

# STUPID UGLY PORTRAITS OF STUPID UGLY ME

Sean Darby

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Pennsylvania State University, 2006

Minor in Art History, Pennsylvania State University, 2006

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requirement.

School of Art and Design  
University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, Michigan

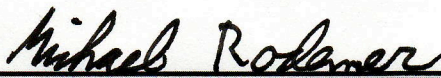
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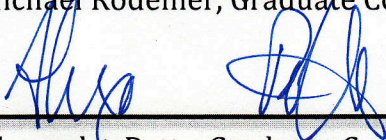
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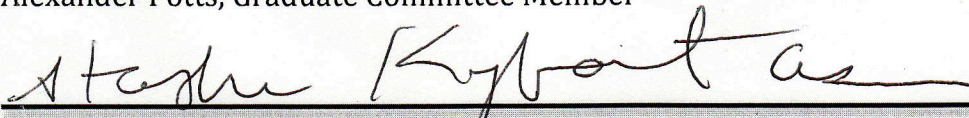
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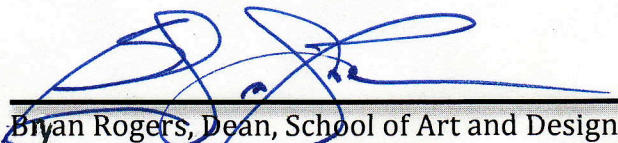
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Stashu Kybartas, Graduate Committee Member



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Brad Smith, Associate Dean for Graduate Education



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Bryan Rogers, Dean, School of Art and Design

Date Degree Conferred: May 2011

# **STUPID UGLY PORTRAITS OF STUPID UGLY ME**

Sean Darby



## **ABSTRACT**

In 1983, I was born in the palindrome that is Apollo, PA: a notorious nuclear waste contamination site. My parents, Bob and Darlene, were both physical education instructors (a.k.a. gym teachers). Because of these factors, I am convinced that my current physique is a radioactive mutation of the handsome athlete I was meant to be. Producing humorously grotesque self-portraits has helped me cope with my freakish attributes. I consider my artistic process as a series of escape plans and coping mechanisms designed to alleviate neurosis through illustrating inner turmoil.

My thesis work stems from, essentially, napkin doodles: little self-inflicted insults. In order to intensify exaggerated physical features and disgusting details, I translate these goofy caricatures into 3-dimensional figures. Each sculpture is made from *Super Sculpey*, a plastic polymer clay, and colored using oil paint; I consider this process a marriage between low-art action figures and fine art oil paintings. I then documented these 7 sculptures as stereoscopic images to be viewed in a retro View-Master. I feel that a white gallery space inherently negates any humor and playfulness in my work. So, I have treated the View-Master as an alternative gallery space that showcases my sculpture while retaining my sensibilities. There were 50 View-Master reels created as my thesis project.

**KEYWORDS:** self-portrait, sculpture, caricature, View-Master, stereoscopy, stereoscopic, toys, humor, body image, bipolar

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>PREFACE</b>	1
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	6
<b>DRAWING</b>	8
<b>SCULPTURE</b>	10
<b>STEREOSCOPIC IMAGERY</b>	12
<b>SELF-PORTRAITS:</b>	
<b>INSTRUCTIONS</b>	15
<b>SEAN</b>	16
<b>AWKWARD SEAN</b>	17
<b>WIND-UP SEAN</b>	20
<b>FLABBY SEAN</b>	22
<b>GROSS SEAN</b>	23
<b>PARANOID SEAN</b>	25
<b>MONSTER SEAN</b>	27
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	30
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	31
<b>SPECIAL THANKS</b>	31

## **STUPID UGLY PORTRAITS OF STUPID UGLY ME**

Sean Darby Thesis 2011

The University of Michigan, School of Art and Design

### **PREFACE: MY LIFE STORY**

I created several characters during my childhood. There was Super Electronic Gizmo Man: a combination of an astronaut from a how-to-draw book and Gizmo Duck from the cartoon *Duck Tales* (which was a parody of *Robocop*). Fighting Ferret was like Warner Bros meets *Rambo*. He often had Vietnam flashbacks; I disregarded Operation Desert Storm. The most original was, Spike Man—imagine Arnold Schwarzenegger on (even more) steroids covered in spikes. I associated with each of these characters and vicariously acted out their exploits. They were incarnations of my fantasy to be physically huge, strong, and ultra-violent.



Contemporary rendition of Spike Man

These characters represented what I wasn't: they were my alternate reality. In reality, I was depressed. I hated school. I loved fantasy; reality was a boring, unacceptable existence. During quiet spelling tests, I imagined ninjas attacking through the windows of North Apollo Elementary; I would, of course, save the day. Then my dream world would come crashing down leaving me lifeless, trapped in a boring desk. I hated sitting. I used to stand at my desk, so they put me in the back of the class. My humor was appreciated, I was the class clown: whoopee cushions and all. But my comedic outbursts were not always appreciated, and, as I grew older,

school became more formal, more business oriented. Recess was the time for jokes, but I was too unorganized for homework and often spent recess in detention. My imagination was getting me into trouble. My creativity was no longer valued; I was lost and depressed.

