

Control My Over Active Imagination

by

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The *Control My Over Active Imagination* series of work began from questioning personal losses. Although miscarriages are common occurrences they are traumatic and confusing. My vantage point as an expectant father, husband, and artist allows me to use personal source material, and reveal my coping with these tragedies in creative, thoughtful, and playful ways. The miscarriages my wife, Suzanne, and I experienced became catalysts for divergent paths of enquiry. There are many questions that I have asked as a response to the miscarriages to help direct my work.

It is important to have some understanding of miscarriages because they are so common but are a rare topic of conversation, like most reproductive issues.

Scientifically, miscarriages are called spontaneous abortions. The connotation is that the fetus or baby is aborted spontaneously without the decision or approval of the pregnant woman. Miscarriages are very common. According to research people do not reproduce well. Veteran science author and researcher Jon Cohen in his book *Coming to Term: Uncovering the Truth about Miscarriage* lays out some statistics:

“According to a landmark study published in 1988, 31 percent of pregnancies end in miscarriage” (5). Cohen adds to that, “50 percent of conceptions fail, which means that

at least half of all pregnancies fail, 25 percent of women who attempt to become pregnant likely will have two miscarriages, and 12.5 percent will have three” (16).

I distinguish a miscarriage from an induced abortion. This fact is important because of the value that society places on unborn babies. Pro-choice and pro-life groups are locked in battle over legal ramifications. These groups are usually aligned with religious dogma and extreme liberal or conservatism. The lives of pregnant women or unborn babies seem devalued depending on how you align yourself with the issue. My protestant upbringing has influenced the way that I think about this issue. Therefore, when reflecting on our pregnancies I ask myself if there is life in the embryo and fetus.

Not every miscarriage is the same. Causes for the phenomena are not entirely known and not attributed to just a few factors (Cohen). I began to assume that the reason for our miscarriages was a genetic defect in the form of a chromosomal translocation that can be hereditary. Several members of my family have this genetic defect. Although some of these family members have conceived healthy children, DNA testing has exposed this defect as a factor for recurring miscarriages. I was a teenager when I heard about the defect and I could observe that it had a large emotional impact on my aunts. Before getting married my wife and I decided that I should go through the genetic screening to determine if I had the translocation. My test came back negative, which meant that I did not carry it and so I would not need to worry about having miscarriages or stillbirths. Much to my dismay, my wife has had three miscarriages. We have not investigated the causes of them. I feel limited in my own knowledge of them. Two were very early during pregnancy. Our second miscarriage was very different because my wife was further along in the first trimester.

I previously mentioned that my protestant upbringing has influenced my view on existential questions. Theoretically speaking, I want to agree with the view to life existing before conception but even religious factions debate this question. When does ensoulment occur? When is the fetus viable? When can the baby survive on its own? Will the soul of a baby see an afterlife? I can't gloss over the existential problems that can only be answered by faith or science. The individual in this issue seems silent. In the light of my own personal experience with these issues it is hard to have a clear answer. It is difficult to believe without seeing. There is so little visual evidence of life in blood clots.

Jon Cohen writes about his experience as a husband who has suffered from multiple miscarriages. He writes candidly about the difference in emotions that he and his wife experienced over the loss. While he acknowledges her expression as, "the particular grief that accompanies the death of someone you love," he all but negates his own grief.

Cohen writes:

I suffered no lasting depression about the miscarriage. In my Cro-Magnon way, I puzzled that she grieved so over a pregnancy that had lasted a few weeks. Men and women do—must—have different reactions to miscarriage, which adds yet another twist to an emotional rope that already has many knots in it . . . any woman who has miscarried has a more precise understanding of Shannon's sense of loss. A woman lives through a miscarriage. A man, no matter how devoted, only observes it . . . though the pain eventually did recede, I am certain that for her it will never entirely disappear.  
(9)

I concur almost entirely with Cohen about his peripheral role in the events. However, watching the trauma of my wife's body as she passed the clots of blood containing cellular matter has marked me. When I recall the miscarriage event I remember my wife's body as if something else had taken control of it. It was not normal to see death expelled from her body. And in a quasi-scientific way I performed my own investigation of

the blood clots to try and understand better what occurred. My experience of visiting the doctor was, to say the least, disheartening.

