

ABSTRACT

ORGANIZING DESIRE

by Adam Jacono

April, 2010

Director: Gil Leebrick

SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN

This thesis investigates how American culture internalizes, processes, and acts on data received through mass media.

ORGANIZING DESIRE

A Report of a Creative Thesis

Presented To

The Faculty of the School of Art and Design

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Photography

By

Adam Jacono

April 2010

©Copyright 2010

ADAM JACONO

ORGANIZING DESIRE

By

ADAM JACONO

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: _____
Gil Leebrick

COMMITTEE MEMBER: _____
Jacquelyn Leebrick

COMMITTEE MEMBER: _____
Matthew Egan

COMMITTEE MEMBER: _____
Annie Hogan

DIRECTOR OF THE SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN:

Michael Drought

DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL:

Paul J. Gemperline, PhD

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF PLATES	VII
LIST OF FIGURES	IX
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: ILLUSIONS	2
Big Brother	2
The Big Illusion	4
CHAPTER 2: ADVERTISING	7
Everyone Could Have Success	10
Hit Me Baby One More Time	11
A History of Consumerism	13
Consumption	15
CHAPTER 3: ANTICIPATING THE VIEWER	16
Pirates	17
Plunder Not Pillage	19
CHAPTER 4: MEDIA	26
Seeing Ourselves in Others	26
CONCLUSION	30
REFERENCES	31
ENDNOTES	49

LIST OF PLATES

1. Big Brother	33
2. Everything You Want	33
3. The Big Illusion	34
4. The Big Illusion (detail)	34
5. Home Entertainment	35
6. Nuclear Family (Home Entertainment detail)	35
7. Home Entertainment (detail)	36
8. TV Phone Home	36
9. The Secret	37
10. The Majority (The Secret detail)	38
11. Consumption Rainbow (The Secret detail)	39
12. The Elite (The Secret detail)	39
13. GM/Notorious BIG: Mo' Money Mo' Problems	40
14. Bank of America/Britney Spears: Hit Me Baby One More Time	41
15. AIG/Feist: One Two Three Four	42
16. Leftovers	42
17. Friends	43
18. Friends (detail)	43
19. www.yourfortuneawaitsyou.us	44
20. Culture/Nature/Academia	44
21. Promotional Material	45

22. Organizing Desire	45
23. Organizing Desire Thesis Exhibition	46
24. Organizing Desire Thesis Exhibition	47
25. Organizing Desire Thesis Exhibition	47
26. Organizing Desire Thesis Exhibition	48
27. Organizing Desire Thesis Exhibition	48
28. Organizing Desire Thesis Exhibition	49

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Gurl You So Crazy	4
2. Mass Insulation	5
3. Sidestep Shoeshine Motherfucker	11
4. I Love Your Love	20
5. Strong Armed Robbery	21
6. Mantalk	25
7. Jeremy	26

INTRODUCTION

America's history of desiring objects is manifest in contemporary culture through visual media. In today's American culture, desirable objects are presented to us through advertisements, which generate profit for the upper-class. This economic production is presented in my artwork and research which analyzes the American corporate structures, illusions in advertising, idealized success, and consumerism. By anticipating the desires of American culture I produce artwork that reflects the values of society in both the public realm, and in the gallery. My perception of visual mass media acts as a vehicle for understanding the society in which I participate.

ILLUSIONS

Big Brother

I see visual marketing as I would see a magician—enticing but frustrating. I'm attracted to concepts of magic as I am the structure of an advertisement, but I know there are foundational deceptions inherent within both. I can't figure out how David Copperfield levitates, and thus I become a frustrated cynic. With advertising, I feel the same way. I often yell at the television in frustration of overtly false, seductive, and objectifying commercials such as the *Hello Bombshell* commercial by Victoria's Secret¹. The commercial presents women in their underwear posing to the beat (and film cuts) of a fast-paced song. The female background announcer has an English accent, and keeps saying, "Bombshell" repeatedly, as if engraving a sexy-military sensibility onto the commercial's viewers, as if girls in underwear wasn't enough to sell the product. However, in this day and age, it's imperative that as a society we understand the subversive features of advertisements so that we may better understand where our desire for objects or a particular lifestyle comes from.

Freedom from advertising cannot be obtained without understanding its inherent subversive features. "The culture is in relative decay because you can pacify them, keep them fearful, and they'll never stand up for justice. You can't have a movement for freedom, if everyone's obsessed for lust for pleasure. That's why the younger generation is hungry for more than the lust. But all they're getting every day is orgiastic free-play, obsession with stimulation, titillation, and unconcerned with broader struggles for freedom."²

I believe it has taken too long for society to snap out of its transfixed, immediate stimulated state, and I have started using magic as a metaphor for why society desires objects. I use the most notable contemporary magician, David Copperfield, as a metaphorical puppeteer to speak about the deception and control of mass media on society. My mixed media piece titled *Big Brother* (Plate 1), stretches across an entire 30"x40" panel and combines blue-printed (cyanotype) images and screen printing. Copperfield's face is obscured by the *Everything You Want* image in the background (Plate 2), and a red bandana in the foreground that hides his mouth and nose area, thus obstructing the viewer from recognizing him immediately. The bandana serves as an ironic mask that partially obscures the public from the mass media. The work poses Copperfield as a driving force behind the marketability of desirable objects, and conceptualized as a metaphor for the desires of society.