I started contemplating suicide. I would sit in my attic and contemplate jumping. I didn't think that the fall was high enough to kill me. I thought I would just fall on my feet, break a leg, and then have to explain myself to my parents. So, I devised a plan to affix a knife pointing at my sternum with a teepee of duct tape from the handle to my ribs then, when I landed on my chest, the knife would surely kill me. But landing directly on the knife would be difficult as well. So, I revised my design as several rings around my body, in a spherical shape with dozens of knives facing inward, so no matter how I landed, I would surely be fatally stabbed. They were the only designs I never drew the blueprints for, because, if my parents were to find them, I'd have to explain that I was seriously considering killing myself. My other drawings had become dark with a great attention to violent, gory details. They were the outlets for my inner frustration.



Contemporary rendition

My fantasy world was divided. I was either the super hero, Spike Man, with the dangerous spikes pointing outwards as imposing weapons. Or I would become depressed and I'd turn the spikes inward, impaling myself from the attic roof. My self-image became bipolar.

High School only added to my insecurities. For all of the girls that I pined for, none of them were interested in me. My artistic talent made me popular, I was funny (often publishing short stories in school's literary magazines and newspaper), and I had a lot of girls that were friends, but none of them were sexually attracted to me. I didn't think that I was ugly: I thought I was rather cute compared to most of the student body, but maybe there was something wrong? I was the shortest guy in my class. I had acne. I developed a slouch from being hunched over sketchbooks. And my circle of friends consisted of nerds, freaks, and goths: the genetic untouchables. When trying to define my self-image, I became confused. What the hell was wrong with me?



Front and side view of a monster bust completed my senior year in high school, 2001

I started thinking about myself as a ghoul. I was always fascinated by monsters and aliens, often terrified by nightmarish delusions of something creeping from behind my bedroom door or suddenly appearing behind the black, reflective glass in the kitchen. I quit being afraid of them and started to associate. My drawings shifted



from super heroes and cartoon characters to violent monsters. My emotional incarnations had fangs, claws, bat wings, spade-capped devil tails, and frequently held (smiling) decapitated heads. I became nocturnal, sleeping after school until midnight, and then staying awake until school started. I didn't see my family. I didn't see my friends. I would sit in the kitchen drawing monsters and watching the 70s buddy cop show ChiPs (in four-hour blocks). In my solitude, I was able to create without interruption; I could completely enter my fantasy world. I was hero, villain, comedian, ladies' man, whatever I needed to counteract the harsh reality of High School. However, when you set your level of denial to monumental proportions, your current state seems all-the-less significant. My self-image became increasingly bipolar. I was the World's Most Eligible Bachelor who was destined to die a virgin. I thought in extremes because being "average" was a fate worse than death. When I thought about how average I was, I contemplated suicide; I'd rather be a disfigured mutant.

In college, I became more analytical, more self-aware. It was then that I realized that all of those childhood super heroes and teen-angst-fueled monsters were actually self-portraits. They were not meaningless composites of mass-media stimuli, but manifestations of inner turmoil. They served a purpose. There was a reason that I was not content drawing Bugs Bunny, there was a reason I needed to create Fighting Ferret: it was personification. After this breakthrough, my monsters increasingly resembled my physical appearance. I was much more aware of how physical skewing could metaphorically express emotion. I studied Art History and Greek Mythology: analyzing the symbols of classical morphology. I saw my work within a larger context, the goofy drawings I had done were legitimized. Likewise, the frivolous, detrimental, low-art, pop culture media that I idealized were also given artistic value and cultural significance.