Over the course of this series of work my wife's current pregnancy will move beyond thirty weeks. We eagerly anticipate the birth of a baby. Emotionally I feel some confidence that the pregnancy is progressing normally and my wife will give birth to a healthy baby. However, doubts have crept in about stillbirths and health problems that could develop after birth. There have been times when my wife becomes ill or sustains an injury during pregnancy causing my anxiety to increase.

Despite the anxiety, this time of reproduction is full of hope. During our second pregnancy I spent time talking to my wife's belly. I listened, I read, I sang in hopes that my involvement would nurture, connect us, and stimulate growth. I wanted to practice for when the baby finally arrived. The first imaginings I had of interacting with our newborn were of playing. That I would be able to make faces, zoom toys around, and make silly noises. My projection into the future was different than Suzanne's who was thinking about swaddling, breast-feeding, and holding. I seek to understand my potential parental role and why toys and playing are such integral parts of my anticipations. The best memories I have as a child were times when I was engaged in play. Reflecting on my potential role as father has led to question what are the most influential things in my life, especially my early childhood. This includes people, places, things, that will be important for me to bring into my child's life. These things are then take the form of an archive from which I can draw. Photos, toys, places, people, and settings from my memory become reconstituted and reconstructed into something new.

I hope that the above has helped the reader to understand something about miscarriages and how they have affected me. There is tension within the transitional stage

of pregnancy full of fear and hope especially after experiencing miscarriages. Thus I want the subjects within the paintings to be reflective of my experiences. How can a canvas be expressive of emotions, both anxiety and joy? How can the canvas show a figure in a transitional stage? How can I be reflective of my past and look forward to the future? My process for creating these paintings is very reflective of the content.

The *Control* series utilized a formatting approach that is not entirely conventional. The picture plane consists of three areas that become less distinct as the painting is formed: a kids space characterized by toys and often flat stylized and repeated objects, a landscape that has been a memorable part of my past, and finally a primary figure that occupies a space between the kids space and landscape. Merging these spaces is like pulling together different visual languages. I usually begin with sketches but allow opportunities for responding to marks, color, and imagery. With that in mind I view the picture plane as a place where I can play. The distinct features of these spaces pertain to visual languages and thus have a semiotic charge that is important.

Semiotics informs my work to the extent that ways of marking and types of imagery via conventional use become coded. Art historian Rosalind Krauss makes clear in her 1994 essay on Cy Twombly, *Cy was here; Cy's up*, regarding semiotics and language, that sometimes language is not easily deciphered. Krauss points up that some critics read into Twombly's markedly graffitied canvases written words and titles that refer to places that act as analogies to the places and things they name. A different interpretation is that they should be read as humorous and jestful biting the thumb at rules and conventional norms. Krauss explains:

[Roland] Barthes . . . admits, the Mediterranean light is there, as are the silence and the emptiness. And yes, there is a chain of references inscribed on the canvasses that leads from antiquity to the present. He calls this the 'Mediterranean effect,' and says that 'Twombly's

inimitable art consists in having imposed the Mediterranean effect starting from materials (scratches, maculae, smears, dearth of color, no academic forms) which have no analogical relation with the great Mediterranean radiance.' But he immediately adds that what takes place in each of Twombly's works is an attack on seriousness, on decorum, one that 'takes on the appearance of an incongruity, a mockery, a deflation, as if the humanist turgescence was suddenly pricked.' (Krauss)

I use Twombly as an example of semiotic usage due to similarities in some of the mark making that I employ. Twombly's subject matter differs from my own but the confusion of visual languages deployed are similar: scrawls, scratches, indecipherable writing, and pops of color. What meets the eye is not always easily understood.

Thus the three distinct spaces that I have defined for these paintings merge together and languages become jumbled. For instance violent scrawling might overlap graphic patterning or kids toys might appear in a landscape exaggerated in scale. I purposefully use these different visual languages to show feelings that accompany trauma and grief. I also use them as an opportunity to play and break the normativity of expectations, unexpectedness.

The kid's space that I have identified often uses patterns, toys, fictional children's characters, scribbles, and scrawls. The toys and characters represent the kid's space as much as they also form a language that the viewer can identify as such. In anticipation of my own children I activate this child-coded imagery in the picture plane. But they are laden with memory from my own past.

