

# REAWAKENING

by

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Artists continually, create art celebrating Western Society and Civilization as the epitome of human culture. Art is created that memorializes our environment, landscape and culture in ways that are inconsistent with the truth and evidence of our history. As an artist and creator of culture, I am working to create and promulgate new ideas and practices. I am aware that our social practices are partially formed by the imagery of the visual culture that surrounds us, and as an artist, I work to create a visual language that strives at questioning our understanding of community (the people and the environment that surrounds us), love (the love of oneself and our neighbor), nature (the interconnectedness of all things) and individuality (our understanding of self).

My desire to create and develop new cultural and social practices grows from the absence of benevolence and humanitarian values in contemporary western society ideas and practices. This need has given me purpose to create and pursue a career in art despite the evidence and history of my culture, so that I can create works that celebrate life despite the travesty that we, western society, have made of it. This work is to be an inquiry into our way of life, and the reason of my current art making.





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A Thesis

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Master of Fine Arts

by

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## INTRODUCTION

When I decided to pursue my MFA, art was still a “thing” to me. For me, there existed this sentient “thing” called art that was outside of the realities and ideologies of contemporary mundane life and society. Art to me was apolitical and autonomous from the politics of life. It was instead a reflection of life's truths. There was no racism or sexism in art, because art was sovereign from human prejudice and duplicity. It was uplifting and true to all human nature, and there was no room in it for social issues and political commentary, nor was that what my art was to be about. Art had become an escapist illusion and an aesthetic that allowed for me to refute the ugly truth of my society and contemporary human nature.

At that time, my work wasn't about the truth of my surroundings, or my place or anyone's place within our society. It was fantasy helping to further obscure lies and ideology, and the mockery of life, produced by these byproducts of the industry of our culture, and my complicity in it. I too, was trying to get something for nothing, art and meaning from depravity, life from its absence, and beauty from a blind bitch with eyes only for herself. I too was a producer and a contributor within our culture's industry of disillusionment. My work was saturated with ideas and values that weren't true to me, my heritage or my understanding of life.

The truth of it was, there is a yearning that some may feel at times, the need to be a part of one's culture, to be understood and recognized on the

terms that our society have structured no matter the pitch or level of the playing field, despite the purposelessness of the game. To this end we practice different forms of assimilation, trying to adjust ourselves within our roles in culture. This need at times can cause us to smother or disassociate our work and ideas from our values, so that in the name of art and culture we create and re create in the vision of another "man's" progress, in the ideas of another "man's" culture. The beauty of the history of Western Civilization, our contemporary world, the fabrication that I wanted to believe in, I too wanted to believe in the lie of contemporary humanity and our ideologies of culture, class and civilization. I too wanted to believe that the problems that plague our society had nothing to do with our own understandings and ways of living life; had nothing to do with me. I believed in the illusion that has been painted and crafted over the centuries that pictures life to be a snapshot of some universal aesthetic beauty evidenced by western values, culture, and civilization celebrated as art. I wanted to be part of that aesthetic. I wanted to create imprints of life that held no iota of my true-life experience, and that reaffirmed or ignored my society's ways of living and our impact on life and this planet.

My art became another reification of western civilization and our history. This was fitting because to me history was as natural in its assumption as art, and what was written as history seemed to be as "naturally right" as what through history we have come to label as art. Instead of social conditions and true illustrations of our society and the reality of our ways of life, I depicted

contemporary scenes of idealized history never once imagining to question, criticize, or even decide if the values I displayed were an expression of my own values and understandings, a reflection of me.