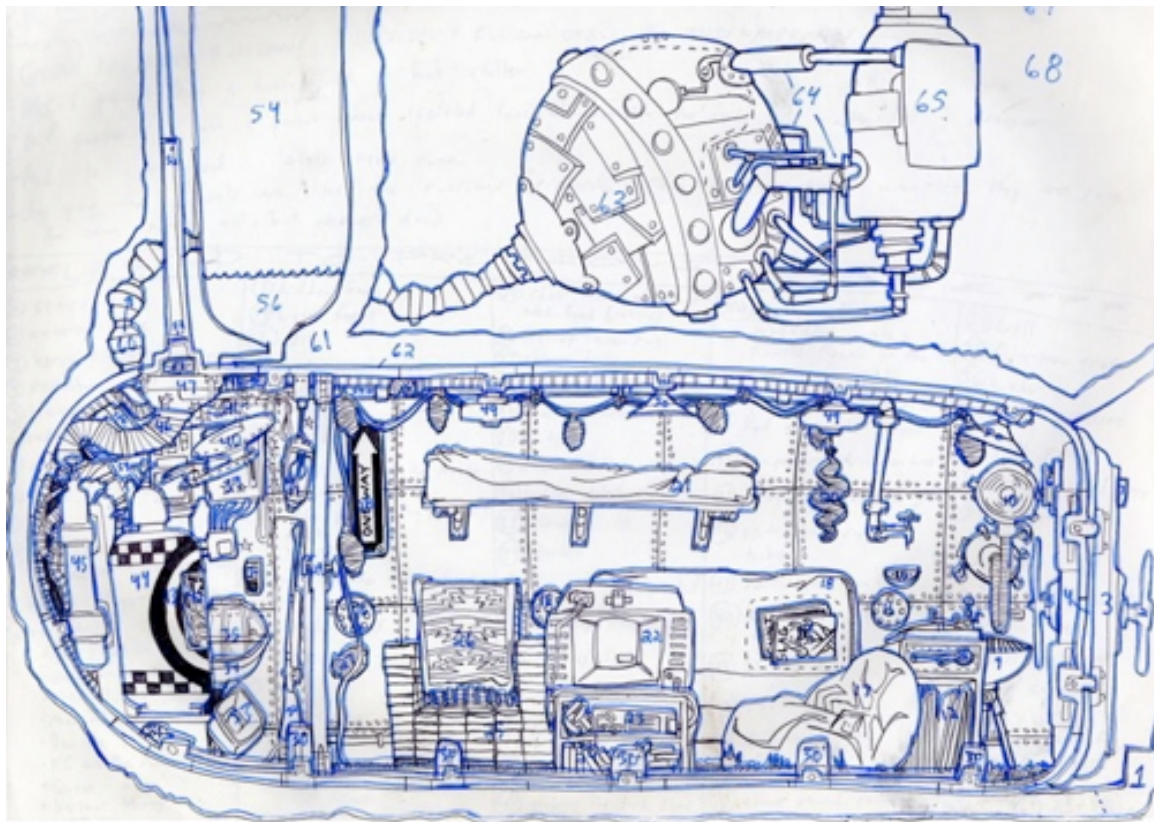


## **STUPID UGLY PORTRAITS OF STUPID UGLY ME**

Sean Darby Thesis 2011

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After receiving my BFA from Penn State University, I struggled to find an artistic direction. I no longer had a studio, tools, A/V equipment, nor — worst of all — student loan money. Before graduating, I could effortlessly fill a sketchbook with blueprints of my next big project, but without facilities or funding, I felt impotent.



Blueprint for a subterranean fall-out shelter, drawn in college

I still had ideas, but I felt discouraged that they would never come to fruition; so, I quit recording them. My sketchbooks were empty; however, I kept drawing on napkins, hotel note pads, and newspaper margins. Drawing on such ephemeral materials, I discovered a freedom to explore. If I thought a sketch was unsuccessful, I'd just tear it in half – a violent act, unheard-of concerning sketchbooks (even if I

hated a drawing, I would never rip it out). I would often be in the mood to draw, without having an idea. So, I would draw myself exactly how I felt at that moment. (I have a lot of drawings of me drawing.)

Even though these doodles were all self-portraits, they rarely looked similar to one another. I struggle with what I look like, but there are certain physical characteristics that I am aware of: big nose, predominate brow line, arched eyebrows, small chin/overbite, neck folds of skin, crooked lower teeth, pointed ears, bags under the eyes, lots of acne, patchy facial hair, overly curved spine, large



buttocks, small genitals, hairy nipples, and a birthmark next to my nose. These features are constant, however, their proportion and relation to one another fluctuate depending on the style in which I am cartooning. My style is determined by my emotional and psychological state. Sometimes I focus on detail, other times gesture. I have a wide array of cartooning styles, because I have a wide array of cartoon influences.

In 2008, when I was admitted into graduate school, here, at The University of Michigan, I was looking for a project. After revisiting a collection of self-portrait doodles, I began to think about them more analytically. I enjoyed their simplicity and wondered what effect would be achieved if I were to execute them in greater detail, and in three-dimensions — a process usually reserved for more refined drawings. What if these goofy, little sketches were given the star treatment? It was a gentleman's bet.

The results were colorful, playful, and gross, yet completed with a refinement that I had not accomplished previously. There was a commercial feel to them reminiscent of the Garbage Pail Kids trading cards that I collected. These sculptures deserved to



In the end, when I've either decided a drawing is complete or not worth continuing, I usually think, "What the fuck does that mean?" The conclusion is usually, "It's a self-portrait." I mean this loosely. For instance, I drew this worrisome water buffalo on the plane ride to India. I was anxious about what I would encounter on my trip, so I started drawing something that I wanted to see: a water buffalo. However, as I continued, its expression became more scared and the horns more protective. I transformed it into an expressionistic incarnation of my psyche: the beast became a self-portrait.



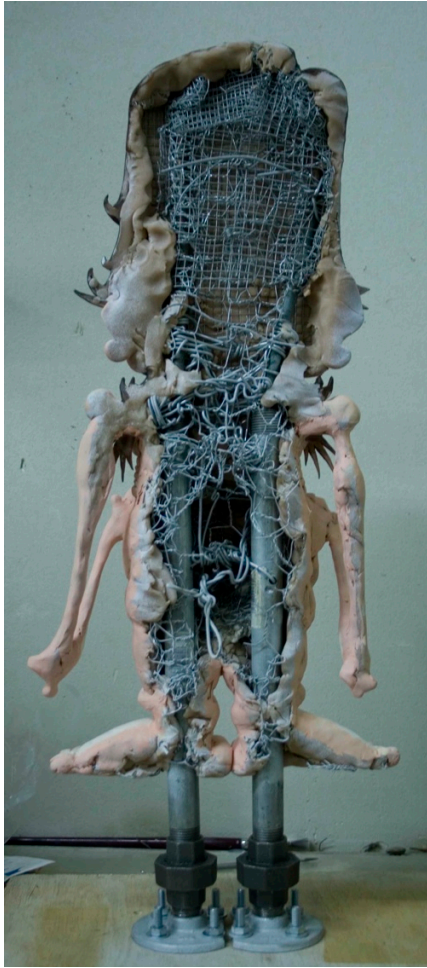
I consider the content of my drawings to be largely subliminal. There is an insanity to my art: a schizophrenic blending of artistic influences. The lack of foresight and control is what intrigues me, but I am often confused and appalled by the result. Not appalled by vulgar or sexual content, but aesthetically appalled by the sheer ugliness of my drawing. I enjoy experimenting and breaking the inherent rules of style and composition, so much so, that I will take a good drawing and purposefully ruin it by adding clashing elements. In order to discover the breaking point, I have to cross it first. After so many destroyed and failed attempts, drawing has become

discouraging. I rarely draw for amusement anymore; instead, drawing has become a technical device: creating blueprints over monsters.

