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Edge of Existence

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EDGE OF EXISTENCE

A Thesis

by

MACK LIAO

**Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2009

Major Subject: Art

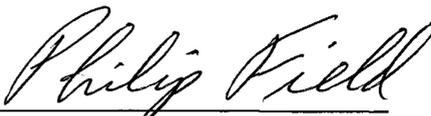
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ABSTRACT

Liao, Mack, Edge of Existence. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), May, 2009, 39 pp., 3 table, 16 illustrations, references, 15 titles.

The painting, *Edge of Existence* best describes my surreal world at its current state. The idea started with the crisis of global warming. I want to express the peril of the creatures that are on the frontier of the global warming effect. The idea for the structure of the painting came from a Magritte painting called, *The Domain of Arnheim*. He has transformed an undeniably grand impression of a moonlit mountain landscape by means of a mental technique related to that of Poe and his imaginary friend Ellison, who described a magnificent, complicated, and weird landscape in which the natural phenomena have been retouched by the spiritual intervention of superior beings. I chose the number three in the glacier mountain to represent the three wise beings that are in deep thought of a solution to the immediate global warming problem as one's beak starts to melt.

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
LIST OF TABLES	v
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	vi
CHAPTER I SUMMER	1
CHAPTER II FALL	12
CHAPTER III WINTER	21
CHAPTER IV SPRING	31
BIBLIOGRAPHY	xxvi
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	xxviii

LIST OF TABLES

PYROMETRIC CONE TABLE	vii
CASTING SLIP RECIPE	viii
KURT WEISER'S CASTING SLIP #2 RECIPE	ix

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Rene Magritte's The Lovers	x
The Lovers	xi
The Gathering	xii
I see what I want to see	xiii
Unexpected Ending	xiv
Lost	xv
The Orphan	xvi
The Arrival	xvii
Edge of Existence	xviii
The Chase	xix
Day	xx
Night	xxi
Siren	xxii
Frio Dreamscape	xxiii
Penguin Isles	xxiv
Roots of Extinction	xxv

CHAPTER I

SUMMER

Through artistic creations, I seek to balance my soul, mind, and body. My inspiration for my art starts with the ideas that usually come to me in my dreams, which are influenced by my interactions with my environment during my waking hours. My pieces of my artwork are heavily integrated with one another like the elements of an ecosystem. They grow stronger with each addition and grow weaker with each subtraction. My work is socially oriented and the goal is to reveal society's ills and blessings.

"How did you wind up here?" is the question I get often from the locals in the Rio Grande Valley. The only way I know how to answer such a question is as truthfully as possible. It started with my dream of having a job I enjoy doing all my life rather than working in a cubical space from nine to five p.m. Throughout my undergraduate program my work was always very clean and efficient; I was at the top of my class and a studio rat. Gradually my art and work ethic caught the eyes of my then professors Randy Schmidt, Kurt Weiser, Jeanie Otis among others at Arizona State University. When I was about to graduate, Kurt pulled me aside to his office and talked to me in private and asked me "What do you want to do?" I answered, "I want to teach at a university and make art on my own time." After that important discussion my goal was clear and I was readying myself for graduate school. The next two years after my graduation in 2004 was dedicated to a series of work that would get me into a graduate program in fine arts.

In the summer of 2005, Fred Spaulding, a ceramic professor from UTPA came to Arizona State University for a workshop. I was very intrigued by his way of thinking and methods he used to realize his imagination. I remember him during the NCECA conference in the spring of 2005 as a nominee for an upcoming artist award. I had done my research and sent out applications as a graduate applicant to four schools I was interested in. These were University of Washington, Penn State, UT Austin, and UT Pan-American. I had visited UW and UT Austin personally and was pleased with the professors and work space. They were on the top of my list among the schools I applied. For the next few months I was very anxious waiting for the results of my applications.

One by another the rejection letters came back from Penn State, UW, and UT Austin saying that my work is good but for whatever reason I am not among the selected applicants. UT Austin did say that they have space open in the painting program, but at that time my painting portfolio was not very impressive nor was it enough to submit to a program. The application that I sent to UTPA came through and I was ecstatic when I received the news. UTPA gave me the opportunity I was looking for and I was going to make the best of it.

The next few months I spent preparing myself for the move from Phoenix, Arizona to Edinburg, Texas. I am the only child in my family and have always been independent growing up. I was living on my own in Tempe, Arizona during my studies at Arizona State; however that was nothing compared to me moving to Edinburg, Texas on my own for graduate studies. I had prepared myself mentally saying goodbye to my friends and family in the Phoenix area. I had sought advice from close friends that share

my road to ambition and knew that my choice was right for myself and I did not look back.

I arrived in Edinburg, Texas in August of 2006. I quickly settled into my apartment and met with Professor Richard Hyslin and recent graduate Chris Leonard, who I became friends with and would be working with closely the next couple of years during my studies at UTPA. Professor Fred Spaulding who I was looking forward to working with was on sabbatical the year I arrived and would later teach at another college. I was very disappointed about that situation as I would have liked to have known some of his intuition to the problems I encountered later in my graduate studies.

The beginning of the first semester was a little hectic, but I soon picked up where I left off with my Surrealistic style of artwork. My goal was just to make work and experiment in my first year of research and develop a direction within that period. In ceramics, my main field of expertise, I began to cast various local fruit shapes to get a feel of what they might become in the near future. The fruit I decided to cast had to have a unique shape I desired and I had to keep the overall undercuts to a minimum as I was not yet an accomplished mold maker. The process began with me choosing the section of the fruit I wanted to cast; then I filled the rest of the section with clay, making sure to apply casting soap between the plaster areas so the plaster areas will not adhere to each other. The mold is then left alone for about a week or two to dry naturally before it is set and ready to cast molds.

Once the mold is ready, I cast them often to break them into working order and to see if there are any flaws while making the mold. I used an off shoot recipe of my Professor Kurt Weiser's porcelain casting slip recipe for my casting slip. The original

recipe includes 233 of Grolleg kaolin, 100 of Kaopaque 20 kaolin, 67 of #6 Tile clay, 100 of OM-4 Ball clay, 250 of Custer Feldspar, and 250 of Silica in addition with 14 ounces of water, 6 grams of Darvan deflocculant, .325 grams of Barium Carbonate, and .625 grams of Soda Ash per 1000 grams of dry clay weight.¹ A couple of the materials were not available to me so I did my best and adapted to the situation. I had substituted the amounts of Kaopaque 20 kaolin with Grolleg kaolin and #6 Tile clay with EPK kaolin for my off shoot recipe. The results of the change is mainly in color as I predicted, as the lack of Kaopaque 20 kaolin made the porcelain a little less white but the clay more malleable.

