

Carrier Pigeons

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It is generally agreed upon that pain is an inevitable part of the human condition.¹ There are many different types of pain; there is the realm of the physical and the realm of the emotional, chronic, short lived, acute, dull, radiating, and more. The focus of my current body of work is not on physical pain (although physicality is the vehicle for the message) but emotional pain. By developing social relationships with one another, there is a high risk of inflicting and receiving emotional hurt, specifically through miscommunication and a disconnect between initial intent and actual reception of our actions; no single person lives the exact same life. By just existing as a social creature, negative experiences are inevitable as you are opened up to this imperfect communication network. *Carrier Pigeons* draws visually from historical art such as the Baroque, Renaissance, and Romanticism in style and in concept, along with twentieth century figure painting and the Ashcan School of art in order to convey and digest these inevitable misinterpretations and their consequences.

The genesis of the concept for *Carrier Pigeons* began some time ago with a simple rewatch of the original Star Trek series. My favorite character in the show was Mr. Spock, and I was inexplicably enamored with him. I was fascinated with why he had such difficulty with emotions, and I was drawn to the idea of the Vulcan Mind Meld (a form of direct mental contact that Vulcans, the alien species that Mr Spock is part of, can perform). The Mind Meld allows the Vulcans to therefore directly meld their thoughts to those that they perform it with; directly linking themselves with that individual instead of attempting to communicate through other means. There is no room for assumption or inference on either end of the communicating line, and another level of understanding one another is reached between Spock and whomever he performed the Mind Meld on. I held on to that idyllic connection, and continued to research human communication (or miscommunication) and the suffering that consistently seems to follow.

¹ Bjorn Hofmann, "Suffering: Harm to Bodies, Minds, and Persons." In *Handbook of the Philosophy of Medicine* edited by Thomas Schramme and Steven Edwards, 1-17. Springer, Dordrecht: Springer, 2015.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8706-2_63-1

Throughout our human experiences, we individually form ideas on how to encode and decode messages that are sent to us, verbally or nonverbally. When we communicate with the expectation that others will know what we mean, this leaves “others... to develop alternative sets of working assumptions about the meanings of our indirect allusions and subtle hints. Faulty assumptions are often inaccurate, and tend to produce certain types of communicative difficulties that ultimately diminish, injure, or end relationships of vital importance.”² Even when we are seemingly straightforward with our words and actions, the messages encoded into them might be decoded by someone else in a different meaning, warping the original intent of that message. There is a distortion that occurs when communicating with another person for many reasons, namely from what is referred to as bioevolutionary paradigms and sociocultural paradigms.³ Our past (both evolutionarily and individually) and our environments inform how we see the world, whether we want it to or not– we are individuals with unique lives and perspectives, not a hivemind.

In the context of encoding and decoding messaging, the creation of my work is a visual form of communication when words fail; it is a visceral depiction of emotion in a way that can be layered and interpreted differently by the audience. For myself as the artist, it is a way of working through big ideas, many of which originate through life experiences and talk therapy sessions. The painting process and the processes that lead up to the paintings therefore become a form of long term introspection and contemplation of ideas that are often nuanced and require time and exploration to reach a deeper understanding.

I created digital “sketches” of my compositions to prepare for the creation of *Carrier Pigeons*. The reference images used were created by taking photographs of a group of my personal friends who volunteered to model for me. Each person was photographed in a one hour session with me alone, without

² C. David Mortesen, *Miscommunication*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1997).
<https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483327914>.

³ Kory Floyd, *Communicating Affection: Interpersonal Behavior and Social Context* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9-18.

any particular posing in mind. I described the core concept for *Carrier Pigeons* and asked my models to tap into their personal experiences of miscommunication in their own relationships to inform how they moved and the poses that they created, and I instructed each model to move in a way that seemed simultaneously comfortable and uncomfortable to them in order to get organic yet disjointed and dynamic imagery. After taking thousands of images, at least one shot of each person was put into Photoshop and collaged together in a way that created an illusion of the models physically interacting with each other. All of the models used were photographed nude to emphasize the vulnerability that we open ourselves up to by existing socially with one another. Not only are the models figuratively vulnerable with each other, but they are also physically vulnerable, compounding upon that feeling of anxiety that appears in affectionate relationships of all kinds.

