

6-2015

The Hero's Journey

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Recommended Citation

Van Fleet, Alan, "The Hero's Journey" (2015). *Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations*. 246.
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Artist Statement (Long Version)

My artwork is an expression my modern mythology through the juxtaposition of esoteric symbols and my pantheon of beloved action figures. Though myth is founded in partial truths and allegories, it has the unique capability to speak about our relationships to one another and the universe. My artwork conceives of anime, comics, and videos games as part of our contemporary mythology.

Inspired by a fusion of pop culture and spirituality, my ongoing series of assemblages draw on the magical properties attributed to flowers, gemstones and other materials to create shrines, altars, and other objects. Juxtaposing these properties, found in my research of esotericism and mythology, with action figures establishes symbolic connections that act as an interface to the spiritual symbolism explored in each piece.

The collision of masking tape, shoe polish, flowers; gemstones and repurposed objects result in re-contextualizations of characters from popular culture. My practice suggests new possibilities for cultural symbolism reflective of my own unique experiences and values and as an active expression of creative freedom in our experiences of the divine. My assemblages re-examine traditional categorizations in art and culture, such as sacred and profane and high and low, while attempting to demystify the veil that separates the experiential from the transcendent.

Through exploring my early art-making; love of anime, comics and video games; study of the occult and mythology, and how they relate to the theories explored in my graduate studies I will describe how these life experiences have informed the development of my modern mythology.

I was always doing art projects with my maternal grandfather during my childhood.

Referring to them as just 'projects', my grandfather and I would spend hours trying to make the things I would imagine. While my grandfather was not an artist, his experiences in farming and irrigation provided him with a good knowledge of materials and techniques. My projects often involved the cartoons, video games and toys I was engaged with at the time. From hand-cut figures of Super Mario made from crayon drawings on wood to plaster Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Cartoons, comics, video games and toys were facets of my reality. As I got older, art projects became computer or webpage projects but they all shared a similar theme: they involved the cartoons, video games and toys that I felt, and continue to feel, passionate about. My early art making revealed the need to express my worldview through the consumption of anime, manga, video games.

Growing up gay in a small town was also a very influential experience in my life. For years I was relentlessly teased and threatened physically by my peers. Paired with my church's hateful messages on the subject, I felt ostracized and alienated from my community. Through my experience, I came to learn that the models of viewing the world perpetuated by my community, were oppressive in and of themselves. With my newly found realization, I was freed from the taboos instilled in me by my Christian upbringing.

Japanese cultural theorist Hiroki Azuma's Theory of Database Consumption, explains that the desire for constructing alternate values and standards from fiction is evidence of the need to fill the void left by the patriarchal grand narrative for gender and sexuality. The concept of grand narratives was first proposed by Jean-François Lyotard in his 1979 essay, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Grand narratives can be described as the social structures, such as religion or political ideology that inform or construct our values, standards and ideology. Failing to reflect my complex system of values and beliefs, the heteronormative conditions affected by the underlying grand

narratives began to conflict with my emerging identity. As a result, I turned to the inner workings of my own personal world for meaning, validation and development of my modern mythology. Turning to this personal world for sources and inspiration, my work appropriates action figures from various characters from anime, manga and video games that I have a strong emotional response or connection with. Examples of specific manga, anime, video games that appear in my works are Naoko Takeuchi's Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon; Toei Animation's Digimon series, Masashi Kishimoto's Naruto; as well as Square-Enix's Final Fantasy series and Kingdom Hearts, their recent series in collaboration with Disney.

The Theory of Database Consumption states that cartoons, comics, video games and toys are not consumed in and of themselves. The narrative, worldview, characters and popular design elements behind comics, anime and toys are actually being consumed. As a result, pop culture as a whole is also consumed and integrated into a database reflective of the person's worldview. The dual structure of anime, comics and/or toys and the worldview or settings, reflects the structure of the "database model."

Through the computerization of our culture, the database acts as a model to structure our experience of the world in a new way. Lev Manovich, author of the 'The Database', explains that earlier narrative models of viewing the world connects unrelated events with coincidence. The database model organizes the world as collections of images, text and other data. The database model describes a world reduced to two complimentary components, data structures and algorithms. Data structures can be any object in world and functions as information with in the database. The narrative experience of anime, comics, and videos games function as algorithms. Through their experience, narratives from anime, comics and video games are broken down into data and integrated

into the database.

After my first episode of Sailor Moon in 1996, anime had become a facet of my experience. As I watched more, I began to notice references to Greek and Roman mythology which I had enthusiastically studied earlier in my youth. Through repeated exposure to anime, video games and comics, I began to become curious about things like the zodiac, tarot cards and witchcraft. With the help of the Internet and the library, I began an in depth investigation into Neopaganism and Wicca. More than just naive curiosity, my study of Wicca and witchcraft was both reaction and critique of my traditional, Southern Baptist upbringing.

