

Making Friends: Narrative, Process, and Portraits

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Abstract

This paper will discuss how, through an exploration of the concepts surrounding portraiture and nontraditional storytelling, I create narratives that reflect the complex humor surrounding issues of mortality and the intricacies of the human psyche.

Utilizing the format of the book both conceptually and physically creates the stage (world) for my characters that is separate from our world. In comparison to other forms of art, the interaction with a book is markedly different by virtue of the viewer's movement through it with the turn of a page. The codex allows for an element of surprise, of transformation. In narratives, even non-traditional, nonsensical ones, control over the pacing and the timing of the "punchlines" is crucial.

This paper examines how the work of Maurice Sendak, Lydia Davis, and Marcel Dzama informs my understanding of how narratives can be constructed. From broaching difficult subject matter with emotional complexity (Sendak) to pointedly encapsulating distinct moments in time (Davis) to the construction of visual narratives that challenge the viewer (Dzama), all of these artists navigate the difficult, the unsavory, and the strange with humor and honesty.

Introduction

In the past, my work touched on themes pertaining to family, interpersonal connection and identity. Through an exploration of the concepts surrounding portraiture and nontraditional narrative, I am currently creating books featuring various creatures (monsters, birds, circus sideshow freaks, etc.) who find themselves in uncomfortable social situations, battle existential crises, and contemplate mortality.

In considering the past two years of this program, I not only acknowledge the growth and breakthroughs I've experienced artistically, but I recognize development in my ability to engage with my chosen subject matter. In allowing myself to identify and unpack the complex feelings I have about the passage of time, loneliness, and grief, I am able to create narratives that are honest, at times ambiguous, and that reflect my humor. I draw on visual elements from my childhood to create books and images that illustrate and examine (seemingly) simple, humorous instances of complex human emotion.

My current work deals with mortality, but also with the little deaths we experience every day: embarrassments, failures, strained relationships, and so on. It is in these small but crushing moments that our humanity is revealed in all of its complex tones.

I. Artistic Influences

i. Concept

Maurice Sendak's relevance to me rests in his handling of difficult themes and the ability to poignantly capture and interpret a wealth of human emotions. Mortality, a topic of interest to us both, weighed heavily on Sendak's mind. This originated in childhood and was a huge influence on his lifetime of work. He told Terry Gross in a 1993 radio interview for the NPR show, *Fresh Air*, "So it was the awareness at a very early age of mortality which pervaded my soul, apparently, and I think provided me with the ingredients of being an artist."



Figure 1.1, Maurice Sendak, detail from *Where the Wild Things Are*

Sendak managed to address topics such as death, loneliness, separation, and sadness—all difficult to consider—in books that hold great appeal to readers of all ages (Fig 1.1 and 1.2). I believe his ability to

broach such painful or scary topics hinges on his honest storytelling and his ability to make work that touches on themes so deeply human. Children seem to identify easily with the child hero of the stories, be the hero human or not. “Anyone who thinks that children don’t worry, don’t ponder, don’t think about dying, who thinks Grimm’s is going to put that thought in their mind,” writes Sendak, “seems to me incredibly naïve” (Zinsser, p. 22-23). I think it’s important to note that while Sendak tackled difficult topics and placed his characters in seemingly perilous situations, he always managed to instill in his readers a sense that painful experiences are universal, transformative, and transitional. The variation in the tone of his work is complex. As a reader, I have returned to his stories and found that past meanings or conclusions have evolved as I have matured, and my ability to read and understand has grown.

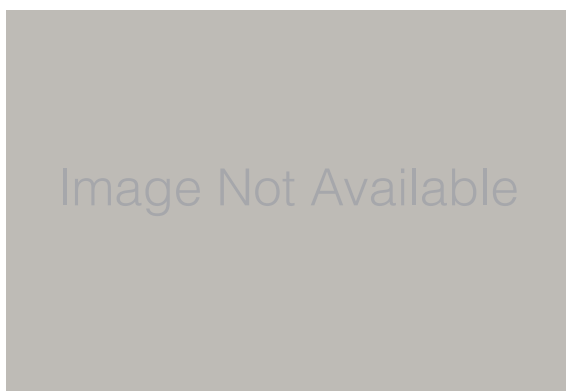


Figure 1.2, Maurice Sendak, detail from *Where the Wild Things Are*

In Sendak's last book, *Bumble-Ardy*, we meet a young pig who, at age nine, has never had a birthday party. After his parents die, Bumble-Ardy goes to live with his kind aunt, Adeline. He decides to throw a birthday party for himself and, after inviting too many raucous guests, gets in trouble with Adeline, who had trusted him to behave. Bumble-Ardy fears his aunt Adeline will stop loving him or not want to care for him anymore. After the loss of his parents, to suffer yet another abandonment poses a very real threat. Aunt Adeline, however, takes Bumble-Ardy into her arms and kisses him "nine times over nine."



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Figure 1.3, Maurice Sendak, detail from *Bumble-Ardy*

The resolution may be read as a happy ending, although, on further consideration, there is a sense that this isn't the end of trouble for Bumble-Ardy. He hasn't come out of the other side of this loss

unchanged, and we know the death of his parents is just the first in a series of losses he will experience during his life. Characters in Sendak's books may appear to find solace in the loving arms of their parents after a scary moment, but that moment is fleeting and the reader knows that life extends beyond the end of the story.

Indeed, when writing *Bumble-Ardy*, Sendak was grappling with mortality. He wrote this book during a period of time when his longtime partner, Eugene Glynn, was suffering from lung cancer. Sendak says of that time, "And I did *Bumble-Ardy* to save myself. I did not want to die with him. I wanted to live, as any human being does. But there's no question that the book was affected by what was going on in the house" (NPR Radio Interview with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*, 2011). Creating and making work—specifically this book—geared towards children is a way to affirm one's life. "*Bumble-Ardy*," Sendak says, "was a combination of the deepest pain and the wondrous feeling of coming into my own, and it took a long time" (NPR Radio Interview with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*, 2011). Creating in the face of great pain is something I have done throughout my life. It has been therapeutic, but what's more important, work generated during a difficult period is often revelatory and real. When successful, it avoids decadent self-pity and, instead, creates a universal narrative that can be read on multiple levels.

