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Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:

**Partitions/**

**Apparitions**

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# Partitions/

# Apparitions

by

**Erik Shane Swanson, B.F.A.**

**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
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**Partitions/**

**Apparitions**

by

Erik Shane Swanson, MFA
The University of Texas at Austin, 2014
SUPERVISOR: Ned Rifkin

This Masters Report discusses my pivotal works from the past three years, as well as the generative concepts and stories behind them. Ubiquitous forms and anachronistic processes, pushed to the periphery for sheer abundance or seeming obsolescence, are two of my points of focus.

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Figure 1: *Studio I*, oil enamel on canvas, 28” x 32”, 2011

**Recordings and Impressions**

In *Studio I*, I painted an image of my work studio from direct observation, depicting every surface and object in the picture plane with an equal level of care. Having recently arrived in Austin this was partly an attempt at familiarizing myself with my new space, though my primary aim was to make an anti-hierarchical image. In doing this I realized not only how much stuff occupied my relatively empty space – lamps, paint cans, loose papers,

ceiling tiles, air ducts, etc. – but also how much information each element held, and how indispensable they were to a portrayal of my environment. Set in whatever position I left them the previous day, the arrangement of furniture and objects regarded my working and storage habits alone. The resulting display pointed both to the life of the things and to the actions of the user of the things (that being me). Compositional control came in the framing, while the elements within that frame were situated by logic indifferent to their re-presentation.

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> CT: What was your interest in chance?
> MD: Nothing much more than to get away from things already worked out. A real expression of the subconscious through chance. Your chance. If I make a throw of the dice, it will never be like your throw–meaning that it's a marvelous expression of your subconscious.[1]

Discussing John Cage's throw of the dice to determine his musical notes, Marcel Duchamp posits that chance differs from person to person; that such things as good chance and bad chance exist, like luck. It is a type of delegation, easing the load on the one who establishes the parameters while revealing something about him. My first attempts at plaster as a painting medium fairly resemble this, a crapshoot.

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[1] Tomkins, Calvin. *Marcel Duchamp: The Afternoon Interviews*. 1st ed. Brooklyn, NY: Badlands Unlimited, 2013. 51. Print.

Figure 2: *Dispersion Wall*, graphite powder and plaster embedded in drywall, 87" x 123", 2012

In *Dispersion Wall*, I cast plaster over powdered graphite in a large rectangular cavity removed from my studio wall. The drywall was unscrewed from the structural supports, laid face down on the ground, and wet plaster filled the void. The movement of the flicked and poured plaster is recorded in the displacement of the graphite powder, the image infused into the substrate. Working from front to back, the face of the piece becomes obscured by subsequent layers of plaster building up behind it; this makes it a bit like working in the dark, the resulting image a mystery until it is dry, lifted off of the mold and back into its vertical position. In form and function a Rorschach inkblot may most adequately describe

the resting position of the graphite, yet many characteristics of the work relate it to a tradition concerned with figuration: fresco painting. The pigment in a fresco is calcified into the lime mix, much in the way the graphite in my work is embedded in the plaster, and like the Giotto frescos at the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, *Dispersion Wall* exists in situ.