### **REAWAKENING TO NEW PURPOSE FOR MY ART**

I now understand art to be a vehicle for the communication and expression of specific ideas and philosophies. Art to me isn't about producing an end product labeled as art, but is about using a cultural platform for the initiation of the discussion that returns purpose to life. Art has become about working to create new alternative memories in the establishment of a new collective memory that differs from the echoes of our contemporary society. It's my chance to create a voice of reason to sound against the cacophony of destruction sung by the choirs of our being. Art has transformed for me, from being a thing with dictates and purpose unto itself, to being a function, a vehicle for the transmissions of specific ideas and values. My belief of art for art's sake and for the mastery of specific skill sets and styles, has been redirected to new ideas of art and it's power to influence culture and touch people's lives. "Art as information",<sup>1</sup> is a Conceptualist idea that has become integral to a purpose of the Reawakening. Information, whether it be the idea that "You are not yourself", as dictated by Barbara Kruger, or the stained diapers and baby clothing of a mother recording the developing relationship between herself and her son as with Mary Kelley's Post Partum document, has become a dire and

essential resource in our contemporary society, and it is what I wish to share and disseminate with my art.

I believe that by redefining art to the function of being a vehicle for the transmission of my ideas, I can use the idea of art as information to bridge cultural barriers instead of creating them. The fine art idea requires markets, wealth and prestige to justify a work's creation and to bestow an artwork's worth and value. Most times the value of an artist's creation is based on criteria that are disconnected from the reality of the majority of our society. An artwork's worth isn't determined by its social function or its social value. Instead, art has become evidence of the disparity in the lives and social realities of American people. The fine art idea requires art to be another elusive commodity within capitalism's commodification of American life, so that yet another thing is placed out of the reach of the majority of the American people, so that art becomes yet another barrier of class and "culture".

This repositioning of the function of art, with my desire to create work that addresses the contemporary ideology of our society, will enable me to make reflections, incisive and critical insights defining, describing and criticizing the damning attributes of our culture. My goal is for art to be practiced as a form of creative/intellectual/artistic achievement that doesn't reflect, but instead directs mainstream activity, returning a sense of responsibility, humanity and direction to the culture of our society.



My thesis, that actions and ideas can influence new forms of culture, is a two-part premise. The first conjecture is that by assigning a responsibility to art, a responsibility that includes specific tasks engineered to educate, enlighten, and inform, our community and society, we will begin to create new works with new purposes helping to establish the foundations of a new visual culture. The second speculation embedded within my thesis, is that this new visual culture<sup>2</sup> could help to propagate and perpetuate new forms of action, purpose, and understanding within our community and society. My idea is for a new sense of artistic creation that includes the social responsibilities of the artist, and my

wager, is that art can create and form new behaviors, habits and culture.

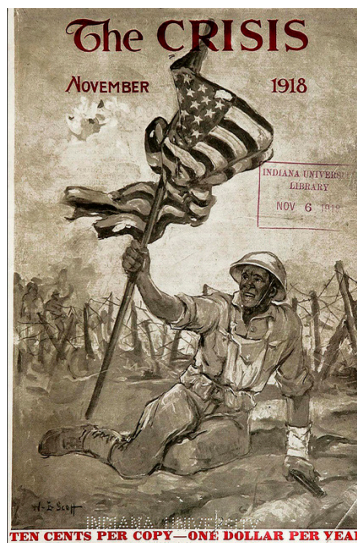


Fig. 1. Front cover.  
*The Crisis* magazine.  
(NAACP, NYC, Nov  
1918)

W.E.B Dubois used the visual arts in his publication *The Crisis*<sup>3</sup> to accomplish similar goals as well. In 1910 W.E.B. Du Bois began working as editor of the magazine *The Crisis*. As editor, Du Bois used art, photography and illustration within the pages of the magazine, to recreate the memory and identity of African

Americans. (fig. 1) Within the pages of *The Crisis*, Du Bois worked to recreate the collective memory of African

Americans while simultaneously using the idea of collective memory to repair the African American self-identity and to endow the memory of African American heritage and accomplishments. The magazine became the platform

that allowed for W.E.B Dubois to work with black visual artists and writers to produce artwork and literature that established an alternative history, and new collective memories to the history and lack of heritage that America assigned to black people. The Crisis was also used to inform America's white/European public of the atrocities and degradations that were part of the African American/black experience here in America at that time.