I've obscured Mr. Copperfield's face in other works also; at times, in small areas of a piece to imply the presence of an omnipresent eye. For example, in *Gurl You So Crazy* (Figure 1), I appropriated a still from the 1960's TV sitcom *I Love Lucy*. In the screen print, Ethel and Lucy are stuffing chocolates in their clothing/mouths. Copperfield looks in from the background as a voyeur to the scene, seemingly checking-up on his working class subordinates from the window in the top right of the image.



Figure 1
Gurl You So Crazy, screen print, 11"x14", 2009

Ethel is pictured with a green light shooting out of her eyes and onto the conveyor belt. This is a reference to the physical strains of repetitive work, and sometimes terrible working conditions for factory workers. The image also references consumption in a very literal sense, and investigates worker relations that I address more directly in the *Everyone Could Have Success* chapter, and through the artwork, *The Secret* (Plate 9).

The Big Illusion

The piece entitled *Mass Insulation* (Figure 2) was exhibited in the Mendenhall student center on ECU campus in August of 2009. The piece consisted of twelve hundred magazine pages that were rolled horizontally and affixed to a 43'x10' wall.



Figure 2

Mass Insulation, nails, men and women magazines, light box, 10'x43', 2009

I had intended for the piece to act as functional insulation for the student center in light of the looming 6% budget cuts to the University during the 2009 US economy. However, the piece functioned as an aesthetic interest rather than functional insulation for the center's population. In the gallery, I was anticipating a diverse viewer with limited art knowledge that would be familiar with glossy magazines. Some viewers were awestruck in the amount of magazine pages, and others appreciated shapes that from afar looked like clouds or strange figures. However, upon closer inspection, the strange shapes revealed themselves as fragmented magazine pages, rolled-up, and only showing a portion of the glossy, advertisement-laden page. The rolled pages fragmented the ads, and thus made them nearly inaccessible for product placement.

Considering the Mendenhall installation and feedback received, the piece now exist in the form of a circular target, flowing out like a flower in concentric circles with horizontally rolled magazine pages. Two thirds of the piece exists on the wall, and one third exists on the floor. The target references the pull of advertisements and is positioned on the wall as alert viewers to the intense lure of advertising media; that if not careful they could fall. Entitled *The Big Illusion* (Plate 3, Plate 4), the piece references the viewer's relationship to printed media advertising in glossy magazines. The piece also references the documentary, *The True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams' Appalachia*³ (as did *Mass Insulation*, Figure 2). Mr. Adams is a photographer who grew up in the mountains of western Kentucky and has returned to document the remote families who live off the grid. One Appalachian family that Adams photographs uses newspaper and magazine pages as wallpaper to keep their home insulated; an idea that is both functional (in the sense of insulation), and metaphorical. In a sense, Adams' rural subjects are bringing culture inside the home through a plastering of newspapers and magazines on the walls, whereas in contemporary society, we bring culture inside the home through television, internet and other signs of culture such as artwork for the walls.

The plastered newspapers on the walls of Adam's subjects' houses as a form of cultural wallpaper inspired a piece titled *Home Entertainment* (Plate 5). For this piece, I collaged digital negatives together atop 24"x36" sheets of cyanotype-coated Cranes Kid Finish paper. The imagery consisted of stills from *I Love Lucy* episodes, tall skyscrapers, airplanes, quotes from pyramid scam websites, and famous photographs from Edward Burtynsky, Jacob Riis, and Michael Wolf. The piece served as a reference

to the functional uses of paper as insulation, and as a metaphor for the visual media society brings inside the home.

ADVERTISING

Advertising denotatively informs people about products through visual media seen virtually everywhere on the planet. Companies go to great lengths to publicize their product or brand—on the beach, on car-wraps, in the sky, through websites—television-advertising is literally everywhere. The psychology behind this concept is that there is always something illustrious, seductive, interesting, colorful, or attractive in an advertisement that sparks our attention, if only for a millisecond. Advertisements are positioned to entice the sale of a product, and when a viewer associates that product with something positive, like a happy, smiling couple, then it's a better sell. We innately cast ourselves in the smiling, happy ad and relate positive emotions to the company or product.

What are the implications of mass media exposing the world to us? In some cases, such as The Army Experience Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, youngsters are given free access to state of the art video games, which typecast them in a virtual war through rifles, hummers, and helicopters⁴. Exposure to high-intensity situations conditions participants for future real-life battles, if they choose to enlist. Another example that shows the implications of mass media is that of a remote tribe in Alaska, which was exposed to television in the 1980's and soon after, lost all ties to their ancient culture⁵. Some feel that the media gives way to cultural imperialism—where one culture becomes dominant by another—where, in the Alaska case this would be true. Others see the media as a source for creating a barren monoculture, where everyone is exposed to the same things. In either case, media exposes us to much more than just entertainment.

