Ties That Bind

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

By

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my Grandfather, Robert Lee Hueston and my Uncle Robert Perry for their influence and inspiration in the blessed tie that binds our family together.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the many friends, relatives, and supporters who have helped make my pursuit of higher education happen. Thank you to my parents, for their support and encouragement in pursing my passion for painting. Thank you to my wife Florencia, for her support, inspiration, and companionship. Special thank you to all the faculty and students who have been mentors, colleagues and inspirations during this great chapter of my life.
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I started this series with a question, what is my identity? This led me to look at my childhood influences -- playmobil toys, adventure films, and my outdoor experiences -- all of which started to inform the subject matter for the paintings. These influences led me to research more about the subject’s history and in turn, my own history.

From a trove of artifacts, letters, photographs and family lore, I started using stories about ancestors as the narrative in my paintings, while continuing to use my childhood toys as symbolic representations.

So began my series of paintings that explore the ties that bind people, places, and histories together. The paintings create open-ended and sometimes fictitious narratives that are derived from my ancestors’ stories. For example, a number of paintings follow the life of my fourth great grand father Cornelius K. Stribling. After forty years of
service in the United States Navy, he had to cope with the death of his son, John Maxwell, who had left the Union to die in the Confederate Navy. Or my great great grandfather Ebenezer Lee Perry whose brother, Grant, went west in 1893 to work for the abolitionist American Missionary Association on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation.

Some of the recurring symbols and characters in the paintings, such as the little feathered doll I call the trickster, suggest that there is more than meets the eye, and perhaps things are not as they appear. Part of the reason for painting images or objects from the past is to call into question my own perceived understanding of history and perhaps imagine a different one.

My hope is that these paintings offer an opportunity to examine the history of a country and culture that is continuously learning who it is through conflicting interpretations of shared histories.
INTERVIEW WITH NATHAN LODA BY ANNE SMITH

Figure 1. Ties that Bind, Thesis Show
AS: Would you describe how you collected the objects in your paintings?

NL: I collected the objects in my paintings, more or less through inheritance and holding on to things I’ve collected throughout my life. My Mother still has a lot of my childhood toys, books, and even art projects in the attic. I have extended family in upstate New York that live in the house that has been in the family since it was built around 1820. In the attic of that farmhouse, there are trunks full of old letters, books, clothing, and objects. As I began to be more interested in my identity through the influence of history and family I found that memorabilia from family members was a great way to explore my understanding of self.

Figure 2. Cowboy, 5 x 7 in, Oil, 2013
AS: How did you know those objects were up in the attic? Did you go up and just start finding things?

NL: I had a vague memory that certain objects, such as my childhood playmobil toys, might be in the attic of my parents home, so I went up and started looking for them. On the family farm in upstate New York, I knew that there were old trunks with family belongings in them, so I went digging threw them looking for objects, and picked out ones that I found interesting or thought would help communicate a narrative about a specific ancestor.

AS: Does your family share stories about objects you find or certain ancestors?

NL: We don’t share too much about specific objects, but there are a good deal of stories and history that is shared. My mother’s father is the last living family member that has stories about the generation before him and he sends out emails about specific ancestors on their birthdays. He has also written down a lot of stories he remembers hearing from his family and has written stories from his lifetime. Part of the fun in finding objects in the attics is that often an object compels me to research its history and in turn, the history of an ancestor and our country.
AS: Why is family history important to you?

NL: I think trying to see the world through other people’s lives gives me perspective on how to see my own life, and how to see history differently. I arrived at this interest in history by trying to understand my identity. Knowing yourself through your ancestors brings a strong sense of heritage and where you come from.

AS: One thing I see in your painting is that you combine subjects that may be in contradiction. For instance your painting, Rebel Son,(figure 4) that has an image of your fourth great grandfather who fought in the Union Navy against his son who fought for the Confederacy during the civil war. How do you handle that contradiction?
NL: I sometimes present a narrative with conflicting characters or histories because it often seems to encourage a new perspective on familiar, or unfamiliar, history. It is also open for viewers to determine whether they see contradiction or not. I have found that my paintings have helped me process some of the conflicting heritage that has shaped our country and my life directly.

AS: Several of your paintings have photographs in them. Why did you choose to make paintings of photographs tacked or taped to the wall rather than just painting the image?
NL: When I am digging through family archives and find a photograph that resonates with an idea or story I’m interested in, I use the photograph as an object rather than an image. I want the viewer to see that this image belonged to some one, was held and cherished as an object. Also by presenting the picture as an object, the authorship of the photograph remains and I’m able to recontextualize the image to extend the narrative beyond what is happening in the photograph.