The models have a diverse range of ethnicity, race, gender identity and expression, age, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc. This cast was chosen not only because they have a personal connection to me in some way, but also to emphasize how universal miscommunication and expressions of affection are ingrained in the social human experience.⁴ The process of selecting and compositing twenty three of the thousands of individual images that I took speaks to the meaning of the work by the interactions of the models with one another; or rather, the lack thereof. The fact that none of the models were ever physically in the same room when the photographs were taken (save a few) speaks to the communicative disconnects that we have in our relationships with one another. In the compositions, the figures appear to be physically overlapping and interacting with one another; they are looking into each other's faces and at each other's actions without having actually done so in reality. Due to the nature of the artificially constructed dialogues that they are having with each other, an emphasis is put on interactions and communications that we have with strangers in our everyday experiences. Interactions occur with other humans without either truly knowing what is going to happen or how the interaction will affect the other person.

⁴ Kory Floyd, *Communicating Affection: Interpersonal Behavior and Social Context* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xiii.

The overlapping interaction of the figures with one another is reminiscent of Baroque and Romanticism, such as Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa*⁵, Bernini's sculpture *Apollo and Daphne*⁶, and Rubens' *The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*⁷. Historically, Romantic paintings were inspired by very emotional concepts and stories, with the investigation of aspects of mankind and human behavior. Romanticists were focused on epic narratives, individuality, and "allegiances to earth and sky, to consciousness and unconsciousness, to dark and light.... Drawing on his emotional responses and spiritual exaltation, the Romantic expressed his immediate sensations, his specific reactions to experience."⁸ With my work as a direct reflection, a "specific reaction to experience" of my observations of the idea of human interaction and the emotional charge that comes with that aligns with that of Romantic painters of the nineteenth century.

The visual style of this body of work aligns more with twentieth century figurative work in terms of paint application and how the figures are situated in space on the canvas. Compositionally, I focus on each figure equally, much like the romanticist Eugene Delacroix, having the figures interacting and flowing into one another to create diagonal⁹ and triangular shapes within the composition and using a combination of linear divisions created by the figures to break up the space of the image¹⁰. Instead of having the figures in a literal environment or landscape like Romanticists would, the environments that the figures exist in are more abstracted.. Many twentieth century figure painters utilize this abstracted environment (or lack of), most of which I take inspiration from such as Jenny Saville, Yang Shaobin, and Egon Schiele¹¹. Much like Schiele, whose figure work omits environmental background, the "empty, monochromatic space in which the artist consistently placed his female nudes (as well as his own nude

⁵"Think Big!," Le Louvre, n.d., <https://www.louvre.fr/en/explore/the-palace/think-big>.

⁶Gian Lorenzo Bernini, "Apollo and Daphne by Bernini," Galerie Borghèse, June 30, 2022, <https://borghese.gallery/collection/sculpture/apollo-and-daphne.html>.

⁷"Sammlung | Raub Der Töchter Des Leukippos," n.d.

<https://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de/en/artwork/5RGQJo84z3/peter-paul-rubens/raub-der-toechter-des-leukippos>.

⁸ Norman Schlenoff, *Romanticism and Realism* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965), 4.

⁹Ibid, 21.

¹⁰ Fritz Henning, *Concept and Composition: The Basis of Successful Art* (Cincinnati, Ohio: North Light, 1983), 92.

¹¹ A more exhaustive list of artists researched for this thesis will be included separately after the bibliography.

self portraits) acts not only to intensity but to suggest an allegorical void.”¹² The background environments are not completely void or monochromatic as his are, but the lack of definition in the backgrounds is based heavily on that allegorical void. The composition, interaction, and movement of figures is inspired by and mimics baroque painting to a certain extent, as there is a more ambiguous conception of space¹³. This ambiguous conception of space is also utilized by Yang Shaobin in *Untitled (1999-4)*¹⁴, as well as Jenny Saville, particularly in her works *Fulcrum*¹⁵ and *Strategy*¹⁶. Saville utilizes layering techniques and compositions involving nude or nearly nude bodies being piled onto or interacting with one another; an aspect of her practice that deeply informs mine.

The actual subject matter of *Carrier Pigeons* are made up of a total of twenty five figures; one with three, one with nine, one with six, and one with seven (in diptych format). There are a total of eight carrier pigeons throughout the compositions, of which over half are dead or mutilated. These numbers are not random; twenty five is the age at which the human brain reaches maturity,¹⁷ and all of the other numbers are either divisible by three or one (with the exception of eight, which is considered to be lucky¹⁸). Triangles and forms of numerology and symbolism are heavily present in Renaissance artwork, particularly that of German printmaker Albrecht Dürer, who often included aspects of mathematics in his work¹⁹.