When I was thirty, I lost my mother to cancer. This event changed my attitudes and relationship with illness and death because, for the first time, I was seeing it from beginning to end, from the inside. I am drawn to make work that references mortality because I am still trying to unravel complex, though universal feelings about it. As time has passed, I see that issues surrounding mortality involve more than just the fear of death. It is embodied in other types of loss: loneliness, unrequited love, or breakdowns in communication with loved ones.

Hector is a book I drafted for a Criticism seminar class. We were given the assignment to create an imaginary work that addressed an “ultimate concern.” The concept of “ultimate concern” was originated by theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich in *Dynamics of Faith* (1957). An ultimate concern is (to be brief) a concern that transcends time and circumstance. It is that which we cannot escape, no matter our situation in life. There is nothing more ultimate to me than mortality. When I first started work on *Hector*, my aim was to create a tongue-in-cheek “guide” for children dealing with a fear of death. As the project progressed, I realized that while it was not a children’s book, it did handle death with an obvious humor that came from my use of both text and image. As the book opens, we see Hector, a young child, encounter a dead cat (Fig 1.4). An older lady (possibly his grandmother) explains the cat is dead, and what

happens when one dies. After a brief discussion of reincarnation, Hector's imagination takes over and

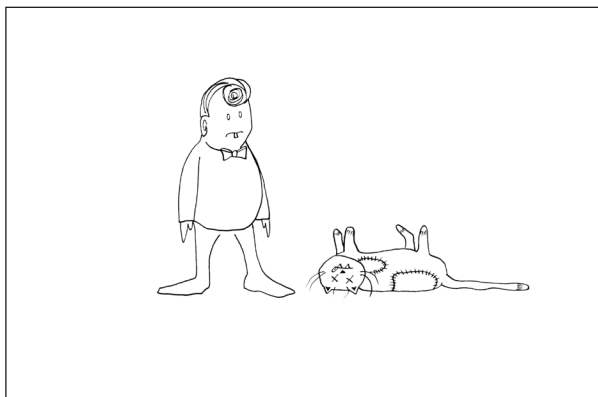


Figure 1.4, Katherine Pulido, detail from *Hector* (2013)

he invents a number of (problematic and funny) reincarnations. At the end of the book, after the old lady sends Hector off to play with an exasperated, "You're killing me, Hector," we see standing behind her a comic image of the grim reaper, the same image we first met on the cover. Like *Bumble-Ardy*, the book is tonally complex and addresses the hard reality (and inevitability) of future loss. The simple, cartoon-like line drawings and their placement in the space of the page spread and the text, which also has visual presence, and its placement, tell a story, sometimes together, sometimes in counterpoint, that may be read on more than one level.

Another aspect of Sendak's work that resonates with my own is his insistence on the creation of his own original creatures. When he was developing the artwork for *Where the Wild Things Are*, he initially looked to mythological creatures for inspiration. They just didn't feel right—they were "borrowed monsters" (Zinsser, p. 20-21). The entire series of seemingly random monsters, birds, and freaks I created in the summer of 2012 all came from gestural watercolors. Like Sendak, I feel it is important that the creatures I create come from me because as I develop them visually, I am developing their internal landscapes and psychologies. Each one is an individual and, in just simple strokes of a brush or pen, I seem to be giving them both a history and a narrative trajectory (Fig 1.5).

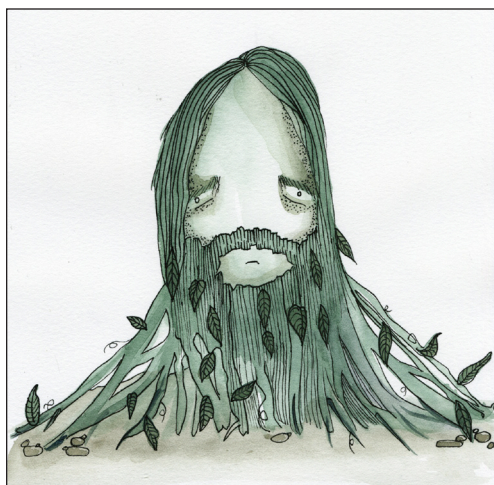


Figure 1.5, Katherine Pulido, *Rootface* (2013)

After the initial creation of this cast of motley characters, I realized that they required a real narrative in which to exist. The traditional book format with its page-turn “reveals” offers many possibilities for various character interactions and narrative structures. Try as I might to impose a traditional narrative onto these characters, it didn’t work. My attempts felt clunky. They weighed down characters who appear complex and lively in their own right. These characters needed to tell their own story instead of being mere vehicles for my storytelling.

ii. Narrative Construction

Susan Viguers, our program director, suggested I read Lydia Davis’ short stories after helping me edit the draft text for *Music for Monsters*, an illustrated book that humorously juxtaposes various creatures in a series of strange social interactions. Underlying these social interactions are the little losses I mentioned earlier (loneliness or awkwardness, for example). In one spread, a tall monster is seen telling a much smaller (and stunned-looking) monster that he’s “a bit handsy” for his liking, while a large tadpole looks on from a distance uttering the word, “awkward.” The nonsensical narrative is comprised of thought bubbles, speech bubbles, and captions, and can be considered a series of short vignettes. I found the similarities between my work and Davis’s writing

striking. Davis's short stories can be incredibly brief, though pointed. They encapsulate a very precise moment in time and in thought, in very simple terms, as in *A Double Negative*:

At a certain point in her life she realizes it is not so much that she wants to have a child as that she does not want not to have a child, or not to have had a child.

(Davis, 373). When asked how she defines what a story is, Davis told Sarah Manguso of *The Believer* magazine that "It's a very hard thing to define...I would say a story has to have a bit of narrative, if only 'she says,' and then enough of a creation of a different time and place to transport the reader" (Manguso). As an artist interested in working with visual and textual vignettes, I find this definition both a validation and a standard. In combining text and image, it would seem that both a narrative and a creation of another time and space could be easily achieved, although creating a compelling, relatable work of art is challenging. One way I am approaching this is by creating narratives and characters that draw from my own experiences and feelings with a good deal of humor.