The process began with me casting multiple pieces of each of the fruit molds I had in the morning. Then that night I cleaned the seam lines carefully with various pin tools and kept all the successful pieces under plastic to ensure that they were not too dry before putting them together the next morning. I compared and combined the fruit shapes according to my sketches and went with the flow. If I happened to find a better placement for my piece, I went with it. In the end, the cast porcelains looked like a cross between fruits and various forms of sea life. Once they were successfully put together they were left under plastic to dry slowly before they were ready to be bisque fired. Years of personal, sometimes agonizing experience tells me that patience and knowledge of timing is the key to successful ceramics. That is what I did with these cross-cultured fruits. The ceramics then were fired to cone 05 with a commercial glaze, cone 5 oxidation firing without glaze or cone 10 reduction firing without glaze to be readied for China paint, which is at cone 018. Cone is a fired piece of ceramic that melts at their

¹ Kurt Weiser, Personal interview, 25 Feb. 2004.

corresponding temperature that is represented by the symbol Δ .² Reduction firing refers to the lack of oxygen and oxidation firing refers to the affinity of oxygen in the kiln during the firing process. Each base glaze preparation gave a unique result. My favorite result was from the base with Δ 05 glazes as the glaze stressed and cracked during the cooling process letting the initial China paint to get into the grooves.

How I came upon China painting is a happy accident really. I was just getting myself into painting but my skills in ceramics still kept my main focus. I was looking for some way to combine the two mediums I love. It just happens that one of my Professors, Kurt Weiser is known world wide for reinventing China painting. I only know that he is a tremendous potter, after he did a demo on the potter's wheel with a fully dressed shirt without getting any clay on himself. I was also oblivious to the style of work that he did at the time. He humbly introduced me into China painting and I was hooked like an addict ever since. In fact he gave me a package of white powder China paint in a small unlabeled plastic bag just before I left for graduate school. I experimented quite a lot with the new introduced medium to form my own style and aesthetics. No disrespect to Kurt, but I did not want to be a clone of him. I wanted to have my own way of using China paint and make my own path to glory. I knew everything in ceramics had been done before as far as technique is concerned. What will make my ceramics unique will be the imagery that I painted on them and the context they will be used in.

There are entire books about the history of China painting. What I'm about to tell you and how I came upon China painting is just the tip of the iceberg. It was started in China due to the need to decorate the newly discovered porcelain in northern China

² Brant Palley, "Fahrenheit Cone chart provided by Orton," New Mexico Clay Inc. 5 Mar. 2009, 11 Mar. 2009 <http://www.nmclay.com/Kilns/coneFchart.htm>.

around 1000 AD. The invention of the climbing kiln, which was a long chamber built on a slope, made porcelain possible as the kiln was able to reach above 2300 °F to melt away any wood ash that accumulated on the surface during firing into a hard glossy sheen.³ That was the beginning for glaze development. The Chinese culture or any other culture for that matter could not leave an undecorated surface for long, so the potters started to paint on their porcelain. Their most notable achievement was painting in blue using cobalt oxide under a clear glaze. The high heat and deducing atmosphere of their kilns destroyed a lot of the color that the potters intended, so they turned to the use of overglaze enamels, which were fired onto the surface of the clear glaze in a subsequent lower temperature firing. To achieve a brighter color in a subsequently lower firing was not a new idea as similar methods were already in use on metal and glass. That is probably where the potters got their idea from. The contact between the artists from different mediums inspired the ceramic artists to develop new colors and styles. One such style of overglaze enameling was known as *famille verte*, in which shades of green enamel colors made from copper oxide predominates.⁴ After the early Qing Dynasty, porcelain and overglaze enamel production in China only repeated itself, and the cutting edge of innovation moved elsewhere.

I started out China painting with imagery on a glazed vessel and then I had experimented China painting imagery on bare porcelain ware with success. Soon I made objects to match with the imagery that I wanted to China paint on. My objects ended up being cute hand held things which I did not intend them to be. An important turning point discussion with my Professor Karen Sanders during the end of my first year gave

³ Paul Lewing, *China Paint & Overglaze* (Westerville: The American Ceramic Society, 2007) 7.

⁴ Lewing 9.

me a wake up call of sort. She inspired me to think outside the box with the China painted ceramics concerning how they were being perceived with the way I was displaying them. That discussion impacted me to think beyond the subject and more about the setting.

Three dimensional spaces has always been my preferred way of thinking but there are times when my ideas are better realized by two dimensional means. I remember seeing the small print of a painting done by Rene Magritte, a famous Belgian Surrealist painter, just like the day I fell in love for the first time. My gaze was focused and intense for a couple of minutes like I was in my own world. The painting I was so drawn to was titled *The Lovers* (Fig. 1) by Magritte. At the time I was still working on my BFA and my sense of direction in art was unclear. I'm not quite sure how to explain this, but the imagery of, *The Lovers* gave me balance. In all my aspects of my life I look for balance; it helps me from tipping over and capsizing. In my opinion, good can only be good if there is bad to compare it with.

In my first semester at UTPA I made a second attempt at the interpretation of, *The Lovers* (Fig. 2) which I was so mesmerized with. I had kept Magritte's concept of *The Lovers*, which were two beings in love embracing each other with a passionate kiss. In conjunction with the theme, I had input my own subject matter that was personal to my taste. First, I had replaced the suited male torso and the dressed female torso with their penguin counter parts. Second, I had kept the mystery of the veiled couple by replacing their heads with an apple and an orange. In order to give that feeling of passion, I had given the model apple a bite as I captured the imagery on the canvas. Third, I had put thought into the background to make the scene more alive by setting the stage with an

ocean view at dusk. I had difficulties drawing out the scene accurately as it gradually changed during the painting process. Therefore, I repainted several areas multiple times which left lines by the build up of paint which bothered me initially. A couple of discussions with my Professors Phillip Field and Richard Hyslin made me realize that a painting is about paint, as well as the build up of paint which should be prized during the painting process and not something to be ashamed of.