You are probably asking yourself, “So then, what of these stupid ugly portraits of stupid ugly you?” Well, these little self-portraits stem from a rather pessimistic viewpoint. I started thinking that everything that I drew and loved (monsters, aliens, robots, naked women in suggestive positions, robot women with suggestive attachments) was just frivolous escapism. I became too aware for drawing to be fun anymore. Before, when I was bored and lonely, I would draw a naked woman to cheer myself up. Now, I just find it pathetic. So, instead, I draw myself lonely and naked. CORRECTION: I draw a grossly exaggerated and repulsive version of me lonely and naked. These drawings are more honest in terms of emotion and content, but also humorously caricatured, allowing me to laugh at my pathetic self. When I mock my pessimism, I feel optimistic ...or at least content. Some people only see sadness when they look at these drawings, but I see mental strife, shrunk to a pathetic and laughable scale.

## **SCULPTURE**

To accurately translate my 2-dimensional representations into 3-dimensional objects, I had to execute them in relief. (Because of the asymmetrical stylization, sculpture in the round was an impossibility.) My process begins with an armature consisting of poultry netting, shaped, and affixed to a steel pole. Over this wireframe I apply Super Sculpey: a sculpting polymer with the same chemical make-up as PVC pipe. I create the general shape by hand, and then add details using dental tools. After sculpting is complete, I bake the figure in an electric kiln at 275 degrees. Then, I apply a coat of spray primer. They are then finished in oil paint.



Back of figure exposing armature



Front of figure in Super Sculpey

In each piece, the sculpted version surpassed the drawing. I credit this, partially, to my drawing method versus my sculpture method. When I draw, I use pen and I do not erase. There are some drawings that I wish had turned out better; however, the limitations that I put on myself are what makes drawing exciting for me. There is a margin of error, but it is slim, and completing a drawing is like a puzzle. In sculpture, because of the additive process and plastic nature of the material that I use, I can manipulate the form until the desired appearance is reached. Sculpture has an added dimension, which is more appealing to me, since I think 3-dimensionally. In addition, I finish my sculptures in color, whereas my drawings are finished using hatching and crosshatching to imply color and depth.



I have a vicarious relationship with all of these figures: I laugh at them and with them. This is the same mentality I have regarding myself. I tend to look at my life from a third-person perspective; this disassociation allows me to laugh at myself. I can only assume this is some kind of psychosis. If some unfortunate event happens to a normal person, they feel horrible. If something unfortunate happens to me, I see the humor in it. This has made me a glutton for punishment. Unfortunate scenarios make for humorous and interesting stories. Just as ugly self-portraits make for humorous and interesting art. I find no pleasure in naturalistic portrayals of myself.

### **STEREOSCOPIC IMAGERY**

I first became interested in stereoscopic imagery when studying at Penn State. Dealing with sculpture students, our professors constantly stressed the importance of documentation. So, I would take 35mm pictures, send out for plastic slides, create digital images, and upload them online. I had only one sculpture, but there were hundreds of visual representations of it. More than likely, if someone saw my sculpture, it would be in a 2-dimensional format. I thought back to my art history textbooks and how millions of students would see an image of a sculpture, but only a fraction would ever see the actual piece. It seemed as though the documentation had actually replaced the work. I realized that this was an unavoidable fact. So, I decided that all documentation of sculpture should be in stereo. If we have access to stereoscopic technology, then we should utilize it to document sculpture the way it is intended to be seen.

Following this philosophy, I decided to have View-Master reels manufactured to showcase stereoscopic images of my work. A Stereoscopic image is created when two slightly different photographs are mentally merged into one image having the illusion of depth. To create this effect, I took one photograph composed exactly as I wanted, for the left eye. Then shifted the camera slightly to right, and took a second image, for the right eye. So, when seen in the View-Master viewer, your mind aligns

the left and right images into one 3-D image.



I consider these stereoscopic images to be the actual works of art. The View-Master itself acts as an alternative gallery space, while the 50 View-Masters that I produced are travelling exhibitions. At any given moment, my work is on display in 50 galleries. So, if 40 of them are sitting in my studio, I have a VERY low attendance rate. Ergo, dispersal and sharing of these View-Masters is integral to my success. The doodles and physical sculptures I consider to be the remnants of a process.

My thesis exhibition, "STUPID UGLY PORTRAITS OF STUPID UGLY ME," showcased the View-Masters, displayed the sculptural remnants, and included a projected slideshow of the stereoscopic images. I thought that this combination accurately detailed the creation of the project, but was also a little redundant; the View-Masters alone would have sufficed. The order in which I intended the audience to experience the show was sculpture first, then 3-D projection, and finally, View-Master. That way, it feels as though you are taking the exhibition home with you, rather than seeing an exhibition of artifacts. So, the projection was a necessary segue.

There are several types of stereoscopic projection techniques; the two major ones are anaglyph and polarized. Anaglyph 3-D uses offset red and cyan outlines, which - when viewed through special glasses with red and cyan filters over the lenses - create the illusion of 3-D.