Artistry exists in the use of humor, which can be an important component in the creation of complex tone. Humor in Davis' work can be found in her artful juxtapositions of the tragic and comic as in *Love*:

A woman fell in love with a man who had been dead a number of years. It was not enough for her to brush his coats, wipe his inkwell, finger his ivory comb: she had to build her house over his grave and sit with him night after night in the damp cellar.

(Davis, p. 178). The texts I work with in my books often utilize slang and other pop culture references. This language play embeds it with humor that can often be read on a literal level and/or within a cultural context. The dissonance between the verbal and the visual (which is comprised of whimsical, yet complex creatures) creates a humorously strange composition as in the *Music for Monsters* spread “I got 99 problems but a beard ain’t one,” where we see both a reference to a Jay-Z song or, if you didn’t know that, a collection of several weird bearded creatures (Fig. 1.6).

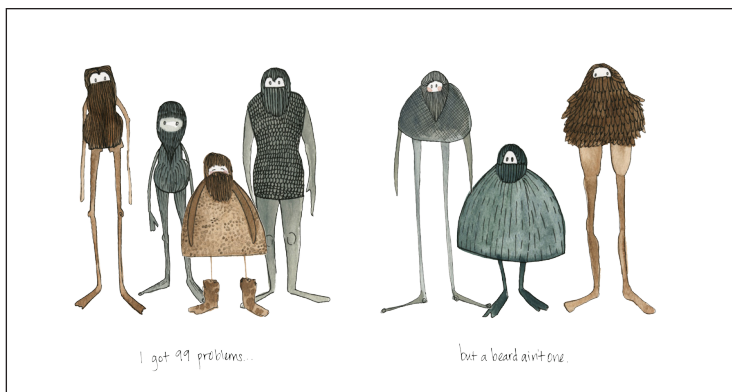


Figure 1.6, Katherine Pulido, detail from *Music for Monsters* (2012)

iii. Composition

When it comes to issues of composition, I look to the drawings of Marcel Dzama. His compositions are highly architectural, depicting complex surreal scenes. His drawings have also been compared to those found in vintage children's books in the early 1900s (Fig 1.7). And yet, this is not artwork for children. According to Deborah Soloman, "he uses his innocent-looking style to capture a savage contemporary universe" (Soloman).

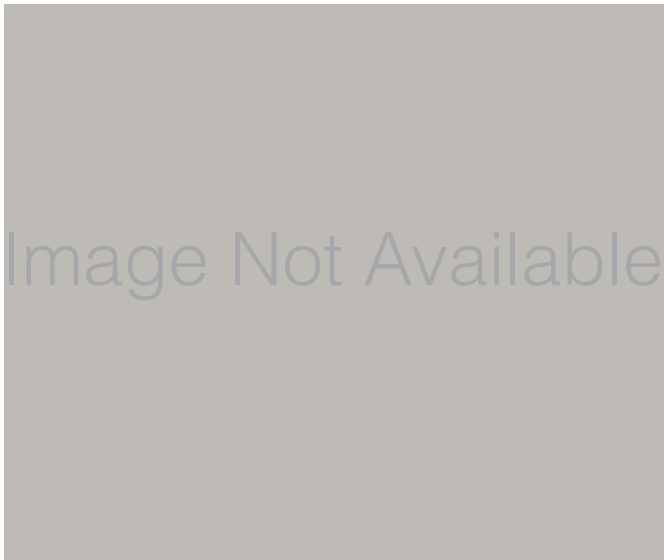


Figure 1.7, Marcel Dzama, *Back Stage* (2007)

His use of a limited, muted palette of browns and olive greens reinforces that vintage illustration aesthetic, although his odd juxtapositions and interjections of supernatural and violent elements (dainty ladies in ski masks, lizard-faced men with guns, bears throwing bricks, for example) into the “ordinary” world signals a narrative that is full of tension and menace, but also humor (Fig 1.8). Dzama succeeds in creating narratives that we are unsure of, are possibly even uncomfortable with, but are willing to engage with.

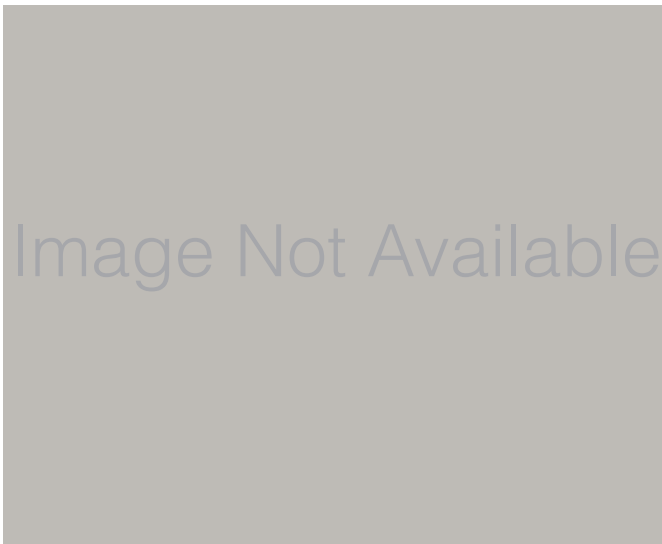


Figure 1.8, Marcel Dzama, *The People Hack Them to Pieces, The Throngs, the Gilded Roofs, the Beautiful Animals* (2009)

His architectural compositions often feature characters in suspension, balancing, hanging, and jumping. The white space around his subjects reinforces this. “In Dzama’s work, particularly the drawings, the scenes depicted are not set in a specific location; characters float on the page and participate casually, unperturbed, in sometimes violent or sexually explicit activities” (Lactot, p.107).