For my paintings I rarely use turpentine as a medium as I dislike the blotchy effect it leaves after it dries. Instead I use mainly liquin as a medium with some linseed oil added. For a wash effect I use something like 3 part liquin, and 1 part linseed oil as my medium. For my everyday medium I use 1.5 part liquin, and 1 part linseed oil as my medium. For detail work I use 1 part liquin impasto, and 1 part linseed standing oil as my medium. Like all paintings, *The Lovers* is no different as it was never finished completely, it is only finished to a stage or check point. It would be several months after the initial stage of painting before I would come back and retouch this painting with the new skills that I have learned under the guidance of my instructor Carlos Everhard. First, I stretched the canvas once more due to the unsatisfactory poor stretching of my first attempt. Second, I made a new drawing around the apple and the bodies to make them seem more three dimensional. Third, I touched upon the crevasses for a deeper shadow effect. Overall I worked on this beloved painting for two years. I am satisfied at this point with the results in coherent with my current painting skill level.

The mystery of the world is beyond the psycho-analysts. Magritte believed, “No one of good sense believes that psycho-analysis could elucidate the mystery of the world. To put it precisely, the nature of the mystery annihilates curiosity.” Magritte’s work does

exactly is to evoke the mystery, his conclusion is, "Psycho-analysis has nothing to tell us either about works of art, which evoke the mystery of the world." He adds maliciously, "Perhaps psycho-analysis itself is a better subject for psycho-analysis."⁵ I agree with his statement as some things are just incomprehensible and some are just as is. To make something more out of nothing is just silly, but somehow I don't think that can be helped as the curiosity to make something logical is in our nature. Take *The Gathering* (Fig. 3) for instance; what I intended for the viewer can be very different from what the viewer interprets. For me the scene is about emperor penguins gathering along the shore of Antarctica readying themselves for the long march to their breeding ground. I got the inspiration from a landscape image that I saw on the worldwide web while researching for ideas. The intense contrast between the silhouettes of the emperor penguin and the glaring light of the rising sun is especially pleasing to me. During a critique some of my colleagues said the image is about a religious cult as the penguins gather about praying to the squash god that is faintly visible in the distant horizon. I had no intention of making any reference to religious theme in this painting, at least not consciously. Perhaps some psycho-analysis of my sub-conscious can reveal what I truly intend with the imagery of my painting. Then again, perhaps my mind just wanted to compose subjects of no relevance to each other to form an imagery of no deeper meaning than what is shown. Whatever the case may be, my images are my expressions of my surroundings and they are made to be enjoyed by me.

This next painting of mine, *I see what I want to see*; (Fig. 4) was inspired by and is my interpretation of Magritte's *The False Mirror*. That painting is a deliberate reduction of the natural function of an eye. The remarkable thing is that, like the

⁵ A. M. Hammacher, *Magritte* (New York: Abradale Press, 1995) 23.

Byzantine eye, it does not actually look at us. This is because here, Magritte avoids the eye's active function-looking by showing only its reflective function-the reflection in the cornea of the sky and clouds. The reflection in the mirror is passive, maybe dead, but the reflection in the eye penetrates the interior and it is there, inside the eye, where the image comes into being. Magritte had a deep response to a one-line poem by Paul Eluard, "*Dans les yeux les plus sombres s'enferment les plus claires*" (In the darkest eyes the brightest eyes have secluded themselves).⁶ I had struggled painting this painting and making it my own for the good part of two years. I had lost count of the layers of paint I had put on this canvas; in fact, the texture of the canvas is nearly invisible. Originally I had incorporated a lemon and a layer of skin where the sky is now. Also some eye lashes within the kiwi were intended but the more I looked at it the more the painting looked awkward for me. I finally decided to retouch the painting as my pride for my works required me to make them the best that I could with my abilities in conjunction with the idea I wanted to express. First, I started to draw the outline of the eye to more of an oval shape. Then I added the clear day clouds that resembled swimming penguins in the blue sky. For my final touches I added a couple of tear drops rushing down the side of the kiwi. The finished product was heavily influenced by Magritte's, *The False Mirror*, but it still had enough elements of my taste to make it my creation. This painting has taught me to be more courageous and not be afraid to start over. I also learned that vigilance is the key to getting my artwork to the stage I desire it to be.

The first year at UTPA has been a great experience just like my Professor Randy Schmidt foretold, as he knows me well and recommended me to the Rio Grande Valley. I believe his words were "hidden paradise" or something along that line. I am not

⁶ Hammacher 86.

completely onboard with his enthusiasm but I am pleased with all the helpful people and the quiet environment that it provided for my study. Whenever I need to relax, a place near a body of water is where I like to be. In Phoenix, Arizona there was not much water if at all. I would often take trips to San Diego, California to ease my tired mind and get fresh ideas for my next creation. Here at UTPA, I go to South Padre Island to get acquainted with the Gulf of Mexico and ease the pressures that come with graduate school and to get new ideas from the local culture.

CHAPTER II

FALL

The shore at the northern end of South Padre Island was a terrible sight for my eyes to behold. Countless human waste lay like autumn leaves around the beautiful sand. From broken plastic bottles to abandon sandals, you name it, it is there. A broken toilet seat really cemented the idea in my mind of how we treat the environment around us. From that moment on I knew what my graduating exhibition will be about. To see so much man made pollution first hand, face to face, was very disheartening. So I started to gather trash that I might use in my exhibition. My efforts may seem paltry when comparing to organizations that do this in a bigger scale. I mean to bring this awareness to the global community so that we may act before something even more serious happens that could hamper mankind.

In my opinion, the only way to go about protecting our environment is to create awareness. Some scientists do comparisons over time by analyzing one specific place over a span of a number of years and detect the changes. As an artist, I can be an historian of my time and inspire the present to avoid further mistakes before it is too late. I believe that it is my duty to jot down the successes and mistakes of my time so that future generations have something to compare when making their own decisions.

The process of setting up an installation to show my expression was new to me. I immediately tapped into my past memory when my dad would take me to the dinosaur

museums. I remember the setting usually had some kind of backdrop wall painting and the space around the dinosaur was decorated with scenery that one might see at that time. I started making some sketches about the setting and the paintings that would be placed side by side with the installation.