Passages of repetition and patterning can be seen in *Plane to Sea, Plain to See*. On the left side of the canvas in *Plane to Sea* stylized sharks move across toward the center of the picture. The shark motif was introduced from a fabric intended for a children's room. While their implementation in the painting maintains a silliness and humor there is also

slyness about them because sharks are in reality dangerous. In the same painting there is a toy plane that is repeated and a rubber duck toy.

The toys are either toys that were a very memorable part of my own childhood or toys with which I look forward to engaging my kids. Tonka trucks, airplanes, big wheels, tricycles, and wooden trains all make appearances in these paintings. The toys are not only memorable but my handling them on the picture plane come out of my imagination. So I am projecting and anticipating with great hope. In seemingly contradiction, the toys don't always appear as ideal. Take for instance the plane crash and the train derailment I deploy; the toys are sometimes implicated in problematic scenarios.

Similarly, the fictional characters like Winnie-the-Pooh and Susie from *Calvin and Hobbes* were also important for me growing up. I reference other stories like *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. The whimsical scenarios, personalities, and colors of these stories and characters appeal to children. Their moral plights influence me too. They then become characters for me to play with in my paintings. Winnie-the-Pooh and Piglet are dangling in the air above a desert. A foray of child like crayon marks bombards their flattened bodies. Poppy flowers have entered their space. And Susie appears to offer her stuffed animal bunny to the figure in *Wheelie Wheel* despite the fact that it appears he is engaged with the dump truck. Whether it is toys, childhood characters, or kids patterning they are partially present in the landscape.

The landscapes in the paintings are places from my past. Not only are they places that were memorable but also I can now reconfigure them for a new purpose. They signify natural order and processes inherent in nature and the female biology. Sand dunes, mountains, hillsides, valleys, and backyards become settings for the actors in my paintings. There is conventional symbolism attached to these landscapes. For instance arid, dry, and

sandy places or deserts represent lack of vegetation or growth. This is a fitting landscape for infertility and spiritual drought. Likewise, mountains and hills are ascents that represent challenges to overcome or the slipperiness of a descent. Backyards connote places of growth, play, and sometimes safety. Poignantly, Suzanne is pictured in the *Quackery* painting with the winter landscape signifying dormancy. Juxtaposing flowers with all their vitality may seem contradictory but there is good reason.

Sometimes within the landscapes I use flowers as symbols. The flowers may be stylized but retain their semiotic charge. Suzanne's current pregnancy is has been progressing relatively normal suggesting fertility, regeneration, and hopefulness. The poppy flower carries many symbolic meanings including remembrance of the dead, hallucinations or dreams, and harvest. The narcissus or daffodil (same genus) represents propagation and renewal. They tend to be the first flowers of spring. Both flowers are associated with Greek mythology in the narratives of Demeter and Persephone.

The poppy is commonly associated with the Greek goddess Demeter, whom is the goddess of the harvest. Homer's hymn for Demeter recounts her loss of her daughter Persephone taken in carriage by Hades to the underworld. The beauty of the narcissus entranced Persephone when Hades kidnapped her. Demeter grieved the loss of daughter. Eventually Demeter made a deal that Hades could have Persephone for the winter dormant months and return her for the spring and fertile months (Homer). Thus the Demeter hymns parallels my story via loss, grief, and renewal. So these flowers are layered in meaning and are appropriate in the landscape as my wife moves toward delivering the baby. Self-propagation and remembrance are signified as well as my dreaming and imagination for the future.

The trail in the forest, part of *Wheelie Wheel* is from a photograph of a mountain bike trail that my dad and I would frequent. My dad would always dog me up the hills. Putting the hill in the picture becomes representative of challenge and fun. Yet the forest is alive with foliage symbolizing fertility and growth. The forest is rendered with a medium degree of illusionistic space. As the forest moves from right to left across the picture plane it transitions to a stylized flat and more modern type landscape. The trees and leaves become highly stylized. The grass is green the sky is blue the sun is a yellow circle all rendered with simplicity. This portion of the landscape melds from a greater to lesser degree of reality; from a kid's space to a rendered illusionistic space. The figures I paint also have varying degrees of representation and are layered with meaning.