In my opinion, one of the largest implications of mass media is mass advertising. One problem with advertising today is that there is just too much of it. The average American is exposed to over 3000 advertisements every day⁶. Advertisements encroach upon our public space in schools, on public transportation, in buildings, and even on beaches. Advertising comes in all shapes and sizes; billboards, TV, radio, newspaper, and magazines, which are all fashioned to grab your attention. But who is 'you'? You are not just an anonymous figure in the marketplace, but a statistic generated from demographic studies: gender, income, age, race, and region. Algorithms are created to process the massive amount of data coming in from millions of people worldwide when they swipe a credit card. These card companies sell consumer profiles to advertising agencies who study, process, and tip-off other companies to make products that better suit individual needs. The irony is that these needs are not individual because of an advertising blanket, which covers so many genders, incomes, ages, races and regions. I'd say our perceived individual needs are more widespread than we actually think, and for good reason; we watch the same television programs which air the same commercials, listen to the same radio stations that broadcast the same commercials, read the same newspapers that print the same advertisements, etc. Before the term 'globalization' was popularized, Debord, author of *Society of the Spectacle*, was arguing about issues such as class alienation, cultural homogenization, and the mass media. Debord says that, "All that was once directly lived has become mere representation," he is referring to the central importance of the image in contemporary society⁷. Images, Debord says, have supplanted genuine human interaction.

TV Phone Home (Plate 8) visualizes the lure of television media. Green and yellow light rays project from the television and the digital projector in a sculptural object built to be photographed. Photographically, the piece references performance, and made-to-be-photographed sculptures that Thomas Demand and Sandy Skoglund present with their images. However, *TV Phone Home* exists as a metaphor for the barrage of advertising media through image and sound present in contemporary television. In reference to the extreme marketing persuasion exhibited in Victoria's Secret *Bombshell* commercial (see chapter on Big Brother), I filmed myself striking a pose with perfectly white shoes, and dancing for the camera. The video, titled *Sidestep Shoeshine Motherfucker* (Figure 3) was played through the television in the *TV Phone Home* image. In addition to the consumerist, and mass marketing/media references, the piece exists for me as a visual notation of ambiguous cynicism to advertising; one that we are (visibly in the image) connected to via coaxial wires and power cords.



Figure 3
Sidestep Shoeshine Motherfucker, single channel video, 1 minute loop, 2009

I must admit some cynicism to advertisements because I've been manipulated more than once by the promise of a product. Jean Kilborune denotes this as a normal activity, "Cynicism learned from years of being exposed to marketing hype and products that never deliver the promised goods often carries over to other aspects of life."⁸ If cynicism is a negative learned behavior, then a critical point of view should be a positive coping mechanism. I use the semiotics in advertisements to understand the desires society encounters on a daily basis.

Everyone Could Have Success

Success is a double-edged blade, and some people can never have enough of it. We've seen numerous examples of this problem, including AIG executives partying it up

while shareholders were losing big on Wall Street, and brokers who were receiving bonuses during the midst of the financial collapse of 2009. There is certainly a disconnect between with the upper class and working class in terms of remuneration. The idea that workers earn wages and executives earn profit still survives in our economy, though now we export labor to third world countries so “Joe the plumber” can have his .99 cent t-shirt at Wal-Mart.

The working class produces marketable products, which are consumed by an entire economic spectrum of people, whereas the upper class administers its workers and reaps in profit. I represented a model of how the working class connects to the upper class through *The Secret* (Plate 9). On the left of a piece entitled *The Majority* (Plate 10), I’ve blueprinted a crowd of people in a 60” tall frame that is exhibited with it’s bottom touching the floor to reference the foundational level of the working class majority. The frame to support the *Consumption Rainbow* (Plate 11) section of the piece, which spans to *The Elite* (Plate 12), a blueprinted, negative image of an upper-class mansion. The mansion is secured to the wall and supports the other side of *Consumption Rainbow*. As a metaphor for the internal structure of corporations, the working class piece as a foundation to success. This section of the piece comes into contact with the ground to reference reality, whereas the upper-class image of the mansion is up in the air and lofty. Bridging the gap between two classes exists a rainbow of consumable products; the only relationship available between the two sectors.

Hit Me Baby One More Time

The rich get richer because the more society has, the more society wants. Dan Ariely, a Behavioral Economics professor at Duke University, proposed a theory about relativity that explains why comparing our lives to those who have more than us makes us unhappy, even if you're earning one hundred thousand a year⁹. Ariely introduces his findings with a Commandment, "Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house nor field, or male or female slave, or donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor." He proposes that we must learn to live within our means, to censure any relative judgments of our peers, and if it helps, find a circle of friends who make less money than you. "I don't want to live the life of a Boxster," says James Hong, cofounder of Hotornot.com, "because when you have a (Porsche) Boxster you wish you had a (Porsche) 911, and you know what people who have 911s wish they had? They wish they had a Ferrari."¹⁰

This quote partially explains my fascination with the controversy surrounding top-level executives and their obscene expenditures. In a project that deals directly with the American financial crisis of 2008, I paired images of large corporations—AIG, Bank of America, General Motors—with songs written about wanting more. The music, Britney Spears' "Hit Me Baby One More Time," Notorious BIG's "Mo Money Mo Problems," and Feist's "1234," were taken out of their original contexts and screen printed atop blueprints of corporations (Plates 13, 14, 15). The text from each song was printed with an overprint varnish water-based ink that remains invisibly shiny, but transparent. The viewer must approach the piece at the right angle to read the words, thus becoming physically closer to the corporations themselves.

A History of Consumerism

The contemporary rendering of consumerism did not happen overnight. Our version of a mall was noted in 1851 when the husband of Queen Victoria built a grand exhibition hall to house the best goods and industrial advances that leading countries of the world had to offer: German porcelain, rubber from India, Egyptian Carpets, Russian furs, and Roman mosaics¹¹. The "Crystal Palace exhibition" allowed customers to view objects that they didn't previously know they craved.