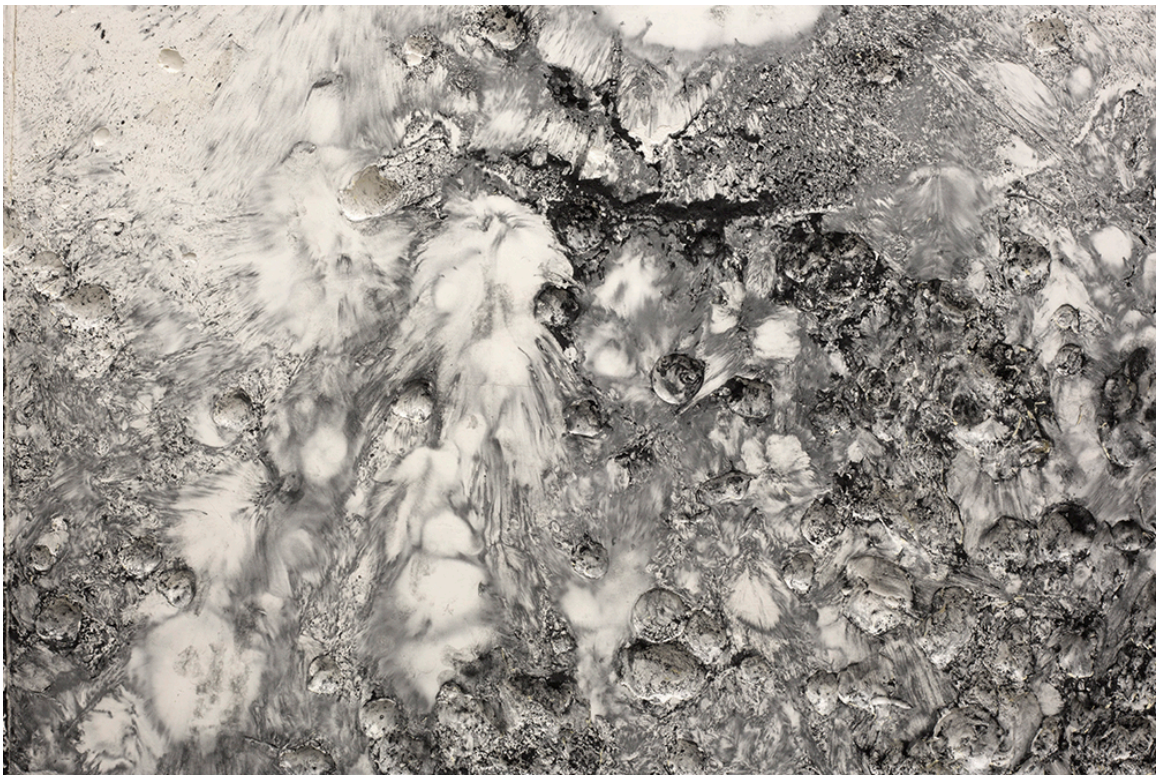

Figure 3: *Dispersion Wall* (detail), graphite powder and plaster embedded in drywall, 87" x 123", 2012

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> "We went in, Goldie, and we didn't see *anything!* … We spoke with the guard there, said, 'We came to see the Robert Irwin show.' And he said, 'Yes, it's right there.' *'Goldie,'* she said, '*Goldie, there wasn't anything there!*'"[2]

Goldie Irwin recounts a friend's response to her son's show at the L.A. County Museum of Art. Her son, Robert, makes subtle interventions with his work in a given environment, and it is at times overlooked. *Dispersion Wall* inserted itself into a given structure and made its presence known, while this past summer in Maine I pushed my work into another wall, and it stood by quietly, unnoticed by many.

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Figure 4: *Maine Coastline*, found plywood and found screws, 92" x 144" x 6", 2013

[2] Weschler, Lawrence. *Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees: Conversations with Robert Irwin*. ed. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2008. 30. Print.

Upon settling into my studio at Skowhegan, I found myself distracted by the surfaces that enclosed my workspace. The white paint clung to the plywood walls as if by a thread, flaking and brittle. Rather than smooth expanses these were weathered surfaces, worn by dramatically shifting temperatures and humidity from the previous years. The textured walls imbued the space with a sense of history, yet I thought they could also tell something of the beams that propped them up through that time. In constructing *Maine Coastline* I removed the worn plywood that constituted the wall plane, measured it out and cut it down so that it wrapped around the structural supports, rather than sit flat on top of them. Laminating the studs defeated the intended function of the wall plane as something flat on which to display, the folding surface highlighting the underlying frame instead. While space was gained in the gaps between the wooden supports, the usual amount of material was deemed inefficient, as it now had more surface area to cover. Reaching across the space I stripped the opposite wall of my studio, utilized it for tool storage, and sawed the removed plywood down in order to complete the veneering process.

Figure 5: View of studio wall opposite *Maine Coastline*, 2013

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Figure 6: City of Portland Archives, Oregon, 4410: City Hall exterior and Liberty Bell after bomb blast. Record Series 2001-09, 1970.

