11: 1-9 NIV
The next piece I would like to discuss is, *Going Green*. This book is built in a more traditional manner. It is a modified accordion bound book that spreads out so all of the pages can be seen without having to turn them. It is formatted like a dictionary and explores the different meanings of the word “green” in our current culture. Green has been used to describe color, naiveté, jealousy, money, and ecological soundness. I think there is an interesting juxtaposition of all of these definitions.

In this book, the usage portion of the definitions to tell a story and an evolution of how we approach the word, “green.” To summarize this, there has been an exploitation of this newfound ecological awareness to make money and turn a profit, while seemingly having little regard for the actual state of the environment. I believe there has been a greater amount of attention brought to how people can make money off environmental awareness than how they can actually help the environment.

*Oh, Moon* is the last book that I developed for my thesis. Similar to *canopy*, it is a wall piece. This piece was a new challenge for me because of its large size. This project measures twelve feet long by two feet tall. This piece was printed in black and white. There are two versions of this piece. There is a full length wall piece. There is also a bound copy of this book. I
think the unbound copy of this print is much more successful. It has a greater presence on the wall. It also suffers from a feeling of segmentation and lack of intimacy when in the bound state. This is caused by its large scale. This book is too large to be held in your hand and this affects how the viewer interacts with it.

This piece tells an allusion of a boy who is in love with the moon. He is in love with the moon as children are often in love with things, without reason and without limit. The boy longs to be closer to the moon, which he often refers to as “her.” This story reminds me of all of the way I used to love nature. As a child, I longed to play outside and had no ambition to improve it. The outdoors was as much an integral part of my childhood as my brother and sister. This story has almost a romantic feel to it, which I think is pretty common when we remember how things used to be. Our memories have a way of romanticizing our childhood.
V. Conclusion and Exhibition Statement

My thesis is an exploration of the relationship between stories and images. Whether explored in the means of books or of flat images, I hope to more greatly reveal a sense of narrative and poetry. It is the conclusion of twelve months of intense study on the subject. Through this body of work I hope to unveil a strong link between two of the oldest art forms: literature and fine art.

The vehicle that I have chosen for this exploration is printmaking. I work specifically in the fields of relief and intaglio. These are two mediums that, though relatively new, have been used in the publication of books and artist’s books over the last two millennia to spread a message or idea to the masses. I hope to do the same.

The message that I would like to convey is a message of conservation and awareness. I feel very strongly that the natural resource of land is being used up at an overwhelming rate to satiate the human appetite for progress. I grew up on a farm in central Indiana. Farm land is bought up for housing developments, forests are bulldozed for strip malls, and valleys are being flooded for reservoirs to provide enough water for all of these people. Everything needs to be new and improved. Whether it is the desire to have bigger and taller buildings or the need to keep a roof over people’s heads, the suburbs keep sprawling while cities are being evacuated. This body of work is asking people to be aware of the decisions they make. Newer does not always mean better.
I have been greatly influenced by several artists. William Blake, Pablo Picasso, Vasily Kandinsky, Ed Ruscha and Walter Hamady have been very influential in the development of understanding of the artist’s book. I have looked to Mauricio Lasansky and Nathan Oliviera while furthering my understanding of the human form. Finally, I have been driven by the push and support of my mentors and fellow artists here at Ball State University.
VI. Reference List