During the industrial age advertisements were formulated for the working class to muse over and have something entertaining to see. The poor working conditions, long hours and mindless tasks had workers ready to enjoy the promise of leisure and satisfaction which advertising employed. "The solution was to tie (media) to images of the 'good life': youth, being up-to-date, personal liberation, and sexuality."¹² Markets were etched out of the working class and advertising enticed viewers with images, sounds, and words that stimulated ones emotions; the advertisements meant to attract, shock, excite, and make you laugh. As "adman" Jerry Goodis says, "Advertising doesn't always mirror how people are acting, but how they're dreaming... In a sense, what we're doing is wrapping up your emotions and selling them back to you."¹³

During the Great Depression, people held on to possessions and learned to spend within their means, or not at all. This lack of spending on excessive items affected industry, which then created widespread unemployment. It took a new economic outlook to get America back on its feet. In 1932 Bernard London proposed a solution on how to deal with the downtrodden economy with his essay, *Ending the Depression Through Planned Obsolescence*.¹⁴ The only way to end the Depression was to propose a government agency that would determine the life span of each manufactured object,

whether it is a building, a ship, a comb, or a shoe. London stated, "People everywhere are today disobeying the law of obsolescence. They are using their old cars, their old tires, their old radios and their old clothing much longer than statisticians had expected on the basis of earlier experience."

To further London's thoughts, in 1954 an industrial designer named Brooks Stevens insisted on, "Instilling in the buyer the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary."¹⁵ Stevens ideology was recognized by government as well, and as President Eisenhower's council of Economic Advisors Chairman noted, "The American economy's ultimate purpose is to produce more consumer goods."

I believe society can no longer sustain a throwaway culture. The effects consumerism has had on individual identity, society, and ecosystem are increasingly apparent (for more on ecological effects of a throwaway culture see *End of Nature*, by Bill McKibben). In the United States we have access to more commodities than ever before, though sources say our national happiness is actually declining¹⁶. Our national happiness peaked sometime in the 1950s, around the same time as Stevens' speech that had consumers literally revving their engines. I believe that the over-simplified perfection of products, people, and landscapes visible in advertisements is responsible for leaving consumers empty. Advertising draws itself from every-day life, however, it picks and chooses what part of life it shows; it does not merely reflect reality. Erving Goffman elaborates on this idea with his writing on "hyper-realization," where people are "stuck with a considerable amount of dull footage" in their every-day lives and cannot edit their behavior enough to provide a purely ritualized social ideal¹⁷. Enter the

advertisement. Goffman proposes speaking of a "hyper-ritualization" of advertising technique. "An advertising photo is a ritualization of social ideals, from which all the processes and meanings in which the ideal is not present have been omitted—edited out of what has been made visible, so to speak."

Consumption

In reference to the consumptive nature of Americans, I set out to literally photograph what people are consuming through their bodies. I was interested in the amount of food consumed by students at East Carolina University's cafeteria and set out to photograph their food choices in a project entitled *Leftovers* (Plate 16). I noticed that of all the choices of food, hamburgers and French fries had a special place on everyone's plate. The irony of course is that eastern North Carolina has a large population of overweight people brought on, in my opinion, by sweet tea, assorted fried foods (i.e.. Bojangles), and laziness. Through my photographic investigation, I learned that the week prior to my visits to the cafeteria, ECU had done away with food trays in hopes of conserving wash-water. This lack of food trays only frustrated the cafeteria customers because they were required to make multiple trips for additional food. In my opinion, this was ECU's way of instituting an exercise regime for its patrons. The piece focuses on the quality and quantity of food people are consuming on a daily basis.

ANTICIPATING THE VIEWER

Pirates

Whenever I consider the production of an artwork, I find it important to first anticipate my audience. For a project based on pirates, I researched the student culture (approx. 23,164 students, 2005¹⁸) at East Carolina University (ECU) to see how they relate to the infamous eastern North Carolinian pirate named Blackbeard, since 'The Pirates' is the name of their successful football team. For this project, I was originally interested in the historical connotations of the pirate, and how society's (in this case, ECU's society) misunderstanding of contemporary pirates leads to violence and destruction.

ECU is a state-funded school in Greenville, North Carolina that accepts about 82 percent of its students from in-state¹⁹. The other 18 percent are directed from all over the country because of comparably inexpensive out-of-state tuition²⁰. The school is about two hours from the Atlantic Ocean, and even closer to the Pamlico Sound, a large body of water, which connects to many coastal communities, such as the Outer Banks, Ocracoke, and Bath. Legend has it that notorious pirates once patrolled and harbored their ships around the North Carolina coast. Blackbeard was the most notable pirate in the area, and owned land in both Bath and Ocracoke Island²¹. His real name, Edward Teach, relates to ECU in that the school is historically understood as a teaching college. Before 1934, the ECU football, baseball, and basketball teams were called "The Teachers," but after 1934 the school adopted 'The Pirates' as a new name. The school's mascot, Pee Dee the pirate, was believed to be named after the Pee Dee River that flows through North and South Carolina, where pirates were known to dock²². A good

deal of the student body is Pirates fans, but games also bring in alumni, and the surrounding Greenville community. ECU has been climbing the ranks of college football in the past few years due to a distinct and expensive coaching staff (last year the head coach grossed over \$200,000²³). As a result of this new coaching staff, the team placed first in their conference for the past two years. Winning Bowls is not only good for student moral, but it also markets ECU on a national map (via television, internet, and newspapers) of thousands of prospective students who follow college games. On game day, Pirates fans are as widespread as the bars and nightclubs in downtown Greenville. However, more than one fatality has occurred within the past year, so downtown has been barricaded off nightly to protect bar/club goers from assaults, robberies, and drive-by shootings²⁴. To inform my artwork, I contextualize the contemporary pillaging of downtown Greenville, in addition to the robberies, thefts, and larceny, which occur on campus regularly²⁵, with the historical connotations of pirates to anticipate a sometimes violent audience.