Polarizing 3-D uses two images projected from two projectors with polarizing filters, one with a vertical line filter and one with a horizontal line filter. The polarizing glasses have one eye with a vertical line filter and one with a horizontal line filter. When viewed, one eye only sees the vertical information, while the other only sees the horizontal, creating a stereoscopic effect. I chose to use Polarized 3-D, because the red and cyan necessary for Anaglyph conflicted with the brightly colored backgrounds behind each figure.



Anaglyph Stereoscropy



Polarized Stereoscropy

At the exhibition, the audience was asked to wear polarized 3-D glasses to accurately see the illusion. Since the sculptures were created in relief, and are not meant to be seen in the round, I do not feel that the viewer is losing any information by only seeing the documentation. If anything, the viewing experience is enhanced because the figures are larger, more vivid, and paired with a visual gimmick. The 3-D technology served a double function: it enhanced the documentation of my art, while contextualizing it with my pop-culture influences.

## **INSTRUCTIONS**

The following text is meant to be read in conjunction with the images in the accompanying View-Master. Before beginning, make sure that the reel is in the correct position. The text should read, "STUPID" and the stereoscopic image should have a yellow background. At the end of a selection, there will be an orange dot; when you see it, please advance to the next slide. To advance, pull downward on the orange trigger. Thank You.

**SEAN**

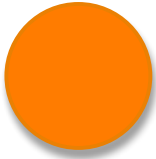


My profile is not flattering. From the front, I'm not too bad; but from the side, I have a weird outline. My predominant brow line, bulbous nose, and recessed chin give my head a nice cauliflower shape. I have a slouch that in 20 years will result in a hunchback. My spine curves in too much, making my stomach protrude even further. And my posterior is quite large for a male. All of these characteristics result in a deformed "S" shape. After completing this doodle, I was reminded of the bizarre "Nutty Initials" stickers that Norm Saunders had created for TOPPS (Saunders).

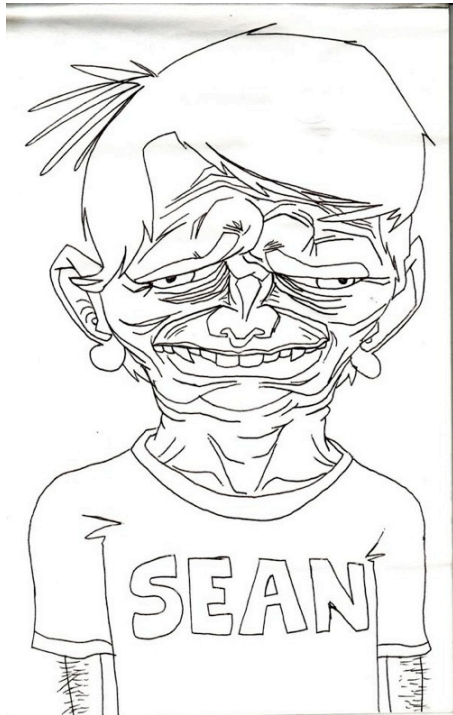


Each sticker consisted of a creature contorted into the shape of a letter, painted a solid, vibrant color. The idea, of course, was to collect enough of these to spell out your name. Easy if your name is "Tom" or "Sean," but quite a feat if you're "Gwendolyn." So, after I completed my S-shaped self-portrait, I added an "E-A-N"

onto the end, resulting in a brilliant juxtaposition. I decided to honor my inspiration and paint myself a monochrome green.



### **AWKWARD SEAN**



I consider this little guy to be a middle school version of myself. I get a real kick out of photographing him, because I am reminded of school picture day; I imagine saying, "Smile!" and getting that face in response. I hesitated to refer to this sculpture as "him" in the previous sentence, because, after all, it is an inanimate object. However, I do have a Geppetto/Pinocchio kind of relationship with this sculpture. I laughed while making him, and laugh every time I see him. I relate to this one the most, because it is the most awkward. The other figures' poses and expressions are focused and calculated, accentuating their predominant flaw. Where this one isn't sure what to do, how to pose; his expression embodies a candid response.

The “candid” response, or illusion of transfixed time, is a quality that I look for in sculpture. There are three contemporary sculptors that come to mind that have mastered this illusion and are major influences in this project: Ed and Nancy Kienholz, Charlie White, and Ron Mueck.

Ed and Nancy Kienholz’s tableaus make the viewer feel as though they are interrupting an event. In *The Hoerengracht*, Kienholz reuses architectural elements to recreate a street in Amsterdam’s Red Light District. He then installs plaster life casts of prostitutes inside them with picture frames over their faces. When the viewer enters this environment, they feel the unease and cheeky delight of walking past seedy, taboo brothels. The women, essentially, act as mannequins, however, due to their realistically tacky settings and grungy aesthetic, one feels repulsed, yet sympathetic towards these figures. The open-framed faces also remind us that these are portraits of real people, adding to our feeling of guilt (Brooks, 216).



Ed and Nancy Kienholz, *The Hoerengracht*, 1984-88

Charlie White’s *Understanding Joshua* series uses a mentality and process similar to my own. White designed a humanoid self-portrait that has alien characteristics to create a metaphor for his own social awkwardness. He then poses his naked, pathetic avatar in uncomfortable interactions with human actors. The outcome is an action photograph that makes it appear as though the sculpture is just as alive and active as the people around it (White, 70-102).