**Iconoclasts and Anachronism**

On November 21st, 1970 an explosion blasted through the entryway of Portland City Hall in Oregon. No one was physically harmed during the incident – it occurred in the middle of the night – but the building was severely damaged. Set beneath a replica of the Liberty Bell in the portico, the dynamite sent shrapnel flying inside and out of the structure.[3] An article in *The Oregonian*, Portland's local paper, mentions the following day that:

> In the second-floor council chamber, directly over the blast, Mayor Schrunk's heavy, wooden desk was upended and desks of the four city councilmen were jarred several feet from their original spots.[4]

Every window on the West side of the building was blown-out; walls and ceilings were reduced to their structural supports, as were many of the columns. When local plasterers Bill Shearer and Al Hanson started work on the restoration they found a significant challenge in making the imitation marble used to veneer the columns, the technique called scagliola. Portland City Hall was originally built in 1895, when the faux marbling process was in wider use; by 1970 it had mostly disappeared.

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3 Those responsible for the explosion were never discovered though some believe anti-Vietnam thought war radicals carried out the act; others that it was merely a prank. The now destroyed Liberty Bell replica has been replaced by another, which sits outside of the building underneath a cedar tree.

4 "Probe of Ruins Fails to Find Blast Clues." *Sunday Oregonian* [Portland, Oregon] 22 11 1970, n. Print.

In ancient Rome the rarity of certain desirable marble-types sparked the development of the simulation called scagliola. The name comes from the term *scaglie*, for marble chips, as this was an important material in the original process. Marble chips may still be used, though the essential ingredients consist only of plaster, animal glue, water and pigment. This imitation marble was first utilized for furniture inlays, and later as ornamentation for architectural features such as columns and walls. Though first created in antiquity, scagliola was revived in sixteenth century Italy and at its height in quality in eighteenth century Florence. Its use became moderately popular in government buildings and theaters across the United States in the late 1800s, but due to degradation in craftsmanship it grew less desirable and the number of projects declined. Tradesmen were secretive with their recipes to maintain an edge on the competition, and the only books that attempt a thorough description of the process are out of print and written in Italian. Despite this, Al Hanson, who had seen scagliolists at work early on in his career, was able to call on his memory and to have discussions with other older plasterers to gain some understanding on how he and Shearer could approach the restoration. These oral accounts passed on to Shearer, who was a younger man, helped reinvigorate the process for another generation of craftsmen.

Figure 7: Detail of restored column in Portland City Hall, 2013

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Figure 8: *Rock, Steady* (foreground), plaster, pigment, and steel, 147.5” x 66” x 20”, 2014, *Background Noise* (background), foam carpet padding, 178.5” x 170”, 2014

***~ Rock, Steady***

A spirit summoned from a witches cauldron, made corporeal, suspended before his ghost tail could fully emerge. The girl with snakes in her hair looked at him, and winked. Arms raised up and out, the way one would to look big in front of a wild bear, forever now his pose. Frozen like a Greek pillar, yet without a structure to bear. Death of a car salesman, out of the lot and into the gallery: people will come to see him, rather than the Crown Vic he once bowed to.

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Figure 9: *Rock, Steady* (detail), plaster, pigment, and steel, 147.5” x 66” x 20”, 2014

**Camouflage Reversals and the Unremarkable**

An imitation more widely recognized than scagliola is that of tiger stripes on clothing, which call various associations to mind. They represent the untamed predatory beast that we as humans instinctively fear; by wearing the image of this animal's coat one overcomes it, and thereby acquires its wild strength. Native to East and Southeast Asia, the tiger and its patterning may be seen through Western eyes as an image of the exotic, obtained through trade or colonialist exploits in places such as India. My interest in tiger stripes, however, lies in the inversion of their function. In the jungle the vertical black markings serve to camouflage the animal among the shadows cast on the earth's floor; when translated onto a dress or t-shirt the stripes frequently call attention to the wearer, rather than blending into the environment.