Figure 5. Dining Hall, 6 x 10 in, Oil, 2014

Figure 6. Ft. Berthold, 8 x 10 in, Oil, 2015

AS: Sometimes it seems that the paintings are set up in a way that inanimate objects -- such as playmobil toys-- interact with other subjects or images, and come alive. Is that intentional?

NL: One of the reasons I enjoyed painting playmobil toys so much is because they are representations of figures. I was able to stage them and paint them more convincingly
than I would have been able to do working with real figures. In other words, I could create narratives with complete freedom. They also carry a sense of nostalgia for me and I can’t help but think of them as I did when I was a child when I would imagine great landscapes and narratives that the toys would participate in. So I was very much interested in trying to paint the toys in a way that they might be animated and perhaps be suggestive of real people.

AS: Your painting Homer, (figure 6) is one of my favorites, can you talk about this painting? Who is that in the photograph and what is Homer a reference to?

![Figure 7. Homer, 6 x 6 in. Oil, 2014](image1)

NL: Homer is a special place for me. My sixth great grandfather, Thomas Gould Alvord, settled a piece of land outside Homer, New York, in 1794. This piece of land is still in the family and it is there that I have had the opportunity to dig through treasure chests in the attic. I found this photograph on one of my visits and was captivated by the
image of a man standing on a horse surrounded by a snowy winter landscape. The man, Rutherford Bell, is a distant relative. Part of what I see in the image is the joy of a simple ordinary life. The photograph suggests a charming time before the noise and distraction of mechanization and consumer culture. The picture is taped to the wall with blue painters tape, which for me symbolizes a temporality. At some point in time the image could fall off the wall and be a part of forgotten history. I also added the word Homer at the bottom of the image to reference the place and also create an access point for the viewer to create his or her own narrative. I like the idea that Homer could be the horse, a person, or a place.

AS: Can you talk about why you paint? Why not set up dioramas, do performance, or take photographs?

NL: I really enjoy the process of painting. For me, mixing paint to create representations of our reality on a two dimensional surface is like alchemy and magic. Every painting is also a puzzle to solve. Mixing color, creating interesting compositions, and communicating narratives with still imagery is a challenge to resolve. When they all come together and work, it is like solving a puzzle and it gives me a feeling of accomplishment. I also love the tradition and story of painting. It is exciting to be a part of this story by painting my experiences in the world and continuing this long tradition of painting. Finally, I enjoy that paintings require a viewer to take time to look and meditate
on a still image. In our society that is so saturated with moving mass-produced imagery and technology, I think paintings offer a quiet break from the busyness and technology.

AS: You have had a couple mentors in your life like Ridley Howard and Bo Bartlett. Can you talk about how they’ve influenced you?

NL: When I was an undergraduate in West Virginia, I spent a semester in Cortona, Italy and had the opportunity to study with Ridley Howard. He gave me the inspiration that it was possible to be a contemporary artist and still use painting as your medium. I learned a lot about mixing color from him and how to think about and construct open-ended
narrative in my paintings. When I finished my undergraduate studies, I saw a Bo Bartlett show at the P.P.O.W Gallery in New York City and became a fan of his technique and narratives. I reached out to him in an email and he arranged for me to study with him one weekend at the Pennsylvania Academy. Bo really carries on the tradition of American Realism from people like Thomas Eakins and Andrew Wyeth. He taught me some of the technical approaches that the American Realists and he himself use. He also encouraged me to paint what is honest and unique to me, to paint my story.

AS: Finally, you have been looking at the lives of your ancestors through materials and stories that they have left you. What would you like your ancestors to know about you through your paintings?

NL: Well that is part of what is exciting to me about painting. My paintings become a visual record of my experience and my perspective of the world. I have also been painting stories about the lives of ancestors that came before me so I hope my work offers another way for future generations to look further into their own pasts to learn more about their history and identity. I’ve learned a lot about the life experiences and personalities of artists like Andrew Wyeth and Winslow Homer through their paintings. Their work opens a window into their own worlds, and I hope my paintings can do the same.
Figure 11. *The 87th*, 5 x 7 in, Oil, 2015

Figure 12. *Look Away*, 24 x 24 in, Oil, 2014
REFERENCE


BIOGRAPHY

Nathan Loda (b. 1989, Vienna, VA) is an MFA candidate at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA with an expected graduation in May, 2015. He earned a BFA in Painting from Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, WV, in 2011. His work has been exhibited in several states across the country and is in numerous private collections.