Wicca is a nature-based religion that celebrates the divine in the image of the God and the Goddess. Many practitioners believe that religions and mythologies of the world are an expression of a common divine source of inspiration. Practitioners commune and interact with their deities through the use of ritual magic. Believing that objects in nature are manifestations of divine power, practitioners often employ the use of such items and objects in the design of their rituals. Generally known as magical correspondences, they are the connections between various herbs, stones, planets, metals, colors, elements and deities used to affirm the intent of magic rituals. My continued study of Wicca expanded my research of these correspondences to include deities from a variety of religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Christianity, and other occult subjects such as, Astrology, Tarot, and Kabbala. This rich network of plants, stones, metals, colors, elements, deities and other correspondences are an influential component in the visual and material languages present in my assemblage sculptures.

My choice to appropriate and re-contextualize action figures is inspired by Dadaist philosophies, and the idea of ready-made sculpture popularized by Marcel Duchamp.

While my wide application of material and techniques is influenced Robert Rauschenberg's Combines series and the surrealist influenced, Joseph Cornell's idiosyncratic boxes. Contemporary artist, Linda Vallejo has also been a strong influence on me and my work. While our subject matter and concepts differ, we both are looking to re-contextualize aspects of culture into new cultural symbols that more accurately reflect our own unique experiences and values.

The process of re-contextualizing objects for their New Age and mythological significances creates, what Chulan Kwak calls, a 'material paradox' between the spiritual symbolism of the object and its material nature. Allowing the material to act as an interface to the spiritual symbolism supporting the piece, dematerializes the material and materializes its spiritual properties. This connection between the experiential and the transcendent gives rise to the creation unique art objects that oppose our views of the material world.

Additionally, my assemblage sculpture and installations serve as critiques on the social institutions which act as sole agents validating identity, art and spirituality. Through my creation of modern myths, I am challenging the view that anime, comics and video games contain little or no cultural value. More than relics of some pseudo-religion, my art is a symbol of how anime, comics and video games are engrained in our identities and society.

In the construction of shrines, altars, and various religious oriented forms, I am calling attention to the limited views in which we perceive and practice spirituality. It brings into question the oppressive function of traditional religious institutions and their control over the right to truth. This undermines the function of spirituality and myth as metaphors that aid us in creating meaning from our unique experiences of the world and

society. Using a variety of unconventional materials in my work challenges the traditional categorizations of high and low art. My use of action figures as material for art causes us not only causes us to reevaluate what the proper materials for art making are, but to reevaluate our own opinions about what art is and the forms it assumes.

My early works in painting were the foundation for my current investigations in assemblage and installation. Stylistically reminiscent of work by Takashi Murakami, my paintings were inspired by Carl Fudge's visual language. Specifically his use of Japanese anime as source material in his work. In Fudge's work, I found the means to justify my own desire to use similar source material. This work was technique driven, as I strived to further develop my technique as well as managing imagery and materials.

In 2010, I began the development of my masking tape/shoe polish application. This application involves the placement of strips of masking tape, arranged in a perpendicular fashion, covering the front and sides of the canvas. After the layer of masking tape has been applied, I move on to varnishing it with shoe polish. The application involves rubbing or buffing the shoe polish into the layer of tape. The tape is then stained, providing an aged, gritty texture. My use of the masking and tape and shoe polish application was inspired by Jasper Johns' use of textures, and the unrefined qualities they convey. Symbolically, my aim is to instill humble, subservient and proletariat connotations associated with shoe polish throughout my pieces.

Once the shoe polish has cured, I proceed to projecting the final composite created from my sources of cultural icons and art historical elements on to the canvas. A middle ground layer is then painted directly onto the tape via the projection. Foreground elements are transferred, and are removed by cutting the transferred image from the layer of tape with an X-Acto knife. Finally, the cut layers of tape are removed, revealing the painted layer

beneath. What was once the background now shows through the cut area, bringing it in to the foreground in terms of its arrangement.

Towards the end of 2011, I began to replicate my masking tape and shoe polish technique onto multiple pre-fabricated composite slab interior doors in an attempt to emulate Japanese folding screens or, byōbu. Expanding on the triptych format from my earlier works, adopting the byōbu (Japanese folding screen) format was the most logical approach in the evolution of my work's presentation. The folding action of the screen creates rhythmic patterns of positive and negative spaces that invite the viewer to come closer.

By creating a painting not hung on the wall, I was challenging the conditions in which the art of painting and sculpture is viewed. More importantly, I called attention to the similarities between the painting and sculpture. I continued to make my byōbu through the Fall of 2012 but, made the switch to assemblage shortly after. I felt that the byōbu process had become too methodological. Moving out from confines of painting, and the attitude toward disciplinary singularity, I felt I could more effectively represent the complexities of my modern mythology.

Through exploring my early art-making; love of anime, comics and video games; study of the occult and mythology, and how they relate to the theories above describe how these life experiences have informed the continued to development of my modern mythology. As I continue develop in my art practice, I would like to explore creating larger, altar-like, assemblage pieces using second-hand furniture. I see these pieces as the beginning in the evolution of more elaborate installation projects. I envision transforming spaces in art galleries, alternative venues, such as empty storefront windows, as well as being site-specific. Finally, I want to expand the variety of mythological sources and

incorporate significant western pop-cultural sources into my work. In doing so, I will gain greater understanding and insight into the complexities of the modern myths, which continue to have profound impact in my life.