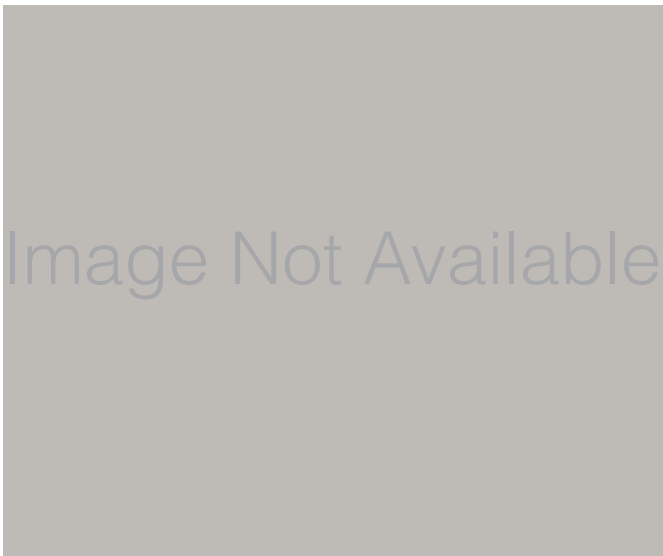


Figure 1.9, Marcel Dzama, *Untitled* (2007)

Dzama’s use of white space resonates with me as most of my drawings and compositions are also

situated within a white space. I see most of my works as small portraits of individuals (Fig 1.10), of visual records of interactions. Even in my books, I am not interested in visual context or setting. In my books, words fill in white space and provide a context that has dimensions that a drawn background could not give. The words spoken by my characters complement and extend their visual presence, evoking an authentic vision of who they are at a given moment.



Figure 1.10, Katherine Pulido, *Two Friends* (2013)

My newest works for the thesis show feature large watercolor paintings depicting scenes of violent celebration. I see these paintings as responses to Dzama's work in both their composition and mood. As opposed to the smaller character portraits with

which I began, in cinematic terms, these paintings are what one sees when the camera pulls back from the intimate interactions found in my books (Fig. 1.11). They offer a macro view of the strange world my characters inhabit.

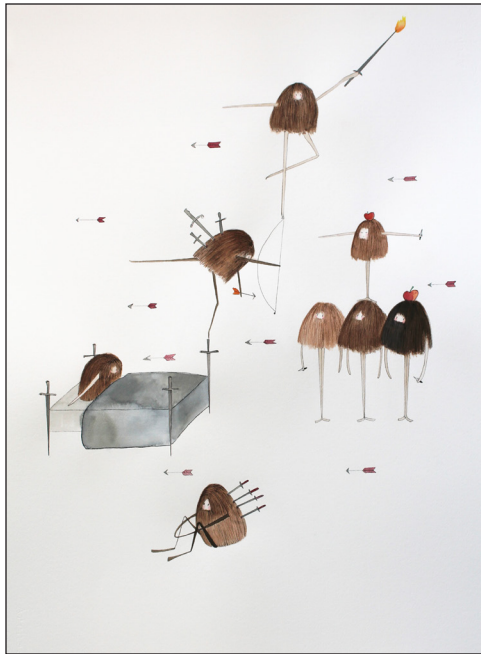


Figure 1.11, Katherine Pulido, *The Apple-shot* (2013)

Looking at these three artists in particular has helped me gain a better understanding of how narratives can be constructed. From broaching difficult subject matter with emotional complexity (Sendak) to pointedly encapsulating distinct moments in time

(Davis) to the construction of visual narratives that challenge the viewer (Dzama), all of these artists have found ways to navigate the difficult, the unsavory, and the strange with humor and honesty.

II. Process and Materials

i. Watercolor

Watercolor painting is something I never thought I would ever do on any level. I viewed it as a practice for lovers of botanical illustration or landscape artists. It wasn't until I tried to illustrate my entire family in the piece *Strings*, that I found watercolors gave me the translucence and delicate subtleties in color that I needed to capture the light portraits seem to require. I work well with watercolor's fluid and organic qualities—the way it flows and can easily be manipulated on paper is vital to the automatic painting style I use.

Before I begin to paint, I cut many small squares of watercolor paper. Working small enables me to travel with my work and create work in spaces of varying sizes. I developed a technique to render my creature portraits in an organic, automatic, and spontaneous way. I lay down freeform shapes using light watercolors and gouache, approximating where facial and other physical features might be. I then go over my painting with a thin black pen. My use

of line figures large in these character portraits. (Fig 2.1). Lines are used to create texture, volume, and contour. They create definition and separation and are most often used in conjunction with color fields. The variation in the quality of the line can be seen if one compares drawings done for *Hector* with those done in the *Music for Monsters* books. In *Hector*, the lines are iconic, reminiscent of a comic book. The lines in the portraits used in *Music for Monsters* have a realistic precision that contributes to the characters coming alive on the page.

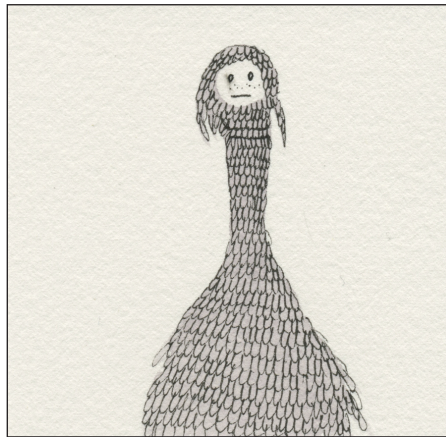


Figure 2.1, Katherine Pulido, *Longneck Monster* (2012)

The very first features I draw are nearly always the simple, round, expressive eyes. As I fill in other features, the character emerges and I begin to imagine what they might be thinking or saying. Their posture

and placement on the page is indicative of something in their personalities and perhaps their relationship to other characters (Fig 2.2).



Figure 2.2, Katherine Pulido, *When Animals Attack Animals* (2013)

ii. Portraiture

I view these paintings as character portraits, and this is why I choose to place them on a simple white background. In traditional portraiture, the artist always situated the subject in a context and provided visual cues as to the subject's status, wealth, social standing, and so forth. Backgrounds figured largely in such portraits and often features lavish furnishings, elaborate dress, and regal colors. Modern portraiture has deviated from that tradition and we see many more portraits of "ordinary" people and far simpler

backgrounds. This past year, I curated a portraiture show featuring Shizu Saldamando, a Los-Angeles-based artist whose work prominently features members of marginalized subcultures who are often overlooked (Fig 2.3 and 2.4).