The fragmented form that the figure takes represents trauma of the body and also being in a liminal phase. The fragmented figure can be seen in all of the painting of this series. Frida Kahlo and Francis Bacon are two examples of painters who take represent trauma with fracturing.

Frida Kahlo suffered from a miscarriage that she documented in a painting *Henry Ford Hospital*, c.1932. The painting takes a diagrammatic form. There are different points of interests like a fetus, organs, female anatomy, and medical instruments floating separate in the air yet connected by red cords back to Kahlo's body laying on a hospital bed. Kahlo is crying and there is blood on the bed sheets. Her right arm is not present. The fragmentation appears to not just be bodily (anatomy and organs outside the body) but also psychological. Kahlo's own psychical nature is reflected in her use of placing personal information outside of her body.

In the work of British artist Francis Bacon we see fragmentation as a result of trauma. Many of the war baby artists born after World War II were well familiar with

mental, emotional, and physical ailments. Francis Bacon's repertoire is replete with ambiguity, deformation, and planes breaking and slipping off the faces of his portraits. Liminality is a being between two points with the end point usually being a rite of passage. In my case the passage is into parenthood.

The breadth of liminality, Victor Turner points up in *Betwixt and Between* (his essay on liminality), quoting Lloyd Warner, in the in-between phase could exist as "the movement of man through his lifetime, from a fixed placental placement within his mother's womb to his death and ultimate fixed point of his tombstone and final containment in his grave as a dead organism..." (Turner 47). Furthermore, Turner goes on to agree with liminal theory's founding father Van Gennep, there are many markers and points at which a rite of passage could occur. Essentially culture has conditioned people to qualify their expectations of a given title (Turner). In my case the father title has not yet been affirmed even though my wife was at points in time carry my progeny. In my own mind I cannot resolve whether I am a father or not. Turner says, "The subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, 'invisible' (Turner 47). Turner expounds on the invisibility saying:

The symbolism attached to and surrounding the liminal personae is complex and bizarre . . . modeled on human biological processes, which are conceived to be what Levi-Strauss might call 'isomorphic' with structural and cultural processes . . . They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified. In so far as they are no longer classified, the symbols that represent them are, in many societies, drawn from the biology of death, decomposition, catabolism, and other physical processes that have a negative tinge, such as menstruation (frequently regarded as the absence or loss of a fetus). (48)

Turner's use of language relates remarkably well to reproduction and gestation issues but also to art. He says:

Sometimes things retain their customary shapes but are portrayed in unusual color. What is the point of this exaggeration amounting sometimes to caricature? It seems to me that to enlarge or diminish or discolor in this way is a primordial mode of abstraction. The outstandingly exaggerated feature is made into an object of reflection. (52)

There are other ideas within Turner's framework of liminality like "recombination" (53) and positive notes such as "death and growth may be represented by the same tokens" (49). Turner might say my condition "is one of ambiguity or paradox" (48).

The figures I depict open up to the landscape to become part of it. The figure's interaction in the landscape may appear passive and more active with the kid's space. For example, in *What Goes up Must Come Down* the figure has dunes and sand passing over and through him. His hand vaguely appears to be filtering sand through and holding a big red crayon. *Wheelie Wheel* also has a salient example of a figure within a liminal passage. The figure lacks substance observed by washes of paint on the skin, empty passages that look straight through the body. But skin tones are exaggerated to call attention to the body and so becomes (as Turner might say) "an object of reflection" (Turner 52). The symbolism and imagery are at work inviting the viewer to consider the figure's participation with both the toys and the landscape. The integration of the spaces and within an object itself relies on the expressive ability of paint and mark-making.

I use mark-making and color to express my feelings, convey a message, and attempt to mirror processes inherent in miscarriages. By demonstrating methods of paint application I am able to echo how the processes of reproduction and miscarriage can be analogized in paint. I intentionally leave areas to appear incomplete or in-process. There are also lines that are basic building structures or beginnings. Dripping, splattering, and pooling the paint I reduce my control the paint, and allow it to take its own form. Drips exceed the boundaries of the canvas. I drip and splatter paint in order to invite chance

because in pregnancy and conception there are no guarantees, it is open to chance. At times I will decide to interfere with the process by altering its appearance.