In my third semester I was given my first college course to teach. In order to inspire and train the undergraduate students to work hard, I led the way by being there working along side them on my own works of art. In the process we both learned a great deal from each other. I was very pleased with the end results they exhibited for their final critique. I believe that by constantly learning myself would I have something new to offer my students. So I went to a couple of interesting workshops to get new ideas and methods that I might use in the art process. In an art festival just outside of Austin, Texas, I saw this unique Native American pottery which gave me the idea of making silhouettes rather than solid objects out of my subject matter. I started by making adequate size clay slabs for my silhouettes. Once the design was ready I cut it into two mirror images of the silhouette out of the clay slabs with a ceramic fettling knife. Then I stuffed newspaper in between the soft slabs before mending the edges to close them. Once the soft slabs began to take shape I poked a hole for the trapped air to escape preventing cracking in the drying stage when the clay shrinks and during the firing process. Then I set the pieces on thick foam under loose plastic to control the drying rate. The pieces were then left for a month to reach the bone dry stage before being bisque fired to Δ 08-06. Bone dry refers to clay that looked "bone dry" and is ready to be fired. Bisque is the first stage of the firing process potters typically fires their ceramics to so they can handle their piece more easily while glazing. For the final touch I decided to glaze them with a black engobe

recipe that is similar to the ones used by the ancient Greek potters found during my research at Arizona State. The recipe includes: 25 of black iron oxide, 15 of manganese dioxide, 5 of cobalt oxide, 5 of chrome oxide, 150 of gersley borate, and 15 of black mason stain. The black engobe is most black around Δ 06 and it gets a tint of green if taken up to a Δ 4 oxidation atmosphere. The results can be seen in the subject matter of *Unexpected Ending*. (Fig. 5)

I remember brushing with death in that semester like it was yesterday. The unexpected car accident happened while I and a fellow undergraduate were on our way to set up a show in Austin, Texas. I had a 1998 Honda Civic at the time and we were going 70 miles per hour on the freeway. I was speeding up to pass an overhaul truck that carried a construction tube. The truck driver must not have seen me as he moved into my lane. I reacted by going to my left and as a consequence the wheels hit the median speed bumps. I was still calm, cool, and collective according to my passenger as I tried best to get us out of the immediate dire situation. Unlike the death encounters in the movies where they remember their loved ones as time slows down, I kept reminding myself "Not yet, I still have much art to do!" Next thing we know, the car was flipping in mid air a few times across the grassy median as I finally lost control. Amazingly we both came away unscathed after all the glass was broken when the car finally landed right side up. Needless to say my car was totaled but I was glad we both were okay thanks to our seatbelts and the body frame of the Honda Civic. That ordeal set me back a bit as I had no transportation. It also got me thinking long and hard about how unexpected things happen in life. Instead of getting depressed about the situation I was motivated to live life to the fullest as I am a glass half full kind of a person. I began to work even harder

and spent countless hours in my studio making progress in my artwork. For a period of time I thought I was driven mad by the ordeal.

I enjoyed inspiring others and to become motivated. That is exactly what my professor Frank Manuella did for me one semester. In working with him I was introduced to ideas that were new to me. He taught me to thinking outside the box when choosing materials during my artistic expressions. In my undergraduate days, I was usually shy about experimenting with new materials and pretty much stuck with what I knew. During that period, I loved throwing and made many pots on the potter's wheel. I was unsatisfied with the results and I started to use the potter's wheel more as a tool rather than a mean. I now know that creative thinking outside the box is one of the major differences between an undergraduate and a graduate student. While an undergraduate is trained in more traditional art mediums, a graduate student is expected to express his idea through any means he can get his hands and knowledge on.

The *Lost* (Fig. 6) came a long way from its original state of purpose. It was originally a part of an installation that resembled a Mars landscape. I had gathered red construction sand to imitate the color of Mars iron rich landscape. There was a remote control vehicle representing the astronauts that would make the discovery of a lost civilization when they came upon the idol. I started making the idol with clay using the slab construction method. Then I wrapped the piece in loose gauze before I applied several layers of densite plaster. After a couple of hours, I began to dig out the clay leaving the plaster shell. The idol was then cleaned up with a rasp and sand paper. The idol was still missing something even after asking my peers and professors for their opinion. I started to search for an answer and looked around for materials that I may use

to solve my problem. I did not have to look far as there were boxes of different colored wax stacked right outside my studio by the wax station. Professor Richard Hyslin gave me all the input on how wax and plaster would work together as I had previously never worked with wax before. I heated up the yellow colored wax I decided upon and poured it over the idol inside out. After the wax had cooled down, I used a heat gun to clean up the inconsistencies. The end result was *Lost*, the sculpture, as the installation I had intended it for did not materialize.

Working with instructor Carlos Everhard was a privilege as he has been influenced and introduced to ideas from the East coast, West coast, and Italy. Not much older than me, he gave me inspiration that in the near future I can become an upcoming artist with some diligence and hard work. At the time I was working on three paintings and had six other paintings to a stage I thought finished. Needless to say, I was very wrong as a painting is never truly finished. One of the first things he had me do was to pick up a picture book on Odd Nerdrum and look at his paintings. So I did, I had bought a thick book that contained a lifetime of works by Nerdrum and a thin book that contained his most recent works that were showing at the Los Angeles Museum of Art. I was not fond of his subject matter as most of his paintings had human figures in it, but man, can he paint! The thick book I had purchased had great close up details of his brush strokes that showed his master execution. My learning curve in painting leaped after studying the techniques that Nerdrum had showed through his paintings along with some hands on guidance by Carlos. Looking at my previously “finished” paintings in my studio was getting more and more unbearable with every glance. Finally my pride could not take it anymore and I started to retouch all the paintings to bring the paintings up to

the standard of my current skill level. It took some time and a lot of effort but it was well worth it as that itch has been scratched.