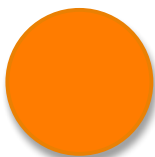


Charlie White, *Getting Lindsay Linton* from his *Understanding Joshua* series, 2001

Using a combination of expressionistic gestures, scale shift, and photorealistic details, Ron Mueck creates emotion in life-like, yet caricatured figures. He may reference a particular person, such as himself, but exaggerates and contorts physical features to intensify a particular feeling. Because of the sculpture's skewed expressions and impossible scale, the viewer knows that they are not alive. However, Mueck's extreme attention to naturalistic detail does cause one to suspend disbelief and treat the resin form as though it were living. This mindset results in a fantastic hesitation, where one feels unease, guilt, or shame when looking his sculpture in the eye or sneaking a peak at its exposed genitalia (Mueck, 64-68).



Ron Mueck, *Boy*, 2000





## WIND-UP SEAN



Being in academia, attending a research based university, it is expected that I have absolute and definitive explanations poised, ready to defend any argument made against my work. That said, I have multiple, subjective interpretations of this piece.

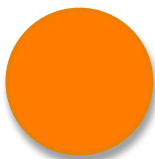
I drew this version of myself after looking at a catalogue of action figures and wind-up toys from Japan. I enjoy the way that a movie character, such as Gamera — a Godzilla-esque gigantic flying turtle that is “friend to all children in the world” — can be modeled, colored, and merchandised in so many different ways. I drew this self-portrait after I had already had the project laid out and View-Master in mind, so a toy version of myself seemed natural. In that regard, this figure could be seen as a commentary on the project itself: taking a character (me) and turning it into a playful commodity object. Surely, this figure, like the GROSS version, has some self-awareness.

When coming up with a display for this figure, I thought that it should include the source material that influenced its design: a.k.a. toys. Luckily, I had a dozen in my apartment. I have always been a toy collector. There was not a lot to do in my small town, so I watched TV and played with toys. By “playing” with toys, I mean taking plotlines I saw on television and applying them to action figures. I would stay in my

attic for hours creating dioramas for my toys to battle in. It was fun, but a solitary existence. I knew that these imaginary games could not compare with having real friends. When I became bored with playing by myself, I would go to the attic window and think about jumping to my death. I was depressed in grade school and often thought about suicide. So, when I look at the juxtaposition of the sad, wind-up me walking away from the toys, I am reminded of my dissatisfied childhood.



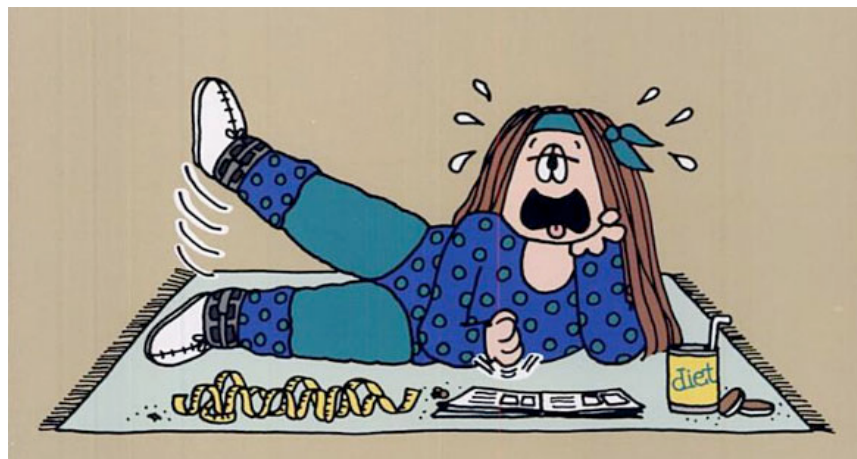
Another interpretation of this display is as an illustration of my Peter Pan Syndrome. I am 27 years old and, as stated, I have a dozen toys in my apartment. I am starting to think that such childish objects could be a turn-off to the female of the species, and may need to go. So, I look at my sculpture's display, and I think of the wind-up me as a Pied Piper figure leading a parade of toys to their ultimate demise. But since I am a toy myself, it is as though by destroying the toys, I too am destroying a part of who I am. Ridding my life of childish toys to find happiness would be a hypocritical act.



**FLABBY SEAN**

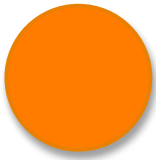


Who hasn't made this gesture in front of a mirror at one time or another? I make it daily. Even though this figure is naked and (not-so-obviously) male, I find it to be feminized. There is an honesty regarding body image that is typically associated with female insecurity. This is the sort of pose that the comic strip character "Cathy" would make while wearing a bikini. Men are supposed to embrace their beer guts and paint them the local football team's colors. Well, that's the gender bias anyway. I admit, I am self-conscious about my body -especially my height and weight. My height, I cannot do anything about, but my weight is under my control; so, it bothers me more. The body is nude in order to convey a sense of vulnerability.



Cathy Guisewite's comic strip character *Cathy*.

This figure is the most exaggerated because the doodle it was based on had the most cartooning style. In reality, my forehead is not so large, if anything it is too sloped and Cro-Magnon. However, to balance the proportion of the body, and make the figure seem shorter, the forehead had to become elongated. These physical traits evoke an association to dwarfism. The skinny, stick-like arms — surprisingly — look okay; however, if they were unfolded, they would extend far beneath the feet. Its body is humanoid, not far off from E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial's or a Ghoully.