I, like Du Bois have a desire to create alternative memories that help to establish a counterview of the contemporary American society.

The Reawakening is a conceptually based project where the idea is, that if we can learn to see our understanding of life for the broken thing that it is and can begin to want to learn to develop new ways of understanding each other, our communities and the relationships between ourselves, our neighbors and this planet, we can begin to change life and develop ways of being that foster life and a future of hope. With this idea, visualized through the abstraction and expression of the Reawakening, I work to initiate a discussion that includes self-analysis. I want my viewer to question and scrutinize our contemporary understandings of life, community, God and self. The Reawakening is not about visual or artistic concepts, but instead is about philosophical, socio-political, cultural and metaphysical ideas that I believe to be relevant catalysts toward a change in our understanding of contemporary life. The visual and representative quality of my work with this project is my attempt, through the use of visual imagery and the visualization of my ideas, to create a language using the

symbols and symbolism of the Reawakening to establish my own visual language with a message that differs from the prevalent message of our contemporary times.

## **METHODOLOGIES**

The Reawakening employs symbolism, abstraction and the pursuit of an idea, in the visualization and expression of my beliefs and experiences. My first



Fig. 2 Ernest Akins.  
*In his Image*. 2012.  
Digital Composition.

methodology with the Reawaken is to create contemporary symbols that represent and embody the social context of our contemporary society. A drawing mannequin that I have named "New Jim Crow" (referencing the legal system of apartheid and inequality that was practiced here in America for

nearly 100 years after slavery, known as the

Jim Crow Laws) is an essential symbol of the Reawakening. (fig. 2) "New Jim Crow" represents the unseeing, unfeeling, uncaring contemporary persona of our American society. By saying, unseeing, unfeeling, and uncaring I refer to our inability to want to see, feel, understand and empathize with the struggles and issues of others and/or the less fortunate in our community and society. I also



Fig. 3 Ernest Akins.  
*American Dream, American Freedom*. 2014.  
Digital Composition.

refer to our inability to see beyond race, politics, wealth and other superficial attributes to the aspects of God that I believe resides within and connects us all with one another, the planet and the world that encompasses us. I refer to the mannequin as “New Jim Crow” because it represents the ideas and



Fig. 4 Ernest Akins  
untitled. 2014.  
Digital Composition.

understandings of our contemporary ways of being that serve only to create division and dissension in our society.

“New Jim Crow” is that part of us that wants us to be greater than God, and all things natural, so that we can continue to believe that we are the masters and purveyors of our own fates, and moreover with that, it

wants us to believe that it is the responsibility of the individual to be said master and purveyor of their own

individual fate, and not the responsibility of the community, state, or neighbor to ensure or create social stability. More simply said, “New Jim Crow” symbolizes the capitalist idea of me first, and then the “other”, everyone else. With the “other” (when the other isn’t being exploited to suffice the I), being completely foreign and irrelevant to our own concepts of self. Because politics and ideologies manifest themselves in our actions, attitudes and interactions, I decided that the mannequin would be a perfect symbol for my idea of the disembodied self, or the thoughts and ideas that form us but aren’t truly a part of natural life.

Other symbols of the Reawakening include, butterflies, which symbolize

metamorphosis and rebirth within the context of the reawakening, sunlight, which represents a new direction and perhaps divine intervention, and shackles and the American dollar sign which I sarcastically refer to as American freedom. (figs 3 -4) These symbols have become the basis of the representation of my expression, and with them I hope to establish the beginnings of a new visual language that pointedly questions the nature, goals, accomplishments and future of our civilization.

Abstraction is another methodology that I employ within the Reawakening. When abstraction and art are discussed, often the immediate response is to only consider the abstraction of nonobjective abstract art. But abstraction in art can also refer to an artist's attempt to create artworks that recreate the natural world conformed to the ideas of their own expression. A perfect example of this is Post-Impressionist paintings. Post-Impressionist painters such as (Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin,) etc. painted natural scenes and objects, but they painted these things expressed through the colors and expressive brushstrokes and tendencies of post-impressionist painting. The Post-Impressionists forewent the desires of realist painters and realism, to accurately re-present the world as it was in every minute detail. Instead they worked to redefine the world around them in terms of color, light, expressive brushstrokes and emotion.