Plunder Not Pillage

Violence has always been associated with pirates, where pillage and plunder is the ongoing *raison d'être*. In the South, especially in eastern North Carolina, there are numerous folktales about pirates inhabiting the waterways. In my opinion, Blackbeard is personified through our school mascot, Pee Dee the Pirate. The body of artwork I've produced around pirates not only relates to an ECU football culture, but a larger American university culture as well. Simply put, the American culture as we know it exists through the personification and objectification of people found in mass media.

When I think of the word 'pirate' in contemporary society, all I see is an image of Johnny Depp.

For one project I appropriated Johnny Depp's image from *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and overlaid it with text that says, "I Love Your Love" (Figure 4) The image connects with its audience as a mainstream symbol of Johnny Depp as a lovable sex symbol.



Figure 4
I Love Your Love, archival inkjet print, 5"x7", 2010

The combination of the text and image implies that pirates love our love, and they are pleased when we pillage and plunder. I believe popular culture has forgotten the implications of historical pirates because mass media re-contextualizes Depp as a

good-looking, pop icon. In continuation of the project, I printed *I Love Your Love* postcards and placed them around populated areas like the Society of Photographic Educators (SPE) National Conference in Philadelphia (2010), and around the ECU School of Art and Design (SOAD). People would take the cards, presumably because of Depp's physical attributes, but also the card itself was nicely printed, and easily fit within a 5"x7" frame. However, upon viewers' inspection of the cards' reverse side, which reads: "You Stole, Adam Jacono, 2010," participants would put the card back with feelings of guilt or doing something wrong. However, at every site that I dropped a postcard, I would return to find it gone. The project didn't exist without public interaction, and in doing so created looting pirates among its participants. I also attached the *I Love Your Love* image to a yard sign, which was then placed at the scene of a crime, specifically one on ECU campus. I photographed myself next to the yard sign with a police report covering my face, which obscures my identity. The photograph (Figure 5) documents the site and I perform a memorial to the initial violence that occurred there.



Figure 5
Strong Armed Robbery, inkjet print, yard sign, performance, 2010

With the *I Love Your Love* projects, I anticipate violence and make work that necessitates viewer participation for it to exist. Participation from others is essential to this particular work. However, Depp's image as a pirate is essential; if it weren't for his recognizable face, the piece wouldn't speak to a pop-culture audience, which is a high priority. The image of Depp is like many others used in mass media marketing. His look is attractive, sexy, pleasing, and we lust for him as we do other celebrities, people, objects, and lifestyles in our society. Culture is saturated with images of people that are glossy, highly polished, and perfect. Society is seduced and lured by our own positive emotional responses to these images which barrage us daily on billboards, magazines,

and TV. In return, we seek out those consumables which we hope will do the same. The mass media has organized our desires in return through visual imagery that we love to love.

MEDIA

Seeing Ourselves In Others

Society not only sees Johnny Depp as himself, but as everyman. Both women and men relate to his roles in movie culture and place themselves inside his persona, finding something positive in Depp's physical, emotional, and personal features. This phenomenon made the *I Love Your Love* postcards so enticing to steal because everyone wants to be Johnny, or at least have a piece of him. The idea of projecting the self, or wanting to be someone else is not a new idea. Mass media specializes in targeting men, women, and children through pointed advertisements. Targets exists through cyber space in computer games like "Second Life", in main stream movies like "Avatar", and in artistic practice through Antoinette LaFarge's *World of World* project. LaFarge challenges the idea that avatars live in cyber space, sending her real life avatar out to perform tasks such as running to the grocery, or performing artist lectures²⁶. In a sense we all have aviators, or identities that are accessible through visual media found in television, magazines, and internet.

Visual advertising targets viewers in many forms, from logos on cars to billboards. Each advertisement enables a projection of oneself into that object or person, creating a physical desire for what is being advertised. Cigarette advertisements target society with cool looks of models puffing smoke, and enjoying the company of friends, but somehow the models don't look like they've ever touched a cigarette in their life. Retail advertisements from American Apparel, Urban Outfitters, and of course, Ralph Lauren, target customers through seduction of the models and the atmosphere of the scene. I've recently acquired two Ralph Lauren posters that have a

presence of seductive models and the atmosphere of a desirable lifestyle. One poster pictures three Ralph Lauren models atop a safari Jeep in what looks to be the African plains (*Friends*, Plate 17, and 18). The poster was once used in a department store (i.e. JCPenney) to help sell clothing similar to the sweaters the three men are posed wearing. In the department store, the image functions to sell products available in the store. Yet the appropriated poster will function for me as a lure for subversion where the context is changed. I have screen printed on the reverse side of the piece the *Everything You Want* image (Plate 2). The image is screen printed backwards so the text and image can be read through the front side of the poster with the assistance of light-box-style back lighting. The rough, screen printed image contains four desirables in life, including a family, a nice car, champagne popping (celebratory moments), and money. The image directs the viewer to a website (Plate 19) I've designed that floods the viewer with audio clips from pyramid-scam websites, flashing images, and an RSS news feed from CNN.com. The website drowns its visitors in a hypnotic pulse of media pressure, while keeping viewers current with news from around the world. The site is completely overwhelming, but I use it to speak about the nonsense and hypocrisy seen in today's mainstream television. For example, a healthy cereal commercial follows a commercial for Hardee's *Thickburger*.

