I. Title: The Afterlife of Images: An Artistic Examination of Contemporary Iconography

II. Introduction

Powerful and seductive images have historically been used for a variety of socio-political reasons. The art forms of an individual culture can be construed as a privileged form of expression, illustrating socio-cultural constructs such as religion or economic value. Recently the social, cultural, political, and technological transformations of globalization have instigated new artistic means and new iconography (subject matter). These transformations, however, are never entirely severed from history. New techniques and subject matter continue to create relations to the past. For my honors thesis I am proposing to create a body of ten individual mixed-media artworks that work to make visible the radical, and perhaps irreversible, cultural transformations that are currently taking place. These works will also strive to present how artworks create new temporal relations that transmit different pasts to an always open future. As an artist, I believe that I have an ethical and social responsibility to create images that generate socio-political and historical awareness of the world around us. My work will deconstruct how powerful visual works can be used to seduce and inform the viewer thereby generating new perspectives on the world and those who inhabit it. The works comprising my honors thesis will
investigate the socio-cultural and aesthetic process by which otherwise normal figural representations are transformed into icons through the use of hierarchical scale, composition, and allegory. (See Figure A, page 7)

The primary conceptual thread that will traverse this body of work is cultural syncretism. According to anthropologist Margaret Mills, cultural syncretism denotes how different cultures and even historical periods interact and communicate. Cultural syncretism creates new aesthetic traditions when disparate cultures interact. Mills writes that “syncretism denotes the combination or alliance of opposing religious or philosophical doctrines, often with political undertones, that results in public and private rituals and commonly accepted local practices which appear to the observer to link orientations that are normally disparate, if not disjunctive. This has become more apparent because of the mixing of cultures, creating a new set of beliefs, icons, and imagery for the public to ingest.” Syncretism has always occurred historically, but contemporary technological transformations and new socio-political modes of interaction (globalization) have made it a primary means by which imagery is constructed and consumed. Part of syncretism’s power and appeal as a cultural means lies in the fact that it consistently seeks to explain complex abstractions through concrete analogies.

III. Case Studies

Within recent art practice there has been a return to iconographic studies as a means to address contemporary aspects of cultural syncretism. Iconography is the identification, description, and the interpretation of an image’s content: the subjects depicted, the particular compositions and details used to do so, and other elements that are distinct from a developed
artistic style. Simply put, it is the study of content (subject matter) and meaning rather than form or technique. Moreover, the ability to read iconography allows one to discern the complicated actions of cultural syncretism at work in a given piece. The presence of icons in art has historically imbued sacred character upon minute aspects of everyday life, but the repetitive production of such imagery beginning with modernity elevated everyday life (non-sacred) beyond its normality.

For instance, the visual representation of mythology in Greek, Buddhist, Roman, and Judeo-Christian art created a set of icons correlated with every culture's unique beliefs, morals, and customs. Over time, icons were not solely used as sacred images in the service of deities, but as works of art. Creative measures such as figurative distortions within illustrated deities would occasionally distinguish deities from mundane humans. By playing with and even transgressing a canon of expected representational motifs, art begins to move from naturalism/realism towards abstraction. However, it remains clear that a creative tension between mimesis and abstraction most motivates viewers to grapple with the complex aspects of their visual culture.

We see this creative tension at work in the endless debates within Western culture between iconophilia and iconoclastic cultures, or later in modernity between figuration and abstraction. In stark contrast to iconophilic cultures, iconoclastic cultures dismiss the need for a literal representation of deities. Abstract representations of unrepresentable phenomena are implied through ornamental patterning (specifically in Islamic art) or, occasionally and more recently, in Minimalist art (1960s). The aim being to displace the viewer's interest and contemplation on the work itself to a transcendent concept, whether of a deity or a perceptual
phenomenon. Often iconoclasm was observed a sign of social transition, where an image of a culturally significant individual or deity is defaced, typically during a time of sociopolitical upheaval.

Several contemporary artists have garnered much international attention by producing works that return to the cultural complexities of iconography. Michael Hussar, Mitch Griffiths, and Kehinde Wiley all apply the visual vocabulary and conventions of glorification, history, wealth and prestige to the subject matter drawn from prevailing social norms. The subjects and stylistic references for each artists’ paintings pervade iconography. Each artist presents the viewer with a contextual subject that is both confrontational and evocative, both iconophilic and iconoclastic.

American born painter Michael Hussar paints exclusively in oil. He maintains a traditional approach to figurative painting; however, his oil paintings and drawings are very provocative and often somewhat objectionable because they are intensely realistic presenting macabre abstract elements are often infused with said intense naturalism. The tensions created within Hussar’s paintings because of this macabre-naturalistic combination serve as depictions of social problems, specifically because he elevates every subject to an icon through his use of composition and juxtaposes each icon with a visible, often frightening flaw. Sexuality, identity, and hierarchy are addressed in every painting, showcasing vulnerability and power as flaws within his appointed icons. While Hussar’s paintings heavily allude to Western iconography in unconventional means and I greatly admire his work, I plan on expanding upon his concept by showcasing iconic compositions present in Eastern iconography as well. Through the implementation of Eastern iconic stylization, I will be able to address a broader audience and
wider range of current issues in my thesis project.

British painter Mitch Griffiths heavily appropriates heroic and iconic poses in his figurative paintings. Richly detailed, viscerally layered canvases reveal scenes which simultaneously inspect notions of empire, guilt, celebrity, and first world entitlement whilst offering to depict the essential vacuity of a society drenched in mass media and consumed by materialism. Griffiths employs an unflinching hyperrealism to pick ideas apart which promise to haunt and comment on society with an unnerving familiarity. Inspired by the canon of Western representational painting and its enduring duty to hold a mirror to the civilizations which act as patron, Griffiths has adapted an ancient medium to scrutinize a very modern world. Through Griffiths’ heavy appropriation of iconic imagery, he creates valuable cultural commentary that I agree with and plan to explore for my exhibition. Furthermore, he approaches his paintings as portraits of his selected icons, allowing each subject to establish an identity—a tactic I plan on employing as well. However, I am interested in creating images that are less Westernized and more globally conscious than I feel he may produce (even though the concepts behind his piece are universal), to address a wider scope of problems.

Kehinde Wiley is an American portrait artist known for his detailed works of African Americans. His colossal painted and sculpted figures are depicted in a heroic manner, as their poses connote power and spiritual awakening. Wiley’s imagery explores the themes of the sacred and the secular associated with Renaissance and Baroque art in his continued analysis on mass media stereotypes about masculinity, race, power and class in Western society. Wiley’s portrayal of masculinity is filtered through poses of power, heroism, and spirituality, while often blurring the boundaries between traditional and contemporary modes of representation. Wiley’s
backgrounds are heavily detailed patterns, often in floral and geometric motifs, contrasting starkly with the gritty appearances of his subjects. The compositional and conceptual juxtaposition contained within each of his pieces begs the viewer to examine projected stereotypes of American minorities and decipher why a pre-determined and engrained idea of social classes exist.

**IV. Methodology and Body of Work**

From each case study introduced, I will appropriate iconographic strategies to create a series of images that will form a coherent body of visual work. My final ten artworks will be medium-scale, two-dimensional images that will collage iconographic elements that contain historical subject matter about religion and social change. The ten images shown in the series will vary in artistic material, content and subject matter, but all will work to express a creative tension between figuration and abstraction. The conceptual thread of cultural syncretism will guide my artistic choices, with the ultimate goal being the presentation of a body of work that will provoke thought and cultural critique from my audience.
Bibliography