Through the art history classes I have come in contact with the works by Giorgio de Chirico. His art seemed to address itself directly to Rimbaud's exhortation to the artist that he makes himself "a seer" in order to plumb the depths of the "unknown," and to attain a hallucinatory state of "clairvoyance." Not only did de Chirico create an authentic, troubling dream imagery of great power and intensity for the first time in the century, but he also managed to capture the spirit of the age, to convey, in Breton's words, its "irremediable anxiety".⁷ Following in his footsteps, I created *The Orphan*. (Fig. 7) In the painting I intended to capture the lonesome melancholy feeling by setting a penguin-like creature standing alone in the unforgiving Antarctic environment that is just pass the viewer's reach behind a brick wall. The idea behind the brick wall comes from a Magritte painting, *The Empty Picture Frame*. The work illustrated, seems to be a painting within a painting which also shows us the wall of a room with a wainscot. There is scarcely any depth, only the wainscoting and the shadow of the frame. The painting is not empty; however, it consists of a framed brick wall, so real and so minutely detailed that we do not doubt that it is the outer wall of the gray inner wall.⁸ I started by making the texture of the individual bricks by applying some multi purpose carpet & sheet vinyl adhesive with a scrapper. I had come across the vinyl when I asked my professor Rey Santiago about a paint saving texture substitute. Once the vinyl dried after a couple of weeks I started painting *The Orphan*. In a constant reminder about the setting by my

⁷ Sam Hunter, et al., Modern Art 3rd edition revised and expanded (New York: The Vendome Press, 2004) 165.

⁸ Hammacher 118.

brain, I painted a shooting star in the sky where the eyes of the penguin shaped opening would be, similar to another of my paintings.

I painted *The Arrival* (Fig. 8) at the time I was experimenting with paint on a variety of surfaces. I had decided on metal as the coldness and weight of it produced another receptive outlet for our senses. In preparation for the painting I first sprayed a rust prevention fixative over the metal. Then I applied a coat of gesso and modeled the textures I desired with the vinyl I had previously used. The scene is astrological as a penguin shaped meteor is on a collision with the planet below. Ever since I was a child I was fascinated with the mystery of the universe. Where do we come from? I often wondered the meaning of our existence in general. Then my mind kindly reminded me that I do not get to choose when, what, where I will be born. I am grateful to be alive as a human being. Since all life is finite, it is best that I adapt to whatever the situation may be and most of all make my impressions felt by my surroundings in the form of art.

By now you may wonder why I included penguins in the theme of my artwork. The penguins are a wonderful species. I especially admire the Emperor penguins. They migrate to the edge of Antarctica every year in late fall readying themselves for their longest march of the year.⁹ For some it will be their last. They march inland some fifty miles over treacherous terrain by foot or belly to the place they were once hatched to breed the next generation themselves. On arrival they pair up by singing love songs to each other. Once they find their mate for the season they stay loyal to one another. After the eggs are laid, the mothers transfer their egg to the father's care as they are exhausted after the labor. Even so, the mothers must trace their footsteps back to the sea to fill their

⁹ March of the Penguins, dir. Luc Jacquet, writ. Jordan Roberts, narrated by Morgan Freeman, DVD, Warner Independent Pictures and Nation Geographic Feature Films, 2005.

belly and feed their soon to be hatched egg. Once in the water they must bravely pass the gauntlet of the predatory leopard seals. Meanwhile the fathers stay together to generate warmth against some of the coldest weather on Earth. At the same time they must juggle their precious egg between their feet and keep it warm under their belly. The Emperor penguins are the only known bird species that is not territorial. They simply cannot afford to if they mean to survive against -70 °F weather without wind chill. After some months in the darkness due to the polar extremes, some of the penguins simply fade away into the whiteness. The survivors can enjoy their fruition as their precious eggs begin to hatch. The chicks are hungry and cold waiting together with their father for their mother's return. The fathers by this time have been fasting for over three months and have lost a third of their original weight. In their last ditch attempt they give their final ounce of substance to their chick sustaining them a few more days. The desperate couple eagerly waits further for the return of the mothers. For most of the chicks the wait has been fulfilling as they meet their mothers for the first time. For some they are eventually abandoned by their hungry fathers waiting out their last draw of breath. In the end about a quarter of the initial pairings of the Emperor penguins end in tragedy due to predation, weather, and inexperience. The fathers now must travel back to the sea in their hungry state to fill their bellies. The parents rotate their duties till the chick is nearly fully grown. By the time the chicks are ready to take their first dive into the water, the coming spring has melted away the ice to their footsteps. The adolescents join the colony and live in the sea for five years until they are mature themselves to reproduce. At that time they will make their first march back to the place they were once hatched.

The characteristics shown by the Emperor penguins are most admirable to me as I sometimes dream of being one of them myself. Then I wake up and here I am. One of the main reasons I admire them so much is their toughness through the worst of circumstances. I hope I can get to their level of fortitude someday. One similarity I have with the emperor penguins is that I am curious about them just as much as they are curious about us humans. They are one of the few species that do not run away due to fear of our presence. In fact they are just the opposite. They approach the film makers with abundant curiosity and intuitiveness. In essence they give the unknown a chance no matter what it is. Their action maybe considered naive in some situations, but that same innocence can help avoid conflict between two parties. In short it is their wonderful positive characteristics that make them most admirable to me.

The second year into the graduate program I encountered a few curve balls thrown by life. I have learned a lot about myself and grew in the process. I did not blink nor panic in the face of adversity, instead I kept steady my focus and with some patience I persevered. My sophomore slump gave me the option to sink or swim and I survived. My stubbornness, or stupidity, simply will not let me take the easier road in life, and for that I am grateful. I hope my long and sometime agonizing trials in life will draw out the very best in me after the dust settles.

CHAPTER III

WINTER

The nights are getting longer and I cannot sleep. I am awake in my bed thinking of new ideas and techniques that I could apply to my immediate artistic expression. It may be the long hours I have spent in my studio that deprives me of precious sleep or perhaps the coffee that I have drunk a couple of hours ago. Sometimes I am so tired that when I sleep I do not dream. That is the part I am most upset about as my dream state is where I do my creative thinking process.

What is dream and why do we dream? I contemplate these questions regularly in a quest to find out what is reality. According to Freud dream is the process of displacement which is chiefly responsible for our being unable to discover or recognize the dream-thoughts in the dream-content, unless we understand the reason for their distortion. He went further saying that the situation in a dream is often nothing other than a modified repetition, complicated by interpolations, of an impressive experience of this kind; on the other hand, faithful and straightforward reproductions of a real scenes only rarely appears in dreams.¹⁰ For me dream is a place where my mysterious subconscious works to give me their suggestion about a situation.

As I continue further in my quest for what is real I begin to question my senses. Is reality something I can see, touch, smell, hear, and taste? Does it require all five of our

¹⁰ Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Art in Theory 1900-2000 An Anthology of Changing Ideas, new ed. (UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) 21.

known senses or a number of combinations of them to be real? For sure we all have come across something that fools one or more of our senses. One of the best examples I can think of is imagery on the internet. It is formulated by pixels to be visible for our eyes, but does that make it real? In fact you cannot apply any of the other four senses to authenticate the presence of the imagery. So what really validates reality?