The visual components within *Carrier Pigeons* apart from the human figures hold specific symbolism and intention. Throughout history, carrier pigeons were used to send letters to one another

¹² Alessandra Camini, *Nudes, Egon Schiele* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1994), 3.

¹³ Frederic Taubes, *A Guide to Traditional and Modern Painting Methods* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1964), 67.

¹⁴ “Untitled (1999-4) | Denver Art Museum,” n.d., <https://www.denverartmuseum.org/en/object/2001.882a-b>.

¹⁵ “Jenny Saville: A Cyclical Rhythm of Emergent Forms | Essay | Gagosian Quarterly,” Gagosian Quarterly, November 8, 2021, <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2021/11/08/essay-jenny-saville-cyclical-rhythm-emergent-forms/>.

¹⁶ “Strategy - Jenny Saville | The Broad,” n.d., <https://www.thebroad.org/art/jenny-saville/strategy>.

¹⁷ Arain, Mariam, Maliha Haque, Lina Johal, Puja Mathur, Wynand Nel, Afsha Rais, Ranbir Sandhu, and Sushil Sharma. “Maturation of the Adolescent Brain.” *Neuropsychiatric disease and treatment*. U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2013. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3621648/>.

¹⁸ Swee Hoon Ang, “Chinese Consumers’ Perception of Alpha-numeric Brand Names,” *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 14, no. 3 (June 1, 1997): 220–33, <https://doi.org/10.1108/07363769710166800>.

¹⁹ “Albrecht Dürer.” *World of Mathematics*, Gale, Detroit, MI, 2006. *Gale In Context: Biography*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/K2426100100/BIC?u=auraria_main&sid=BIC&xid=b10b5026. Accessed 1 March, 2023.

since ancient Rome, and are still utilized today in some places²⁰. Carrier pigeons are a direct representation of the literal form of discourse with one another, with the dead or mutilated pigeons representative of misinterpreted or failed messaging between people. This is where the titles of the individual pieces and the project as a whole hold relevance. *Dovecote*, the largest piece, is named after a small building of shelter used to house domesticated squabs and pigeons as early as the fourteenth century²¹. Not only does the shape of the figures huddling over each other create a form that is reminiscent of a simple house, but the figures are using their bodies to shelter each other in a way. The other works, *Satinette 1*, *Satinette 2*, *Carneau*, and *Skycutters* are all named after different breeds of pigeons²². *Skycutters* is named for the sharp lines throughout the composition and the cloud-like environment, *Carneau* is named for the latin word “carneus”, meaning “of flesh”²³ and the composition of an open composition of almost all flesh and no environment, and *Satinette 1* and *2* are named for the silky, flowing nature of the composition.

The presence of plants and flowers in the “landscapes” have different symbolisms. Though they are interpretations that evolve and shift through different cultures and time periods they have specific symbolism in this context; The mulberry represents tragic misunderstandings²⁴, tree peonies represent love and affection²⁵, hazelnuts for communication, reconciliation, and peace²⁶, elecampane for woe and tears²⁷, monkshood for misanthropy and “poison words”²⁸, snapdragons for desperation and presumption²⁹, rue for morals and mercy³⁰, nettle for cruelty and slander³¹, zinnia for thoughts about

²⁰Mary Blume, “The Hallowed History of the Carrier Pigeon.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, January 30, 2004. Accessed 1 March 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/30/style/the-hallowed-history-of-the-carrier-pigeon.html>.

²¹Jane Canova, “Monuments to the Birds: Dovecotes and Pigeon Eating in the Land of Fields,” *Gastronomica: The Journal of Critical Food Studies* 5, no. 2 (May 1, 2005): 50–59, <https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2005.5.2.50>.

²²Keerthi, “Types of Pigeons: 30 Different Species of Pigeons with Pics & Names,” *Styles at Life*, February 8, 2023, <https://stylesatlife.com/articles/types-of-pigeons-names-and-pictures/>.

²³“Origin and Meaning of Carneous,” *Etymonline*, n.d., https://www.etymonline.com/word/carneous#etymonline_v_53220.

²⁴Ernst and Johanna Lehner, *Folklore and Symbolism of Flowers Plants and Trees* (New York: Tudor Pub, 1960), 71.

²⁵*Ibid*, 104.

²⁶*Ibid*, 118.

²⁷*Ibid*, 115.

²⁸*Ibid*, 111.