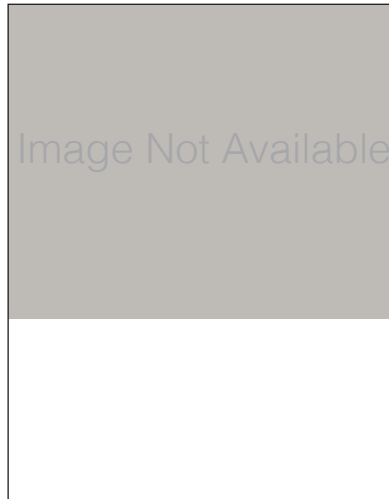


Figure 2.3, Shizu Saldamando, *El Darketo, El Chopo, Mexico City* (2009)

Many of her highly detailed subjects are painted on wooden boards allowing the grain of the wood to become the only background. We are given context and clues as to the identity of the subject based on such visuals as clothing, hairstyles, accessories, posturing. In her artist statement, she writes: "Visual signifiers drawing from fashion and place are constantly in flux, fluid in meaning yet rich in

historical context. For this reason I gravitate towards portraiture as practice and process” (Saldamando, Artist Statement).

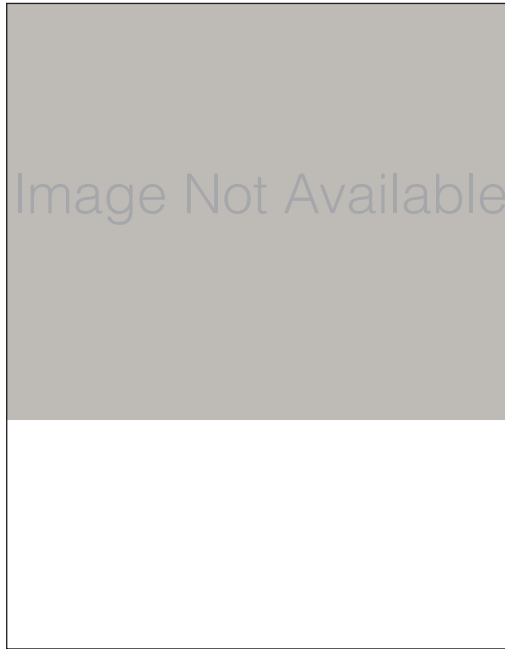


Figure 2.4, Shizu Saldamando, *El Chopo Couple* (2009)

My portraits do not place the character in a historical context, nor do they make much comment about social status. My character portraits, instead, capture a glimpse into the complexity of emotion. In juxtaposing one portrait with another and by creating dialogs between these characters, I investigate the challenges of interpersonal connection,

disappointment, and the vague dissatisfaction that floats right beneath the surface of consciousness (Fig 2.5).

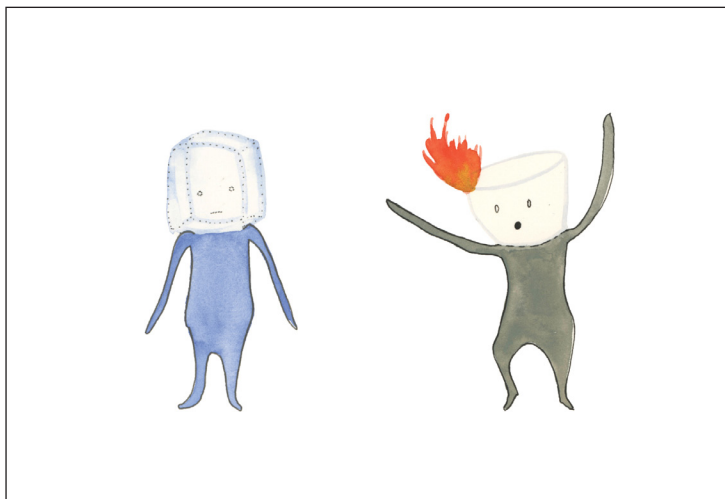


Figure 2.5, Katherine Pulido, detail from the cover of *Music for Monsters, Volume 2* (2013)

iii. Creating the Narrative

Utilizing the format of a book both conceptually and physically creates the stage (world) for my characters that is separate from our world. In comparison to other forms of art, the interaction with a book is markedly different by virtue of the viewer's movement through it with the turn of a page. The structure of a codex (the traditional bound book structure comprised of left and right-

hand pages)—the form I most typically use—allows for transformation from one page to the next. In *Hector*, my book that follows a little boy’s growing understanding of death and the possibilities for the afterlife, as Hector is freaking out about all the cool things he can be reincarnated as (a piñata and a cheeseburger, etc.), the turn of the page reveals the “reality” of these particular choices (his bashed-in piñata guts, his half-eaten cheeseburger face). The codex allows for an element of surprise, of transformation. In narratives, even non-traditional, nonsensical ones, control over the pacing and the timing of the “punch lines” is crucial.

Pacing is just one of the issues that gets refined in the process of translating a series of character portraits into a book. Like the first *Music for Monsters*, *Music for Monsters, Volume 2* is comprised of a series of illustrated creatures often in uncomfortable conversation with others or deep in existential angst. Again, we return to the underlying theme of the little losses, or little deaths experienced in everyday life. The text in the book is a mixture of handwriting and electronically set type. A series of seeming non-sequiturs, the format changes as the reader moves through the book. One page might be the factual account of Dr. Harry Harlow’s rhesus monkey experiments, the next an illustration of a creature couple in bed without text of any kind (Fig 2.6).

In the early stages of this process, I line up all the character portraits I think I may want to use (or that seem to want to say something) and make photocopies of them. I make many photocopies in various sizes. I then fold a simple blank codex containing a minimum of twenty pages. This number is completely arbitrary, though it gives me a starting point—pages can always be added, though they are rarely subtracted. I then begin to pair up the creatures based on whether I think the conversation or relationship they would have to one another would lead to something big or funny or sad. I paste my characters in place, though this place often changes as the book develops. It is important to note that the original watercolor portraits are really just quick starting points for my bookwork. They are not precious in and of themselves, but they do initiate and drive the narrative forward (Fig 2.7).