With the help of photography modeling lights, the front of the poster itself becomes the center of an ongoing performance; people are encouraged and encouraged to have their photos taken in front of the handsome Ralph Lauren men. As a secondary effect they recognize the subversive screen print image while being seduced. A second poster I re-appropriated from a department store shows another

three handsome gentleman, but this time they're wearing Christmas sweaters, and lounge against a faux wooden post fence. I have cast the men into a silent video entitled *Mantalk* (Figure 6), and have affixed small flaps to the mouths of the men, pulling the strings to make it appear as though they are speaking to each other.



Figure 6
Mantalk, single channel video, 1 minute loop, 2009

The piece is designed for viewers of the video to author and project their own dialog into the moving mouths, although I can only see them as saying “Bob”. Using the same poster in a photography shoot, I posed a notoriously dusty ceramics colleague in front of the same poster for an ironic photograph that referenced two distant worlds (Figure 7).



Figure 7
Jeremy, archival inkjet print, 2009

Through both Ralph Lauren posters, I'm experimenting with other ways to re-contextualize the figures to produce another meaning. Separating myself from the models in this poster allows for an alternative method of dealing with mass media images that afflict society. A society that understands the symbols inherent within advertising creates an informed viewer, capable of dealing with the pressures and anxieties of mass visual media.

Market research has shown that image/projection psychology has been proven to work in all areas of advertising, however instead of making people happy, it does the opposite²⁷. "I buy all the right things: the macho man's cigarettes, the sports star

sneakers, the successful man's clothes, the after shave that attracts beautiful women... but I don't see any of this doing me any good..."²⁸. Advertising appeals to societies emotions and desires, but not to reason. Advertising focuses on aesthetics, with the appeal of something gained when a product is placed in a certain setting. In my opinion, people tend to anthropomorphize objects and view possessions as extensions of themselves. The General Motors (GM) Hummer, for example is always contextualized as a capable off-road vehicle with the ability to scale a steep vertical incline; a manly, outdoors car. However, when Joe Smith purchases a fifty thousand dollar Hummer, he's extremely unlikely to even take it down a dirt path. Research shows that most SUVs never leave the pavement²⁹. Advertisements seduce viewers through subverting objects and creating a believable fantasy or (sometimes false, as with the Hummer) value that is also acquired along with the object advertised. I believe our identity is a construct, and linked heavily to the things we own, or see ourselves buying. A dependence on the desired objects makes us feel as if we're not good enough on our own and thus depend on objects to define us. As Tyler Durden from *The Fight Club* (1999) says, "The things you own end up owning you," In turn, objects become symbols of our identity that establish gender, income, age, race, and region—the same key terms marketing professionals use to define consumers.

Historically, Americans interested in making money during the gold rush era saw themselves in the Western landscape, just as society sees itself in advertisements today. Through the 19th century paintings by Thomas Cole, John Gast, and Albert Bierstadt, American colonists were inspired to project their values, ideals, and future onto the land as if it were for the taking. Unlike products today that can be purchased for

a nominal price, settlers on seemingly free land displaced Native Americans away through the depletion of Buffalo, and exhausting natural resources. American paintings from 19th century represented these events and transcendental thought by always depicting the sun setting (in the West), in paintings by the Hudson River School and metaphorically through Henry Thoreau's poetry. These landscapes exhibited a political scope that encouraged viewers to desire the expansive, untapped, and beautiful land, as if it were free for the taking. In contemporary society we no longer look upon the land as the early settlers once did because the landscape has been used and abused from former ideologies on how to approach nature. Contemporary photographers like Chris Jordan and Edward Burtynsky, make artwork about how humanity has impacted the physical world. In particular, Burtynsky's *Manufactured Landscape* project documents the effects of industry with beautiful and sometimes horrific images. Both Jordan and Burtynsky seek to motivate people through photography to change their understanding of nature, and to treat the earth with sustainable respect. As Frederick Sommer states, "Some speak of a return to nature, I wonder where they could have been?"³⁰

In an image titled *Culture/Nature/Academia* (Plate 20), I use Andrew Wyeth's painting, *Christina's World* to re-contextualize the way society looks at universal systems such as Academia. With the piece, Christina is pictured moving out of culture and into a mote of nature which surrounds a University structure. She sits atop a pile of advertising rubble as if pushing culture aside, and in route to an institution. In my opinion, Academia is autonomous and universal; specifically at ECU, where I've learned the rules of self governance through student organizations such as Graduate Arts Forum, Photography Guild, and Visual Arts Forum.