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Things that are designed to be conspicuous can in turn be made discreet; an animated object stilled, the shouting image muted. The unremarkable and the eye-catching can exist on the same plane, visually equalized. In their abundance, everyday items are often taken for granted, pushed to the periphery. Of his realist polyurethane objects carved with partner David Weiss for their 1993 installation *Room Under the Stairs*, Peter Fischli said: "I'm suddenly forced really to contemplate these plastic tubs. The imitation demands patient engagement with the object, an empathy."[5] Passing familiarity with an item provides

[5] Fleck, Robert, Beate Sontgen, and Arthur C. Danto. *Peter Fischli, David Weiss*. London and New York: Phaidon, 2005. Print.

the illusion of understanding that thing; on further examination one notices the range of subtleties in wear and functional design that an object may possess. The examination is not purely visual, but tactile, as the hands shaping the reproduction *feel* the nuances contained in the form. Between the source object and the material in which it is recreated, a space exists with the potential to hold new meaning.

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**Illumination**

The current drought in California has been long and debilitating, increasing the likelihood of brush fire in an already vulnerable region and severely damaging crops that provide nearly half of the nation's fruits and vegetables. Despite the drought's harmful effects, the resulting decrease in water levels has uncovered gold-rush era towns that were previously submerged for decades. One example is Mormon Island, which has resurfaced after fifty-eight years under Folsom Lake, near Sacramento. According to Kevin Oliver of KCRA, this town was once inhabited by as many as 2,500 people, with a school, four hotels, and seven saloons. While only the outer edges of Mormon Island have become accessible (ninety percent of the town is still underwater), Eagle Shawmut Mine in the Don Pedro Reservoir is now fully visible. This mine reportedly produced $7.4 million in gold, silver and copper during its operation from 1850 to the slow period between 1926 and 1936.

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Figure 10: *Black Light*, wax, pigment, and wick, 3" x 8.75" x 3", 2014

A search may never yield its intended results while great discoveries are stumbled upon by accident. Between these two scenarios is the finding of one thing while in pursuit of another. The bombing of Portland City Hall, for example, was intended to send a political message to local government officials, yet in the rubble an art form edging towards extinction was recovered. *Black Light* holds the ability to illuminate a darkened space but with the threat of self-destruction, as it would slowly melt away. A candle in the guise of its brighter counterpart, and in many ways its successor, romantic occasions notwithstanding. Though the low, warm light of the flame is only suggested, intimacy is essential to this object

as it requires a closer look in order to be recognized for what it is; the shift in material from scuffed rubber to pigmented wax is likely missed by a passing glance. Proper lighting in a gallery setting offers a cue for examination, but despite the location some works can go entirely unnoticed.

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My investigations these past few years have been largely concerned with visibility and the physical structure of my surroundings. Attempting to see clearly the parts that composed my work environment, I depicted them onto a two-dimensional plane. Prying further, I continued by looking into and through the planes that define a given space, making rigid surfaces malleable and folding walls in on their supports. My research on arcane processes once used for finishing architectural features, now nearly invisible in their obscurity, motivate my current thoughts and actions in the studio. Moving forward, I will continue to summon, reclaim and examine the space of the lost and overlooked.

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> The history of art is like a vast mining enterprise, with innumerable shafts, most of them closed down long ago. Each artist works on in the dark, guided only by the tunnels and shafts of earlier work, following the vein and hoping for a bonanza, and fearing that the load may play out tomorrow. The scene also is heaped with the tailings of exhausted mines: other prospectors are sorting them to salvage the traces of rare elements once thrown away but valued today more than gold.[6]
>
> -George Kubler

[6] Kubler, George. *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*. New ed. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962. 114. Print.

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## Vita

Erik Shane Swanson was born in Santa Barbara, California in 1983 and raised in Portland, Oregon. In 2005 Erik received his BFA from the Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, California, and in 2006 he moved to Brooklyn, New York. Swanson has exhibited in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and around Texas. In 2013 he participated in the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and was a recipient of the DMA Art Ball Prize. Erik received his MFA from the University of Texas at Austin in 2014.

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This thesis was typed by the author.