Perhaps a look into the surreal world can explain further the answers that I seek. If the Surrealists are widely described as painters of a constantly mutating dream world, this should not imply that they reproduce their dreams in painting, or that each artist uses the elements of dreams to construct a little private world in which to play out some benevolent or malevolent role. It means rather that these artists move freely, boldly, and confidently at the borderline between the inner and the outer world, a borderline that is physically and psychologically entirely real even if it has not yet been adequately defined and determined, that they undertake to register precisely what they see and experience there, and that they intervene wherever their revolutionary instincts suggest they should.¹¹ In essence the definition of reality is not so clear cut.

During the process of searching for reality I come upon the realm of the surreal world. Perhaps understanding the surreal world will help me get a better grip on what is reality. So what is Surrealism? Andre Breton, the leader of the Surrealist movement during the 1920's defined Surrealism as psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.¹² He goes on saying

¹¹ Harrison 493.

¹² Harrison 452.

that he believes in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak.¹³ The surreal world in my mind is made up of mismatching sets of imagery during my waking state of being and imagery I experience in my dream state.

The painting, *Edge of Existence* (Fig. 9) best describes my surreal world at its current state. The idea started with the crisis of global warming. I want to express the peril of the creatures that are on the frontier of the global warming effect. The idea for the structure of the painting came from a Magritte painting called, *The Domain of Arnheim*. He has transformed an undeniably grand impression of a moonlit mountain landscape by means of a mental technique related to that of Poe and his imaginary friend Ellison, who described a magnificent, complicated, and weird landscape in which the natural phenomena have been retouched by the spiritual intervention of superior beings.¹⁴ I chose the number three in the glacier mountain to represent the three wise beings that are in deep thought of a solution to the immediate global warming problem as one's beak starts to melt. The leopard seal is a nemesis of the penguins as it rises up from the breaking ice threatening their every decision. The soft clouds pass over the clear sky no matter the outcome.

The movement of the clouds got me thinking of another dimension, time. It is during that time I created, *The Chase* (Fig. 10), after days of studying the clouds and their gradual motion. The way the clouds metamorphose by the power of wind pressure is very interesting to me. It is like watching a dramatic scene from a movie unfold before your eyes. The clouds could be easy going on a clear blue sky one day and be intensely

¹³ Harrison 450.

¹⁴ Hammacher 152.

threatening the next during a thunderstorm. The immense variety of expressions the same clouds could metamorphose into is the most attractive part in my eyes. The concept of *The Chase* began when I saw the Magritte painting, *Personal Values*. Magritte has changed the proportions between these objects to such an extent that between the smallest object in the real world – the match – and the largest pieces of furniture – the cupboard and the bed – they have almost been reversed.¹⁵ His idea of playing with the sensible brain has encouraged me to alter subject matter that we normally expect into something unnatural and unexpected.

In the process of expressing myself through art I have discovered my natural appreciation for the negative space. Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* in the Great Salt Lake, Utah really exemplifies what I started to appreciate and work toward. I started to research Minimalism, such as the Japanese Zen rock gardens and spiritual Native American sand paintings. Moreover, it was Minimalism that, unwittingly, drew free-spirited artists back towards environmental issues, since, being relation less, unitary objects tended to solicit relations with the world outside. Meanwhile, Happenings and Environments had also prepared the way when Conceptualists, in the late 1960s, allowed post studio consciousness to evolve into Earth and land consciousness, which soon meant setting art works far from galleries and placing them in some remote wilderness, occasionally urban but mostly natural. In the words of Michael Heizer, a leading Earth artist: "The position of art as malleable barter-exchange item falters as the cumulative economic structure gluts. The museums and collections are stuffed, the floors are sagging, but real space still exists."¹⁶

¹⁵ Hammacher 144.

¹⁶ Hunter 371.

Earth Art graced the world with a masterpiece after Robert Smithson managed to transform a barren shore on the Great Salt Lake into a huge, exceedingly romantic metaphor for his fascination with entropy – the rate at which all matter decays. Not only had the site been wrecked by oil prospectors; the cove seemed to quake with its own internal strife, rather like an “immovable cyclone” or the underwater vortex that, according to local mythology, welled up from a source in the faraway Pacific Ocean. In this felt but motionless spin, together with the corroded drilling equipment, scattered shards of black basalt, cracked lake floor, and pinkish-red, algae-infested water, Smithson saw the poetic possibilities of an earthen gyre built with bulldozers as a beautiful but melancholy symbol of the entropic realities of all creation. Yet, since *Spiral Jetty* appears to open outward as well as inward as if decaying into its own dead center, the piece could be read as emblematic of life’s complex process of simultaneous self-renewal and self-destruction.¹⁷

The sheer scale and size of Earth works is intimidating. The amount of space, funding, material, machines, man power and hours is staggering. It would be my dream to come true creating something that monumental someday down my artistic career when I have the means and cross path to the concept for my creation. In the meantime I am taking small steps by creating installations drawn from my imagination.

The installation, *Day* (Fig. 11) was created during this time of inspiration. The subjects are made of different colored wax silhouettes to represent the seasons of the year. It is laid over the sand which is drawn into by a make shift stick guided by the hands of the artistic creator. The red color flood lights enhance the warmth during the day on this

¹⁷ Hunter 371.

foreign dreamy landscape. The concept of the installation, *Day* came from readings within a Zen rock gardening book professor Phillip Field gave me for my ongoing research. The quotes and poems of the masters past were very inspiring on my sponge like mind. A quote by Zen master Sojo (384-414 A.D.) was most memorable, he said “Heaven and earth and I are of the same root, the ten-thousand things and I are of one substance.”¹⁸ Even though he lived in an era long before I was even born and in a very different place and setting, I find that our beliefs are most eerily similar. Starting with our appreciation for nature as an art form, we do anything to preserve that beauty. I was born and baptized into Roman Catholicism, but my beliefs evolved into more of Buddhist teachings as I grew older and became more culturally aware of whom I am.

Life is constantly in motion, but a moment of that can be captured, analyzed, and scrutinized to change the perception of that frozen moment in time. Altering perception with a different colored light source to change the mood is what I did next to my installation *Day*. With a cooler source of light suggested by Professor Rey Santiago the installation *Day* had transformed itself into *Night* (Fig. 12) instantaneously with a flick of the light switch. The cooler light can bring upon the feeling of chilling desert nights from within the viewer’s experience and knowledge to the surface. From that point on, light has become another source in my arsenal in creating of my art.