Abstraction in the Reawakening is my creation of a world defined by the realities of my own revelations. Within my picture plane, reality is abstracted to

conform to the ideas that I wish to express. Anything and everything upon the “canvas” conforms to the concept of my expression. So that I can depict a spiritual self, resurrecting itself from the lifeless body of “New Jim Crow” the drawing mannequin (fig. 5), or I can depict a landscape where waters



Fig. 5 Ernest Akins.  
*Reawakening*. 2012  
Digital Composition.

(representing turmoil or tribulations) can be overflowing the land while biblical text (reminding us that we are our neighbor's keepers), is interposed within the sky and waters. (fig. 6)

Abstraction allows for me to recreate the world that I am criticizing or commenting upon, into the

visualization of my declaration. It is my goal that through the use of abstraction I can in my own way work to place the ideas and understandings of our contemporary American society in a place where they can be easily scrutinized and assessed, so that my audience can decide if our contemporary ways and understandings of life, God, self and community truly imbue a sense of life, and potential for

ourselves and our future. Lastly, abstraction allows for me to recreate from what is real that which resides within the confines of my head, heart and imagination.

The Reawakening is the pursuit of an idea developed visually using methodologies that help to create a visual body of work with a message, and

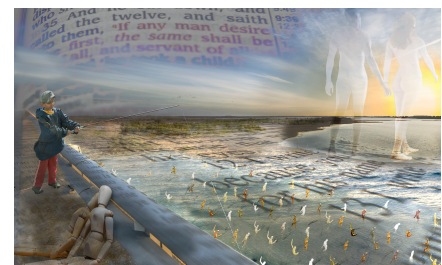


Fig. 6 Ernest Akins.  
*Fisher of Men*. 2012.  
Digital Composition.

an underlying concept that recognizes the importance of visual culture in the development of the beliefs and views that our society uses to create meaning for our history and ourselves. My goal is to create new habits and understandings established and informed visually with work that provides a counter view to the prevailing voice of our society. The Reawakening is about specific ideas or concepts that I explore and then hope to share with an audience through visual representation. Moreover, it's about being able to imagine and visualize these concepts artistically in order to reaffirm or imply their existence. With the Reawakening as with all conceptual art<sup>4</sup>, the ideas of the artist are paramount and visual representation serves, first to create alternative and different collective memories establishing ideas that are absent or disconnected from our contemporary ways of being, and secondly to allow me, the artist, to share my ideas and concepts within a visual aesthetic, while giving fact to the existence of these ideas despite their absence within the culture of our society.

The Reawakening has allowed for me to find purpose and direction for the ideas of my expression. It is the doorway that has facilitated my departure from Art for Art's sake to art with a social-civic agenda. A foremost concept embedded within the Reawakening is the idea that there is a lack of spiritualism in our culture that is needed to balance out the materialistic tendencies of our society. Ideas of the spiritual expressed through the visualization of concepts and ideas for the empowerment of the social is a methodology that I share with

an artist who influences me, Joseph Beuys. Like Beuys I believe that through art I can give evidence to the existence of things unseen and spiritual, and I believe that the Reawakening is a call for and recognition of the power of transformative actions. Actions that others and I must be ready to undertake in order to change the atmosphere of our existence. Like Beuys and his methodologies of transformation, the Reawaken begins with the transformation of the artist. Through the artist's transformation (my own) I hope to empower others to desire and to see the need for other transformative action. This begins first with the audience's own soul searching and is to be supplemented through discussion and interaction. Later through interaction, with the artist, and others, (through papers and writings, talks and discussions and hopefully seeing these ideas and principals being applied within the artist's way of being), the audience can achieve or attain the ability to perform transformative actions that work to change their own lives and culture. (Here culture represents the embodiment of our actions and ways that shapes the society surrounding us.)