### **GROSS SEAN**



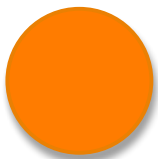
The drawing which this sculpture is based on was created after my project was outlined. I had several drawings already translated into sculptures, but there were still a few to be determined. I created this doodle as a commentary on my process. I was already exaggerating my physical features to gross proportions, but I had not gone to an extreme. I already had poked fun at my overbite, my large gut, and my

arched back, but I had not tackled my big nose. So, I drew a nose so big that it was literally the torso of my body –with legs oozing out of the nostrils. The earwax arms were to follow, and, finally, I added the pupils in the eyes, looking right at me, the creator. This figure is self-aware: I had gone too far with my physical exaggerations and he is calling me on it.



A very distorted Daffy Duck in the animated short, *Duck Amuck*.

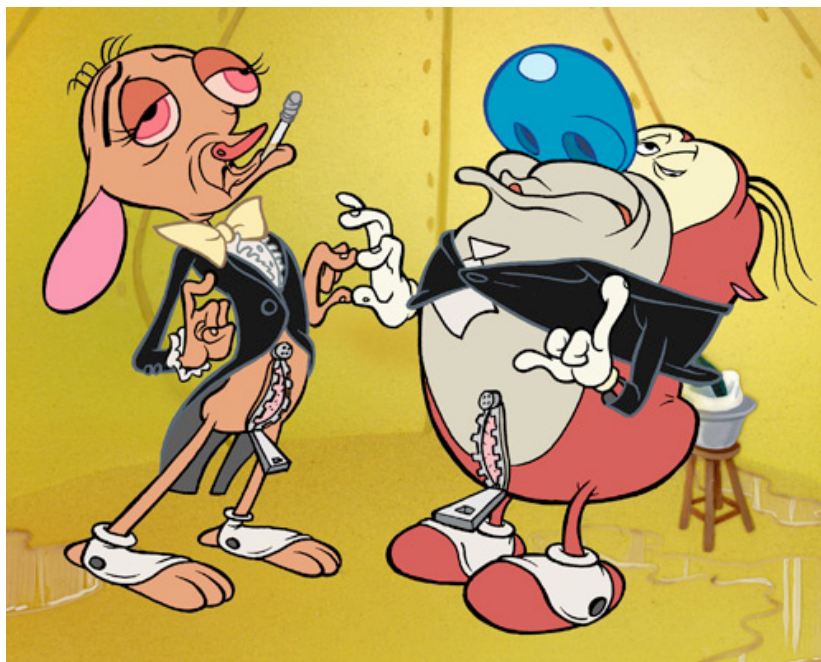
The most obvious influence that comes to mind, when I look at this figure, is the Warner Bros. cartoon “Duck Amuck” directed by Charles M. Jones. It stars a very self-aware Daffy Duck who complains directly to the animator who is manipulating him. At the pinnacle of the harassment, Daffy is animated walking on all fours with a flower for a head and a screwball flag for a tail. In the end, it is revealed that Bugs Bunny is the animator. It was one of my favorite cartoons as a child, and definitely influenced this self-portrait.



## PARANOID SEAN



Paranoia inspired this drawing. I was staying at a friend's house and was too anxious to sleep, so I decided to draw to calm my nerves. It resulted in this expressionistic characterization. This self-portrait is heavily influenced by close-up paintings featured in John Kricfalusi's cartoon, *The Ren and Stimpy Show*: the show I was weaned on.



Ren (left) and Stimpy (right) from *The Ren and Stimpy Show*.

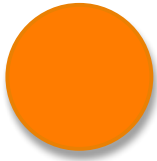
Growing up in the early 90s, *Ren and Stimpy* was groundbreaking. It was the first gross-out cartoon series directed at children. Gross-out culture has been around for centuries in illustration, painting, sculpture, and more recently, comic books, trading cards, motion pictures and action figures, but *Ren and Stimpy* was different; it was not part of some underground movement, it was on a mainstream children's television network: Nickelodeon. It transformed alternative culture into popular culture. The previous generation of gross-out beatniks — consisting of such greats as Basil Wolverton, Robert Crumb, and Big Daddy Roth — were counter-culture artists: too perverted and aesthetically assaulting for mainstream consumption. Had I been born during that time, obtaining this art would have been equivalent to scoring heroin: paying some burned-out teenager to smuggle me *Fritz the Cat* in a brown paper bag. But in the 90s, my dealer was Viacom and my parents were oblivious to the sick imagery being relished by their innocent, impressionable son.

Ren and Stimpy's visuals were an impressive combination of highly expressive animation and vividly painted still shots. What separated it from other animation at this time was that the characters were never on scale. The proportions of the characters were plastic, so the audience never knew what to expect. The still paintings were definitely the most shocking: close-up shots of booger-filled noses and smiles with rotting crooked teeth. Children are not as reserved as their adult counterparts, and we relished every disgusting detail.



Besides the aesthetics, the content was equally as shocking. Some episodes were too mature to be shown on Nickelodeon and were broadcast on MTV, instead. Situations often included hints at sexuality, extreme violence, and suicide. These topics were prevalent in other MTV cartoons as well, such as *Beavis and Butthead*, *Liquid Television*, *Aeon Flux*, *Cartoon Sushi*, *The Maxx*, *Daria*, and *The Brothers Grunt*. I loved them all and watched 8 hours of television a day. These cartoons were a gateway

drug; through them, I later became introduced to the freak-out culture of the 60s, and underground comix of the 70s.



## **MONSTER SEAN**



This drawing was originally intended to be a creepy little monster with some huge mechanical machine on its back. However, after I finished the monster's head, I decided to make a commentary on my experience in graduate school. This drawing attests to my inability to escape my current mental state. As much as I'd like to think of my art as an act of escapism, it's more about metaphor. Indeed, this drawing — with its pinwheel hat, trash-can house, and elitist dummy — is heavily based in metaphorical symbols. It reads like a convoluted political cartoon.