²⁹*Ibid*, 125.

³⁰*Ibid*, 125.

³¹*Ibid*, 122.

absent friends³², and cornflowers for reliability and tenderness (which were also depicted in works by the Renaissance painter Botecelli)³³. All of the plants and flowers included in these paintings have connections to relationships and the consequences of misunderstanding. Not only do they symbolize these things, but they are also acting as a form of sending encoded messages to be decoded by the audience via their symbolism, reiterating the basis of this work conceptually.

The use of color throughout the works is reminiscent of twentieth century figure painters such as Lucian Freud³⁴ and members of the Ashcan School such as George Bellows³⁵, as they are naturalistic but certain colors are more saturated than others and/or are not actually visible on a real person. The non local colors speak to how perception can be changed within social situations based on who is having the experience, as well as adding visual interest to the visual form instead of being fully realistic. Use of color exaggerates certain parts of the body so that they are more noticeable to the viewer (ie, addition of red/pink hues on the feet and knee/elbow joints, which are some of the more commonly physically painful parts of the body). This emphasis on body parts also de-emphasizes the facial features of the figures present (although they are still present and legible). Specific identities in this context are not central to the message. Utilization of neutral tones throughout the paintings indicate melancholic feelings and helplessness realized when considering the grievances and loss of social relationships.

Technical choices such as surface, material choice, and method of paint application are all intentional and adapted during the production process. Two of the five works were produced on hardboard wood cradled with pine, while the other three were produced on stretched canvas. Instead of producing each work at the same size and on the same material, I decided to vary the sizes to add visual interest and a wider range of expression of material, as well as to allow me to piece them together in a particular

³² Lehner, 128.

³³ Riklef Kandeler and Wolfram R. Ullrich, "Symbolism of Plants: Examples from European-Mediterranean Culture Presented with Biology and History of Art." *Journal of Experimental Botany* 60, no. 12 (2009): 3297–99.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24038442>.

³⁴ William Feaver, Lucian Freud, and Frank Auerbach, *Lucian Freud* (London: Tate Pub., 2002).

³⁵ Marianne Doezema, *George Bellows and Urban America* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1992), 126.

unified composition onto a gallery wall. A series of underpaintings were created on all of the surfaces in a method similar to Baroque paintings³⁶, with some areas of the work having boldly opaque and thicker paint reminiscent of the Ashcan School style, while other parts continued building layers using glazing methods to create more luminous color and illusion of depth. Oil paint specifically was used throughout the entire process due to the buttery quality that lends itself to depict flesh in a way that I find more accurate and visceral than that of acrylic paint or other forms of painting. From a conceptual standpoint, the use of different surfaces is also a reflection on how different individuals respond to the same message in different ways.

The installation of paintings on the gallery wall is executed to create a sense of balance within each painting as well as in the composition as a whole. They are laid to create movement and dialogue with one another; especially as the bottom two speak directly to one another in the creation of one larger image. The installed composition forms a larger landscape-esque image as the pieces evolve from the grassy environment present in *Satinette 1*, *Satinette 2*, and *Dovecote* to the cloudy sky environment present in *Dovecote*, *Carneau*, and *Skycutters*. There is an emphasis on negative space around the figures and the other components by using a mixture of close cropping and wider compositions. These differences are used to simulate or exaggerate how different perspectives dictate different meanings, especially when one painting is viewed individually versus with the rest of the works.

Introspection and the contemplation of relationships is far from a simple, straightforward topic; there is nuance to consider and different perspectives to learn. How to be a human in a social setting is a lifelong learning process. Being a person is difficult, and interacting with other humans is part of that difficulty. Our lives and the experiences that shape how we see the world also shape how we communicate and interpret how we are communicated with, which is more than likely to be different from others in subtle or dramatic ways. This can result in emotional strife to those we interact with, from

³⁶ Taubes, 67.

strangers to dearest loved ones. Although this is a tough reality to accept, it is precisely because of its difficulty that it is worth exploring further.

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Artists Informing Thesis (Footnote 11):

Lucian Freud

Giambologna

Van Gogh

John Singer Sargent

JMW Turner

George Bellows

Robert Henri

Eugene Boudin

NC Wyeth

Egon Shiele

Jenny Saville

Charles Ray

Rogier Willems

Dennis Sarazhin

Phil Hale

Yang Shaobin

John Hull

Liu Xiaodong

Sylvie Guillot

Yu Hong

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

Glenn Brown

Justin Mortimer

Kehinde Wiley