Concept or the reasoning behind each work becomes of the utmost importance with each work being designed to in some way inform, enlighten, or influence the audience's behavior or actions, and ultimately the culture produced by and through their everyday actions and interactions. The main and overarching idea of the Reawakening is our society's need for change. Within this one large concept lay other sub-concepts that are integral to the larger idea. Within these sub-concepts, one finds, for example, the need for



more spirituality, or the lack of the idea of a communal experience within our society, social inequalities, etc. Because I believe that the errors of our contemporary ways of understanding ourselves, God, our world and each other stems from the same lack, I know these sub-concepts and ideas to be crucial to our ability to change our contemporary understandings.

These three methodologies symbolism, abstraction, and the pursuit of a theory and an idea, help to form the visual experience of the Reawakening. Each work within the series may adhere to a similar aesthetic, or depending on the intended focus the works may differ in their visual representation, because the Reawakening isn't about a particular aesthetic or style of work but is instead about my desire to use the cultural platform of art to work to create a change in our society. The drive and purpose of each work is for me to find new ways to visually express my concept and philosophy.

In addition to my visual research for the Reawakening, I researched different philosophies, theologies, and people who worked to make a change in our world. I too want to make a change, and my first step towards change was for me to begin to create artworks with a specific purpose and function. I want to return purpose to life, and to me purpose in life equals a return to God (not religion) and the attributes that I believe manifest God's goodness to our personal and inter-personal actions and interactions. I want for us to see that life is an essence that we all share in and are a part of, and that it is our responsibility to work to foster and perpetuate life not only for ourselves but for

our families, communities and the planet and environment of which we are a part.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Reawakening is about returning attributes such as love, community, fellowship, and sacrifice to the dialog of our daily lives and interactions. I chose to use art for my purposes because I believe that art can offer a gateway that helps our society to return to life with a purpose and balance. I also believe that art can help us to begin to see God without the cultural barricades of manmade religion.

When you think about it, to ask a function of art is to ask for nothing more than what we require from every other idealized aspect of our society. While I recognize and believe that the true function and purpose of our society (human survival and a higher quality of life) has been perverted by the invisible fascism of capitalism, profit and the dollar, I know that to some degree we like to still believe that there is a function adhered to our ideas of civilization (justice, education, science, government, community, etc.).

Justice serves for the equal dispersal and administration of the law and resources. Education serves to enlighten, inform, and develop our youth and society, etc. So what is so different in requiring such a likely function from art as we expect from every other cultural, governmental, or administrative office of our society? Must every definition of our existence be defined by the totalitarianism of capitalism and it's puppet leaders profit and the American

dollar? I say no, and I chose to work to change this by creating the beginnings of a new visual culture that redefines and reorients ideas such as profit, progress, capital and self, to be inclusive of the community and others. I chose for life and a higher standard and quality of life for all, and I believe that with the right impetus people can begin to see the failure of our contemporary capitalistic society and I hope for the Reawakening to be a part of the force that helps to bring balance to life.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more information about Conceptual Art, and Art as information see *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*.

<sup>1</sup> Visual Culture deals with how visual data, (photographs, Television, film/movies, etc.) works to inform our ideas and our ideologies of self and community and moreover how this form of learning has supplanted the semiotics of language with the visuals of seeing. For more on Visual Culture see Nicholas Mirzoeff's *An Introduction to Visual Culture*.

<sup>1</sup> Official magazine of the NAACP co-founded and edited by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1910. The magazine worked to create an awareness of the African American experience at that time in America. Issues such as lynching, employment, education, and the advancement of the arts and literature by black writers and artists, were discussed and written about within the publication. The magazine also served as means for Black artists to become published and recognized for their creative production.

<sup>1</sup> See Sol Lewitt's *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, which talks about the artist's concept as the most important aspect of an artist's work and how concept, drives the artist's work/production.

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