Seeing ourselves reflected in objects, models, or in the landscape, is an integral part of living in a capitalist society. I believe my position as an image-maker is to make art that presents alternative methods of interpreting the images we are presented with through advertising. By researching and making art about the effects of mass media, I'm able to diffuse and understand the semiotics of advertising. In my opinion, the word aesthetics is not only vocabulary used to speak about art, but also is a foundational ingredient in advertising media. Viewers are seduced by craft, color, composition, and content because these same terms are used to educate art students. As an art teacher, I must place value in the sum of all five C's (craft, composition, content, context, concept), and graduate students in their completion of them. I help students decode the immediate lure of advertising through discussions supported by the five C's. Again, the more society can understand the signs and symbols presented in visual advertising, the more society is able to make informed decisions about the effects mass media has on our psyche.

Conclusion

At one point, I believed there were unseen forces in advertising that persuaded society, but this was a cynical and ineffective way of dealing with visual media. Cynical viewpoints only limit American society's ability to comprehend mass media, and I believe that society must recognize the symbols of advertising in order to understand the marketing of desire. I believe as culture we must realize that advertising is not transparent, and that our desires are driven by ourselves.

REFERENCES

- Ariely, Dan (2008). *Predictably Irrational: The hidden forces that shape our decisions*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Baichwal, Jennifer. (Director). (2002). *The True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams'* [Motion picture]. USA: New Video Group.
- Brandt, Brandt. (1976). *The Land: Twentieth century landscape photographs*. Jackson, TN: Da Capo Press.
- Debord, Guy. (1967). *The Society of the Spectacle*. London: Rebel Press.
- Ferreira, E.C., Ferreira, J.C. (1997). *Making Sense of the Media: A handbook of popular education techniques*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.
- Kilbourne, Jean. (1999). *Can't Buy Me Love: How Advertising Changes The Way We Think and Feel*. New York, NY: Touchstone.
- King, Heather. (2009, July 4). *Services Held For Victims; Reward Offered In Case*. Retrieved from <http://www.witn.com/home/headlines/49501532.html>
- Klaffke, Pamela. (2003). *Spree: A cultural history of shopping*. Vancouver, BV: Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Kline, S., Jhally, S., & Botterill, J. (1997). *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, products and images of well-being*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kyrios, M., Frost, R. O., & Steketee, G.. (April 2004). Cognitions in Compulsive Buying and Acquisition. *Cognitive therapy and research*, 28(2)
- LaFarge, Antoinette. (2009) World of World. Retrieved from <http://www.forger.com/projects.html>
- London, Bernard. (1932). *Ending the Depression Through Planned Obsolescence*.
- McKibben, Bill. (2007). *Deep Economy*. New York, NY: Times Books.
- Michael Schudson, Michael. (1984). *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion*.
- Pratt, Kristin. (September 07, 2005). System issues warm welcome. *The Daily Tar Heel*. Retrieved from <https://www.ecu.edu/cs-admin/news/inthenews/archives/2005/09/090705warmwelcom.cfm>
- Ryan, J., Wentworth, W.M. (1999). *Media and society: The production of culture in the mass media*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Smiley, Travis. (2010, March 20). *We Count! The Black Agenda is the American Agenda*, [Television broadcast and Online video]. Greenville, NC: C-SPAN. Retrieved from <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/292635-7>



Plate 1
Big Brother, screen print on blueprint, 30"x40", 2009



Plate 2
Everything You Want, screen print, 5"x7", 2009



Plate 3
The Big Illusion, magazines, nails, metallic insulation foam, 10'x10', 2010



Plate 4
The Big Illusion (detail)



Plate 5

Home Entertainment, toned blueprints, 20"x33" gelatin silver print with varnish, dimensions variable, 2010



Plate 6

Home Entertainment (detail), gelatin silver print with varnish and frame, 20"x33", 2010



Plate 7
Home Entertainment (detail)



Plate 8
TV Phone Home, archival inkjet print, 20"x24", 2009



Plate 9

The Secret, screen print on blueprint, archival inkjet print, 90"x56", 2010



Plate 10

The Majority (The Secret detail), blueprint, 58"x20", 2010



Plate 11
Consumption Rainbow (The Secret detail), die cut inkjet print, 30"x53", 2010



Plate 12
The Elite, blueprint (The Secret detail), 15"x20", 2010



Plate 13

GM/Notorious BIG: Mo' Money Mo' Problems, screen print on brown print, 18"x12",
2008



Plate 14
Bank of America/Britney Spears: Hit Me Baby One More Time, screen print on toned
blueprint, 18"x12", 2008



Plate 15

AIG/Feist: One Two Three Four, screen print on toned blueprint, 24"x14", 2008



Plate 16

Leftovers, archival inkjet print, 33"x46", 2008



Plate 17
Friends, screen print on Ralph Lauren poster, 5'x17', 2009



Plate 18
Friends (detail image)



Plate 19
www.YourFortuneAwaitsYou.us, website, 2010



Plate 20
 Culture/Nature/Academia, archival inkjet print, 28"x33", 2008



Plate 21
Promotional Material, archival inkjet print, light box, 34"x48", 2010



Plate 22
Organizing Desire, 16 30"x43" found Blockbuster posters, dimensions variable, 2010



Plate 23
Organizing Desire Thesis Exhibition, Emerge Gallery, Greenville, NC, April, 2010



Plate 24
Organizing Desire Thesis Exhibition, Emerge Gallery, Greenville, NC, April, 2010



Plate 25
Organizing Desire Thesis Exhibition, Emerge Gallery, Greenville, NC, April, 2010



Plate 26
Organizing Desire Thesis Exhibition, Emerge Gallery, Greenville, NC, April, 2010



Plate 27
Organizing Desire Thesis Exhibition, Emerge Gallery, Greenville, NC, April, 2010



Plate 28
Organizing Desire Thesis Exhibition, Emerge Gallery, Greenville, NC, April, 2010

ENDNOTES

¹ (November, 2009). Retrieved from <http://vsholic.com/news/2009/11/04/hello-bombshell-commercial/>

² Smiley, Travis. (Producer). (2010, March 20). *We Count! The Black Agenda is the American Agenda*, [Television broadcast and Online video]. Greenville, NC: C-SPAN. Retrieved from <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/292635-7>

³ Baichwal, Jennifer. (Director). (2002). *The True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams'* [Motion picture]. USA: New Video Group.