I will also remove paint by scraping and then maybe reapply. The removal or purging the canvas of unwanted things is likened to miscarriage. If I choose to cover something up by adding a layer of paint then the image below is usually invisible or shows through incompletely. The canvasses then serve as a type of palimpsest, an effaced historical document, of how I have chosen to question and deal with our miscarriages. Covering something up means only that the previous layer still exists. While the viewer may not be aware of the painting's history the memory or trace is still embedded. The memory of a miscarriage is lasting. Talking with people thirty years after a miscarriage they do not forget it. Yet unless you speak with one who has experienced it you may never know it happened. These are demonstrations of how paint can be worked physically to represent processes natural to miscarriage. I also use paint as an opportunity to express my own frustrations and coming to terms with these tragedies.

The neo-expressionists were interested in making paint express emotion. I draw inspiration from Francis Bacon, Anselm Kiefer, and Eric Fishl and others who both used expressive qualities of paint to convey multi-layered content. On one hand I see play and imagination as informing my mark-making and color choices. On the other I see color and mark-making as vehicles for sadness, frustration, and coping mechanisms.

Emily Braun, in her essay "Skinning the Paint" in *Paint Made Flesh*, describes how the younger British postwar expressionists followed Alberto Giacometti's form:

Bacon, Freud, Kossoff, and Auerback responded [to the *Art Informel* movement] by taking up Alberto Giacometti's example of the lone figure engulfed by space and heaving matter but still integral in its form. They also more pragmatic attempts to depict the human condition in the here-and-now terra firma of the body. (Braun 30)

While my figures are certainly distressed and liminal I see myself embracing a similar aesthetic by picturing frailty and brokenness. Yet my landscapes and kids space also become charged with emotion via aggressive confrontational marks, a type of “heaving matter” of paint (Braun 30).

Curator, painter, and historian Mark Scala, in his essay *Fragmentation and Reconstitution: Painterly Figuration* since 1980, writes that American neo-expressionists developed similar “painterly styles” as the German expressionists in terms of “paint laden brushwork, exaggerated body proportions, erotic undercurrents, and strong colors—all meant to express extreme psychological conditions—they drew from a variety of sources and cultures to convey their own feelings of dissociation, anxiety, or yearning to escape quotidian society” (Scala 60). That description is a good analysis of neo-expressionist painters from which I draw inspiration.

Take my painting *What Goes Up Must Come Down* for an example of emotive brushwork. After rendering Winnie-the-Pooh in a flat stylized manner true to his character I then attacked him with color and marks. The style of marks reminiscent of a child’s naive uneducated handiwork. But the force of mark, direction, and color choice may seem to some viewers to imply violence and interpret it as an attack on childhood. To other viewers it may just be an attempt to reenact a child’s coloring page. My intent sees both interpretations as acceptable. The illusionistic rendering of the dunes opens the space for the viewer to visually move back in space while the swipes of thick ultramarine sky and childish clouds become confrontational. The viewer is forced to reconcile the differences in mark making. I take into account the balance and compositional makeup of the picture plane and vary my marks to help lead the viewer around the picture, between passages of

calm and chaotic. The overlapping and mix of marks creates chaos that lends to the disorientation of traumatic events. Drips and splatters express sadness, chance, and frustration. As I have had to cope with these losses I see the canvas as an arena to vent my frustrations. Conversely, I see the canvas as an arena to project my hopes.

The *Control: My Over Active Imagination* series is full of contradictions due to the dual nature of having miscarriages and expectations of a healthy baby on the way. My questions stemming from these traumatic experiences take me back to memories that produce an index from which to draw imagery. Meaningful experiences of play in my childhood tint my projections for my role as an expectant father. I like to imagine the impact artistically I might have on my offspring considering the active childhood I experienced. Yet the emotion and trauma of loss are not forgotten making my canvas palimpsests. Playing with the paint and inviting chance creates unexpected opportunities from which I must make choices that determine outcomes. The multiple layers of meaning invested allow the paintings to be just as much about hope as they are about loss and coping.

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*Plane to Sea, Plain to See, 56" x 68"*



*What Goes Up Must Come Down, 42" x 60"*



*Trikes and Trucks are Wheelie Wheel, 66" x 66"*



*Quackery, 55" x 47"*



*(Progress shot) Training, 42" x 60"*