For the sculpted version, I decided to focus on one element: the monster. I thought that there were too many ideas being explored, and I was afraid that some elements would become lost in translation. Also, the composition had too much negative



space, and the figures would be too tiny, when seen through a View-Master. So, instead of my experience in graduate school, this figure became about my lifestyle.

I depicted myself as a naked monster, because, when I am at home, I am a naked beast. I have lived alone for the past five years; over that time, I have had roughly ten visitors. I have watched two movies with friends: totaling three hours. And I have had zero intercourse. I live a solitary existence ...except for my guinea pigs, which add to my instinctual mindset. They remind me that the key to life is eating and sleeping. They are my gurus. I often stagger around my apartment, naked, having conversations with invisible people. I often think that I don't mind the mess, because I spend so much time in imaginary settings. This is the process involved in conjuring creative dialogue. Hence, the monster with its mischievous smirk and distant stare, as though plotting something...

The pile in which the monster lives is not a gross exaggeration. It is a gross fact. I live in filth. I need clutter to feel comfortable. When I check in to a hotel room, the first thing that I do is dump out the contents of my suitcase. My childhood home, my apartment, and my studio all require pathways in order to navigate through them. I'm not proud of the way that I live, but I'm not apologetic either. I have come to terms with the fact



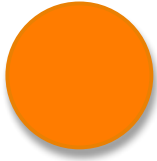
that I am a slob. To obtain the mess in the sculpture, spilling out of the trash can, I literally spent ten minutes with two friends stuffing items on my apartment's floor into garbage bags. I then arranged them into a pile within minutes. I am quite good at making compositionally balanced trash assemblages.



Prince with a long neck(?) from *Le Cachot*.

I painted the trash-can figure with incandescent paint that illuminated under black light. I did this as a reference to fun house and dark ride (fun houses with car tracks) aesthetics, in which my monster is based. Growing up, I found the dark rides at Kennywood Amusement Park, in Pittsburgh, PA, tremendously influential. They were bizarre for the sake of being bizarre. It could be a one-hundred-degree day in July, but inside, it was perpetually a sixty-degree, October, Halloween night. My favorite was *Le Cachot*, designed by Bill Tracy; it is considered by dark ride enthusiasts to be his “masterpiece” and “the ultimate classic dark ride” (LaCross). Tracy’s philosophy was that riders expected to see vampires and zombies and ghosts, so he would give them the unexpected. One gag consisted of a snake wrapped around a peace sign that would

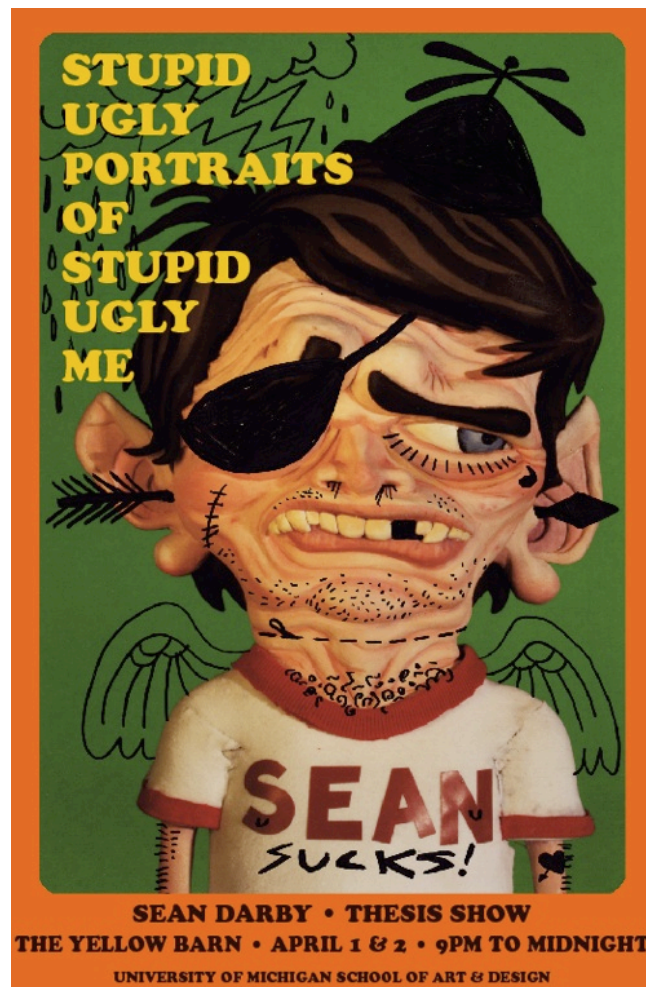
blow air in your face. What does that mean? The point was to shock the audience by confronting them the most confusing and bizarre stimuli possible. I loved it. Tracy was the master of the meta-scare. My monster is, in part, a tribute to *Le Cachot*, which — unfortunately — burned to the ground in 1998.



(Advance to the first slide)

## **CONCLUSION**

When scrolling through the View-Master slides, I think of the device as a retroactive time capsule containing a cross section of memories and emotions. This is my past, packaged in a little white box, and set on a shelf. Once and again I will revisit this project, but where you may see only stupid, ugly portraits, I will reminisce about the stories and influences that I touched on in this paper. Even though my project was only completed a few weeks ago, I already feel sentimental about it.



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