Figure 2.6, Katherine Pulido, detail from *Music for Monsters, Volume 2* (2013)

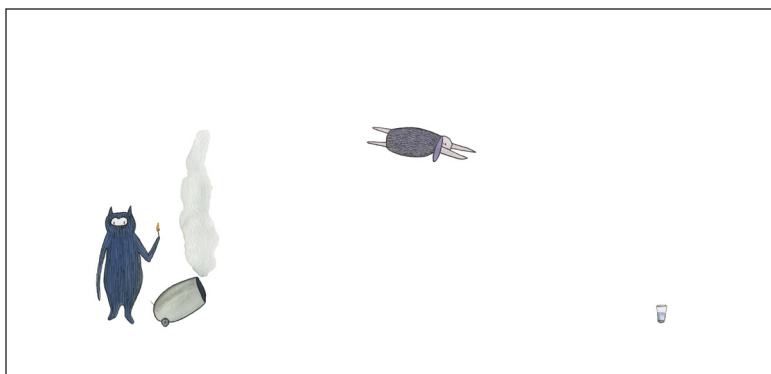


Figure 2.7, Katherine Pulido, detail from *Music for Monsters, Volume 2* (2013)

Unlike Maurice Sendak (Zinsser, p. 28), I do not always begin with text. Not with a book of this narrative form. The text is derived in one of two ways: I either pull from collected bits of conversations, sayings, funny thoughts, song lyrics (that I keep in my sketch book) and find a way to put that bit into the mouth or brain of a character; or, I invent the text based on characters' juxtapositions, attitudes, or the apparent situation created when two or more encounter each other. In my investigations into how Lydia Davis arrives at her pointed, short narrations, I came across a description of her process that I found reassuring. "It seems to me," she says, "that few writers have an overarching master plan or project—or at least, not one that begins when they are first beginning to write. I think that in any case I come to each stage of my writing by degrees.

Perhaps a pattern can be detected after the fact, but as it proceeds, one's development, though logical or inevitable in one sense, is in another sense chaotic" (Manguso). That sums up the way I approach the writing in my books. The text is a fluid and flexible element—in some ways I think more so than my images. Adjustments can be made, and almost must be made, as the narrative progresses. Allowing myself the latitude to do so is crucial to the process. Rendering the character portraits takes time, but the text takes even longer.

In *Hector*, where the narrative is much more linear, I still began formulating the story in drawings. Sendak cautions against that saying, "you don't want to be seduced by the pictures because then you begin to write for pictures" (Zinsser, p. 28). I have encountered that issue a few times, and to sacrifice a really good, funny drawing for the sake of the story is a painful, although necessary, exercise in good creative decision-making. When I began *Hector*, I had a vague idea of what the story was—a child's first encounter with the concept of death. As the draft progressed, I began talking to parents about this topic and listened to some radio shows about death as it pertained to children, and the stories I heard helped me flesh out the narrative arc. I also pulled from memories of my childhood and my understanding of things such as reincarnation.

Many of my stories are derived from my personal life, my childhood. I thought for a while that this was a pitfall—that people typically don't care about other people's personal stories and that work should be universal. This, of course, is not entirely true. While it is important to make work that can be accessible and relatable, it is often the specificity of an event, thought, or feeling that interests viewers and even gives the sense of a shared experience. How much of myself I choose to put into a story is something to be carefully considered. And frankly, in most cases, the audience doesn't need to know whether anything is based on the artist's life. In many of her stories, Lydia Davis also draws from her personal life in the creation of characters: "A character in one of my stories," she writes, "may resemble me in certain ways, through a selection of biographical facts or psychological characteristics, but she is something different, a creation" (Manguso). Part of the creative process is making certain choices and selections about what or how to portray, or, as Lydia Davis says, "fictionalize," elements taken from real life (Manguso). The selection is the artistry. Indeed, distortion, fictionalizing, and creative decision-making is at the core of what artists do.

iv. Visual, Verbal, and Production Vocabulary

In developing my visual vocabulary, I look to people like Marcel Dzama who have created a

rich and recognizable visual style and vocabulary. His paintings (consisting of little to no text) offer the viewer a glimpse into a highly complex and developed narrative that is at once mysterious, mythical, and somehow massive in importance (Thompson, p. 100). As viewers, we are somehow willing to accept being dropped into a moment in time and not knowing the back-story. Bears playing guitars alongside little girls, men hanging from nooses and menacing masked figures wielding machine guns all coexist in his spaces. Bizarre, yes, but combined with his sparse, still backgrounds and limited, vintage-inspired palette, there is a sense of veracity. Knowing when an image stands alone, or when it stands to benefit from the addition of text is something Dzama does well. His sometimes heady and humorous titles (like *Now You Must Marry the Rope Maker's Daughter* or *Wisemen Are a Myth, Unless It Is a Woman*) at times make their way into his pieces as captions. They further our understanding of the imagery without explaining it away. His decisions seem effortless and his compositions cannot exist any other way.

Occasionally, in my work, text stands alone without an image but it still has a visual presence. In my postcard series, *The Nicest Thing I Never Want to be Told (Again)* (2013), for example, I chose the font, *Brainflower* (Fig 2.8). It is a font I use in many of my books, and is often chosen for its casual, handwritten



Figure 2.8, Katherine Pulido, detail from *The Nicest Thing I Never Want to be Told (Again)* (2013)

quality. Surrounded by speech bubbles, the text on the postcards is biting, a series of backhanded compliments such as “You’re a lot prettier than I expected,” or, “I kind of get why you’re single.” The decision to design these postcards without images (aside from the speech bubbles) was due in large part to the fact that in this MFA Book Arts/Printmaking program, it has been stressed that text and image should support each other in order for them to coexist on the page. An image, in this case, would have appeared arbitrary. Striking that balance where image and text both rely on and are bolstered by the other is crucial.

After all of the images and text and layouts have been decided, edited, and reedited, I turn to my computer to compose and output all my pages digitally. Earlier in graduate school, I thought the effort ought to be made to hand print each limited edition book or print.

I have come to believe that the process of fine printing achieves a preciousness and uniqueness that distracts from my current body of work. I find that the output should match or complement the content of a work. *Livres d'artistes* don't make sense as photocopied zines. Likewise, zines do not work as fine-pressed specimens printed on handmade paper. The work I make asserts a physical presence that does not call attention to itself and is not self-conscious. The more time I allow for the development of the emotional contours of my characters, the richer and more thoughtful my narratives are. That my books tend to be multiples is indicative of my intended audience. Laser printed, saddle stapled or pamphlet-stitched, these books are as casual as the characters featured in their pages. These are not books specifically for the upscale collector. The audience I envision varies widely as the themes involved possess a certain universality and comedy. I think the audience I make these books for is engaged in the visuals, understands the various levels of humor and narrative, and is willing to make connections and fill in blanks where blanks exist.