The patterns around the subjects in *Day* and *Night* are from a mixture combination of the Zen rock gardens and the Native American sand paintings I have come across during my research. The immediate impression of a Zen rock garden is both soothing and shocking. To come upon one of these gardens in ordinary life is to seem to break through the veiled appearances of material reality into a sudden stillness, almost

¹⁸ Abd al-Hayy Moore, *Zen Rock Gardens* (Philadelphia: Running Press 1992) 16.

deathly stillness, of a more essential reality.¹⁹ The gardens are a means to discover the source and strengths of our natural humanity, which, according to Zen teaching, is poised, calm, sincere, and capable of facing all matters in life with equanimity and perfect composure. The contemplative experience in Zen is meant to awaken the primal consciousness hidden within us which makes possible any spiritual activity, big or small.²⁰ The simplification of elements sacrifices mental excitement which amplifies the often overlooked subtle details in our surrounding. The need to meditate to balance ourselves is almost required in our daily over stimulated busy lives. Especially when our lives are constantly bombarded by information from our fast growing technological advanced gadgets such as the computer, television, mobile phone etc. Zen rock gardens are sometimes called “gardens of the mind.”

The clean, crisp elements of Zen rock gardens mirror the experience of mind with a capital “M”-meaning not our usual dreary mental chatter, but the natural part of our consciousness that connects us to the Universal Mind, the living consciousness of the whole of creation. This understanding of mind is, to Zen practitioners, the original human state, not only in the sense of ourselves as children first experiencing the world with immediacy, spontaneity, and delight, but also in the sense of humankind’s soulful, original openness to earth, the simple condition of being human.²¹ The slowness in the Zen rock gardens is almost decelerating down to absolute zero for the practitioners so that they can space out from the immediate reality and focus on their meditation.

We seek it but cannot see it;

We call it “subtle.”

¹⁹ Moore 23.

²⁰ Moore 27.

²¹ Moore 29-30.

We listen to it but cannot hear it;

We call it "essential."

We reach for it but cannot grasp it;

We call it "serene."

Lao-tzu (6th century B.C.?) Chinese philosopher

Taoism, a philosophy and cosmology articulated in all its paradoxical ambiguity by Lao-tzu in the *Tao Te Ching*, actually dates back to 3000 B.C., with the gradual complication of the *I Ching*, a book of oracle used in divination.²² The way to become one with the eternal fluctuations in nature, flowing with those changes through a positive kind of non-action is the teaching of Taoism. A Taoist landscape architect would study the uniquely shaped rocks he planned to use in order to best combine them by virtue of their *feng-shui*, invisible deep energies thought to run between all objects in the material world. The resulting gardens seem alive, with spiritual rocks occupying places of sacristy, whispering among each other. The essence of these once powerful gardens can still be felt by visitors today.

Warriors such as the Samurai were attracted to the studies of Zen, a form of Buddhism that was stripped down to its core, vigorous in its practices, upholding virtues of the warrior, such as honor and integrity. The samurai studied under the influences of Zen in hope of achieving direct insight of their *satori*, as the ultimate reward for their strenuous efforts of self-control. Those who entered the path of Zen also hoped to realize the irreversible illumination of Nirvana, a state of ineffable peace, free from the world of space and time, free from the rotating wheel.²³ The teachings of Zen trained its

²² Moore 37.

²³ Moore 49.

practitioners in endurance, rugged service, and self effacement, but at the core of the spiritual training was an emphasis on sincerity. This enables the practitioners to act swiftly into the heart of a matter with unhesitating directness and humanity.

The Zen practitioners were often able to express their experiences of Zen in various mediums, including calligraphy, poetry, gardening, and *sumi-e* ink painting, which is a monochromatic painting created with a soft brush and black ink used straight from the pot or thinned to transparent grays. The result of these *sumi-e* paintings usually say much more than is depicted.

THIS GARDEN

All worries and troubles

have gone from my breast

and I play joyfully

far from the world

For a person of Zen

no limits exist

The blue sky must feel

ashamed to be so small

Muso Soseki (1275-1351)

Japanese Zen master and poet²⁴

Zen teaches us the appreciation of simplicity. For one moment of complexity, we can reduce them to matter of sand and graceful wavy patterns etched in the contrasting reflection of flinty edges of mica. There are many ways to setup Zen spiritual gardens. Some we may find it to be eccentric, saintly, heroic, or plainly flat. The key is to be

²⁴ Moore 83.

spontaneous and experimental. The Zen gardens are like our lives, which we arrange and put into coherent patterns as best we can, raking swirls in the sand around our little gritty protuberances of selfhood in the middle of eternity's ocean waves.²⁵ Satisfied that we are like the grain of sand among the universe, we continue on. After all, it is only a place where we launch ourselves from and come back to.

²⁵ Moore 91-92.

CHAPTER IV

SPRING

Beep! Beep! Beep! It is 6:30 a.m. I am awakening to a new day, and a new world. I had a rare good dream last night. I am uncertain about the meanings of my dream like usual but I was at peace. Usually I am too tired throughout the day's activities and sleep without dreaming at all. When I do dream, it means that I had a great balanced day, both spiritually and physically. My worries, obligations, and burdens lifted. It is a great feeling as I know that I will have a smooth progressive session at my studio expressing my artistic ideas.

I was born in 1980, the year of the monkey. Like the monkey, my intuitive nature led me to try and experience new things. I am always curious about new techniques and alternative methods so that I may apply these newly gained skills in my artistic creative process. One of the reasons for doing so is to save time. Time is the only thing constant in this world of motion. It is the second most important thing to me after family. I am aware of my finite status as a living human being, thus I use that precious time to live and be progressive.

One of the new methods I would like to tryout is digital photography. The graduate program here has two nice Epson Stylus Pro 9800 printers, and I want to take fully advantage of it. I started taking lots of pictures of nature and things of interest to me. Among those I have found a few keepers, but I was unsure about how I would finish

and display them. One such picture was taken at the beach on the nearby South Padre Island. During the manipulation process on the digital picture through Photoshop filters, I saw a vision of a woman in a dress. After more artistic input and going back to my Eastern roots for displaying the print, I titled the piece *Siren*. (Fig. 13) I enjoy the piece quite a bit whenever I look upon the image. The imagery has that magnetic energy to drawn in the viewer much like a mythical siren does to the unfortunate sailors to their sea graves.