⁴ (2009, September 29). *Digital Nation, The Army Experience Center*. Video retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/digitalnation/waging-war/a-new-generation/the-army-experience-center.html>

⁵ "In 1980 the Gwich'in tribe of Alaska got television, and therefore massive advertising, for the first time. Satellite dishes, video games, and VCRs were not far behind. Before this, the Gwich'in lived much the way their ancestors had for a thousand generations. Within ten years, the young members of the tribe were so drawn by television they no longer had time to learn ancient hunting methods, their parents' language, or their oral history. Legends told around campfires could not compete with *Beverly Hills 90210*. Beaded moccasins gave way to Nike sneakers, sled dogs to gas-powered skimobiles, and "tundra tea" to Folger's instant coffee." Kilbourne, pp. 56

⁶ (n.d.). *Advertising: It's Everywhere*. Retrieved from http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/marketing/advertising_everywhere.cfm

⁷ Debord, Guy. (1967). *The Society of the Spectacle*. London: Rebel Press

⁸ Kilbourne, pp. 66

⁹ "In another news story, a physician explained that he graduated from Harvard with the dream of someday receiving a Nobel Prize for cancer research. This was his goal. This was his dream. But a few years later, he realized that several of his colleagues were making more as medical investment advisers at Wall Street firms than he was making in medicine. He had previously been happy with his income, but hearing of his friends' yachts and vacation homes, he suddenly felt very poor. So he took another route with his career—the route of Wall Street. By the time he arrived at his class reunion, he was making 10 times what most of his peers were making in medicine." Ariely, pp. 18

¹⁰ Ariely, pp. 21

¹¹ Klaffke, pp. 26-27

¹² Ryan, and Wentworth, pp. 205

- ¹³ Kline, Jhally, and Botterill, pp. 200
- ¹⁴ London, Bernard. (1932). *Ending the Depression Through Planned Obsolescence*.
- ¹⁵ Adamson, Glenn. (2003). *Industrial Strength Design: How Brooks Stevens Shaped Your World*. MIT Press
- ¹⁶ McKibben, pp. 35-36
- ¹⁷ Schudson, pp. 214
- ¹⁸ (2003-2010). East Carolina University in Greenville, NC. Retrieved from http://education-portal.com/directory/school/East_Carolina_University.html
- ¹⁹ East Carolina will have to pay a \$260,000 penalty for admitting too many out-of-state freshmen. According to a January report to the UNC Board of Governors, nonresident residents made up 18.7 percent of this year's freshmen class, or 738 out-of-state residents compared to the 3,218 in-state freshmen. That's 26 too many. The fine was imposed because this was the second year in a row that ECU has exceeded the 18 percent threshold imposed on all UNC campuses. The money will be transferred to a state financial aid program. The top three states sending students to ECU are Virginia, Massachusetts and New Jersey. (Feb 17, 2010). *Too Many Northern Accents*. Retrieved from <http://www.ecu.edu/cs-admin/mktg/east/Spring-2010-ECU-Report.cfm>
- ²⁰ Pratt, Kristin, (September 07, 2005). System issues warm welcome. The Daily Tar Heel. Retrieved from <https://www.ecu.edu/cs-admin/news/inthenews/archives/2005/09/090705warmwelcom.cfm>
- ²¹ Sbacchi Bairstow, Ingrid. (June 10, 2006). Pirates and Pelicans. The Free Lance-Star. Retrieved from <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1298&dat=20060610&id=2jEzAAAAIBAJ&sjid=0ggGAAAAIBAJ&pg=6618,3070195>
- ²² (n.d.). *Mascot*. Retrieved from <http://www.ecupirates.com/trads/ecu-trads-mascot.html>
- ²³ 2009-2010 EPA Personnel Salary Roster, East Carolina University. [Data file]. Retrieved from https://onestop.ecu.edu/onestop/bd119/ECU_EPA_Employee_List%202_2_10.pdf
- ²⁴ King, Heather. (2009, July 4). *Services Held For Victims; Reward Offered In Case*. Retrieved from <http://www.witn.com/home/headlines/49501532.html>
- ²⁵ ECU Police Department Crime Statistics, Main Campus Crime Statistics. Retrieved from <http://www.ecu.edu/studentlife/police/statistics.cfm>
- ²⁶ LaFarge, Antoinette. (2009) World of World. Retrieved from <http://www.forger.com/projects.html>
- ²⁷ Kyrios, Frost, and Steketee, pp. 242
- ²⁸ Ferreira, and Ferreira, pp. 56

²⁹ Ryan, and Wentworth, pp. 203

³⁰ Brandt, pp. 13.