A large but silent partner, time figures in all aspects of my process—from the immediacy of my automatic creature portraits to the repetitive and often long process of text creation and development to the pacing of the narrative to the very heart of many of my most-explored concepts. As my work continues

to develop, so does my relationship to time as both a large factor in the creative process and as a muse.

III. Development

i. Traditional Methods

The decision to pursue graduate school was a difficult one to make. I had spent many years working in the legal field and though I was dissatisfied with that career path, beginning something new felt extremely daunting. I began taking community college classes in printmaking and book structures and found I wanted to explore book arts more deeply. After some time I realized community college and weekend workshops were not going to offer everything I needed and wouldn't satisfy my desire to be in an environment that fostered creativity and challenged me to trust my creative instincts. When my mother became ill, we had many discussions about what I was doing and where I wanted to be. At her urging, I mustered up the courage to take a chance on grad school and see this newfound passion through.

When I began the program, I had a strong interest in book structures and traditional letterpress printing techniques. My entire first semester was spent experimenting with different printing techniques, book structures, collage, and materials such as paper. My content, too, seemed experimental and unfocused.

Topics ranged from fear to fantastical stories told by grandparents to pork products to everything in between. I made a lot of fairly safe, fairly dull work. My attempts at storytelling felt stilted, and I soon turned away from textual narratives altogether, and instead tried to tell stories utilizing only images. I made the concept of family the focal point of my Spring 2011 works in progress show. I created *Strings*, a wall installation of 34 watercolor portraits of every member of my family (Fig 3.1).

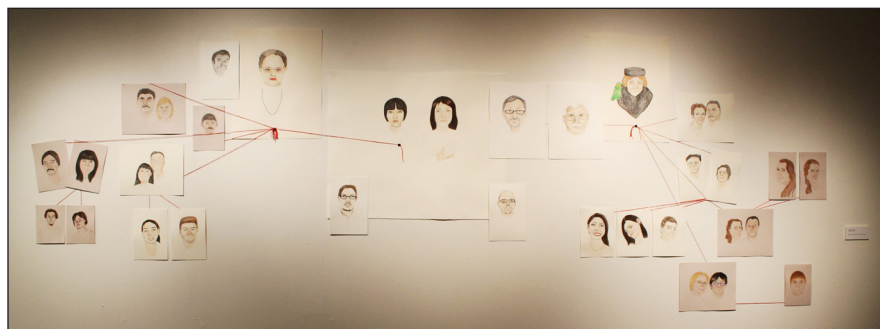


Figure 3.1, Katherine Pulido, *Strings* (2012)

My goal was to show bloodlines, interpersonal connection, and distinct personalities through these paintings, their placement on the wall, and the threads that ran from mother to mother. This sprawling piece did begin to get at some of the issues I wanted to explore (such as inheritance and discord), but without much of a narrative, it left viewers with an incomplete story (Fig 3.2). Rounding out the year,

I created a series of large maps of places that only had narrative significance to me. Again, the lack of text hindered the viewer's ability to discern any narrative. This inability to communicate my concepts and ideas was cause for concern and frustration and I ended my first year unsure of how to proceed.



Figure 3.2, Katherine Pulido, detail from *Strings* (2012)

ii. Conceptual Shift

And then summer happened. I view the summer between my first and second year as a pivotal moment. I was able to live in New York and intern at Peter Kruty Editions in Brooklyn. There, I helped with

the printing and binding of a limited edition artist book by New York artist Lesley Dill. I went on a class trip to South Korea for the Seoul International Book Fair. In addition to attending the fair, we visited a number of book arts galleries, met a number of Korean book artists, and took tours of the Bookcity Moveable Type Workshop and the Hanji Paper Mill. I began to see a broadening in my life and work. I was able to see how different artists worked and advanced the contemporary world of book arts. Exposure to different visual vocabularies helped me begin to see how I could be situated among other artists. I began to feel a lot more comfortable with the way I work and, in the late summer, I had something of a breakthrough.

For 20 hot days I sat at a kitchen table in Swarthmore and painted. I felt the need to be productive and to take advantage of a period of time in which I would not have to make work with a lofty concept behind it. This wasn't work to be defended. It was far more personal. It was work I was doing for myself.

This freedom I felt to create without a formula related strongly to the manner in which I approached these new works. Painting on multiple small pieces of watercolor paper allowed me to work on small surfaces and move these new creature portraits around with ease. As I was in the process of moving to a much smaller and more crowded living situation,

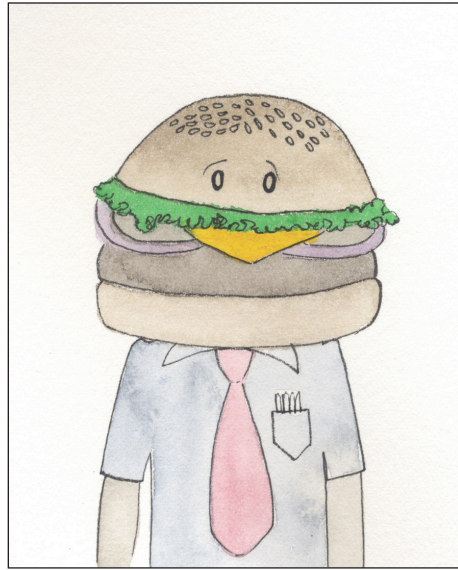


Figure 3.3, Katherine Pulido, *Burgerface* (2012)

working small suited me. I developed the spontaneous painting technique that I use now whereby I spread large areas of color forming vague shapes and then go back in with a pen to add details. At times more layers of paint get laid down adding depth and definition to the painting. The characters all tended to fall into a few main categories: monsters (the largest body of work), birds, circus sideshow freaks, household appliances with faces, and mushrooms (Fig 3.4).

At times I would look at these creatures and try to make sense of what I was doing and what connections

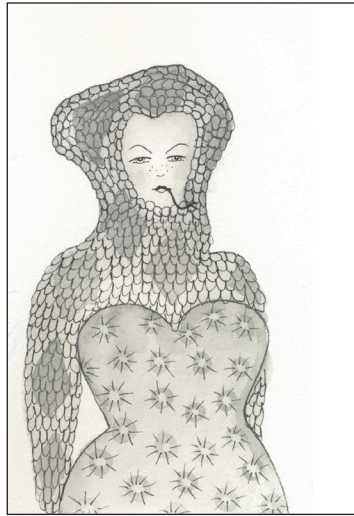


Figure 3.4, Katherine Pulido, *Snake-Lady* (2012)

could be drawn to previous work. My relationship with my work was changing. Instead of beginning with an end in mind, I was allowing the paintings to emerge. In working with the medium some more, I realized that the portraits would reveal themselves to me and show me what and who they wanted to be. After considering them more, I found that they seemed to be an outgrowth of the family portraits I had created in months prior. Though discrete portraits, they all seemed to share certain characteristics. Like a family, they were all individuals and could stand alone, but possessed a different power as a group.

During the fall of 2012, I returned to school with my portraits and decided I wanted to use them in a book format. I quickly realized that imposing a traditional, rigid narrative on the characters wasn't working. It weighed them down, causing them to become a lot less dynamic. After reading through a collection of Lydia Davis's short stories, I began to understand that what one requires to construct a successful narrative can be a lot less than expected. For something to be a story, all that is really needed is a character, an action, and a point of view. Allowing the characters to exist in brief visual vignettes freed them from the rigidity of a story arc. What you see in each spread is the story. Allowing the vignettes their separateness still requires a coherence that must be seen throughout the book. This can be achieved both visually (all of the images clearly come from the same hand) and through a consistency in the author's voice. Developing a voice that is sure and distinct has been a goal of mine throughout the program.

The introduction of humor into my work initially felt like a huge leap. I had the completely misguided notion that to be taken seriously in the art world or even in this graduate program, I needed to make "serious" work. It wasn't until I developed these character portraits that I felt I could and should use humor. The humor itself continues to develop. When I acknowledged that the work I make asks questions about what makes us human, how we understand

the self through relationships to others, and how mortality fits in with an understanding of the self, the humor progressed past one-liners. Writing and making work about life's daily indignities, those brief moments of discomfort and awkward tension, necessitates a type of humor that is relatable and that gives the viewer pause.

iii. Thesis Work and Continuations

In contrast to the first volume of *Music for Monsters*, where I created single creatures on separate pieces of paper that need to be juxtaposed with other single creatures for a story, for the second volume of *Music for Monsters*, I created portraits that have a narrative embedded in them. These newest creatures are already seen in relationship to others and are only lacking the text that will serve to clarify or expand.

In addition to this follow-up volume, I also began making five large paintings that are presented with my books. Working large and with multiple characters is new to me. As an exercise for my Studio & Text class, I had created a visual response to an artist I had presented to the class. Dzama's large paintings drop us into the middle of a narrative we are at once unfamiliar with, and willing to accept. They are engaging, archetypal and immensely complex. My response painting echoed his use of a muted palette and architectural compositions.

Walking the line between just-sweet and macabre, these new paintings depict scenes of celebration and violence. A series of visual narratives, the only textual clues the viewers have are the titles of the pieces. Unlike *Strings*, the relationships between the characters are more explicit, the narrative more clearly defined though not literal (Fig 3.5 and 3.6).

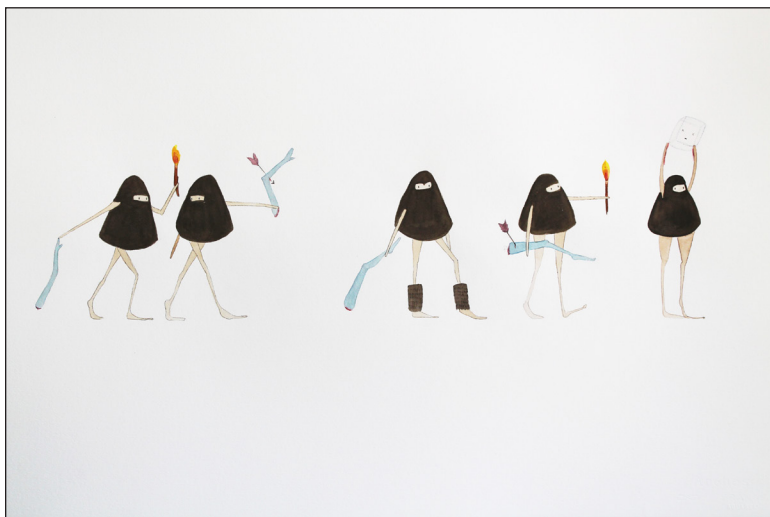


Figure 3.5, Katherine Pulido, *Untitled (Sometimes Revenge)* (2013)

My work continues to change and working through projects continues to push me outside of my comfort zone. At the end of this incredibly intense two-year program, I feel my visual vocabulary and narrative voice have begun to take shape. I do not believe it at all ends here. If the last few months are any indication of the potential for change and growth, I feel that I am destined for more shifts and am happy to take that leap.

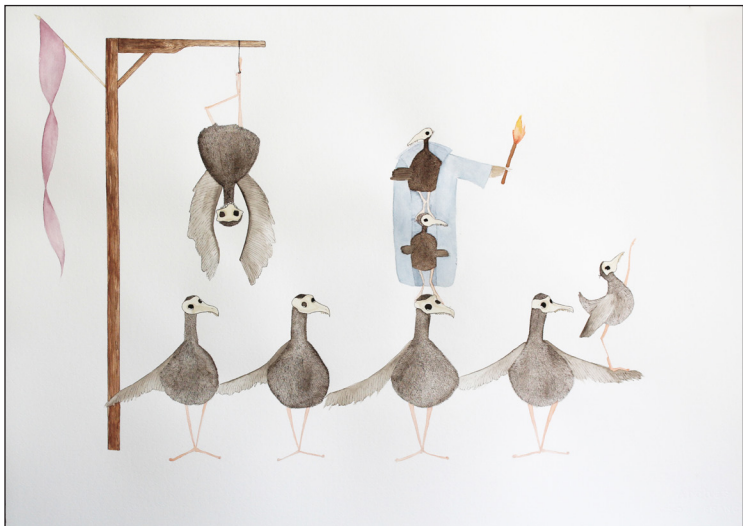


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