In my art history class on woman of Surrealism I came upon a very interesting reading. "Remedios Varo experimented with the accidental effect of *fumage*, a Surrealist technique that Paalen is credited with having invented while sitting in the Parisian café Deux Magots, a favorite Surrealist hangout. He is to have come upon the idea while playing with a lighted candle. By passing the flame swiftly across a surface fresh with oil paint, he found that the smoke would trace unique marks in the wet surface."²⁶ The smoke effect through experimentation is most interesting to me as it could be another way to enhance my already dream-like creations. Like the *fumage* method on two dimensional surface area, I was thinking the same in a three dimensional space to enhance the dream state effect I intended. In conversations with my professors and colleagues the effect could be achieved with dry ice. I have not worked with dry ice before but I know that it is a dangerous material to handle. After more research about dry ice I find the effect of dry ice's duration does not last long enough for my intentions. During my search for a safer and a longer lasting replacement I came upon Halloween fogger machines after a chat with my friends.

²⁶ Janet A. Kaplan, Remedios Varo, Unexpected Journeys (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers 2000) 60.

The stage is set for my next installation, *Frio Dreamscape* (Fig. 14), as I gather and finish the necessary components. The long hours I spend on China painting my cross pollination of fruits and sea life did not go to waste as I display them in the dreamscape. The fruit elements compose of apple, banana, squash, Japanese egg plant, mango, lemon, bell pepper, avocado and more. Then I cut and attached those parts like a surgeon and created various sea forms, such as a narwhal, seal, shark, eel, sperm whale, penguin, anemone, sun fish and more. With the main subject matter complete, I looked into filling the surrounding environment to perfect the serene scenery. First, I added the various sea shells from the beach in South Padre Island to include the element of nature. Second, I added some coral-like exoskeletons to balance the effect of life and death in nature. These corals are not what they seem, which adds another surrealistic element I desire. In fact they are not corals at all. They were made originally from the inside of a perished cactus. Professor Richard Hyslin suggested the cactus to me as the form seemed very interesting to him. I took the next step and coated the cactus with three coats of porcelain slip after cleaning away the unwanted debris. Once the porcelain slip is bone dry, I bisque fired it to Δ 5 in an oxidation atmosphere. The original recipe for this Val Cushing's Δ 5-6 oxidation porcelain body, which I found through the archives of the Hyper Glaze program, it includes 15 of Grolleg kaolin, 15 of #6 Tile clay, 3.5 of EPK kaolin, 10 of OM-4 Ball clay, 20 of Silica, 1.5 of Ferro Frit 3124, 5 of pyrophyllite, 30 of nepheline syenite, in 35 parts of water and .35 parts of Darvan deflocculant.²⁷ Since one of the materials was not easily obtained, I substituted the #6 Tile clay with additional Grolleg kaolin. Third, I obtained some free Styrofoam and began the construction of my floating icebergs. I used a heated wire saw to cut the Styrofoam into the desired shape of

²⁷ Hyper Glaze, CD-ROM, Runtime Revolution Limited, 2000-2004.

a miniature iceberg of all shapes and sizes. Then I painted over these in iceberg blue base primer with a brush before applying a second coat of iceberg blue gloss enamel paint. The paint did its purpose to hide the Styrofoam look. Fourthly, I bought a spray can of South Padre scent to induce the element of smell to my installation. Fifthly, I bought a large blue tarp to display my installation on. I used my remaining iceberg blue base paint and went wild simulating Jackson Pollock, a personal favorite artist, on the tarp to break the space plane. That process was a most invigorating experience, as I felt free and expressed myself with a brush dancing on the tarp. Sixthly, I bought the album *Play* by the artist Moby for the song *Porceline* to go along with the serene installation. Lastly, I must build a foot high platform to hide the foggers underneath. I am an amateur craftsman in wood at best. So I sought and received help from Professor Richard Hyslin. After carefully planning we began the building process. I went and bought five sheets of $\frac{5}{8}$ inch thick 4'x8' compressed particle boards, twelve 2"x2"x8' ply woods, four sets of hinges and screws, and couple boxes of joint fasteners. The list for the platform project would have been more but I, Hyslin or the facilities at the UTPA woodshop have the other necessary components. We decided to make the platform into three sections; each has a surface area of 4'x6'. During the process we hit a snag even after our careful planning, thank goodness the platform will be covered in the end anyway and the criteria is to simply prop up the installation one foot for the foggers to underneath. Overall the process was fun and I feel a bond of camaraderie between me and Professor Hyslin. For the final finish, I cut six holes in the tarp and drilled through the platforms underneath for the accumulated fog to escape.

After watching the program *Earth: The Sequel*²⁸ on the Discovery channel, I felt a sense of relief. The program makes it crystal clear that we can build a low-carbon economy with the efforts of cutting edge entrepreneurs solving today's global warming effects. One example on the program was the conversion of geothermal heat into electricity in Alaska, United States. Several leading countries and states in the U.S. already has put a cap on carbon pollution in the air within its boundaries and enforced a higher vehicle emission test. The majority of the states within the U.S. and countries however, still had not done their part to help the global effort to keep the carbon pollution in check. You as an individual can make a difference in your community by educating yourself and others concerning the preservation of the environment we live and breathe in.

My efforts have led me to the creation of *Penguin Isles*. (Fig. 15) It started with the idea of what the world might look like for the future generations. How many species we enjoy today would be there for them? What are the consequences of our actions or inactions today? I started researching aerial views of polluted cities and islands on the World Wide Web. An aerial imagery via satellite over the California, U.S. and Baja, Mexico border stood out from the rest. In correspondence with my surrealistic theme, I altered the landscape altogether. First, I applied the same carpet vinyl adhesive Professor Santiago introduced me to for the desired landscape texture with a spatula. Then I used an empty paper roll tube and rolled it across the textured masonite surface to intentionally lift up some of the vinyl adhesive. Second, I started the long painting process. In the beginning I had in my mind the aerial view of crop fields, but the green and yellow did not please my eyes. So I turned to the colors of the ocean for comfort and metamorphosed the crop fields to islands. Third, I added the clouds above among the

²⁸ Earth: The Sequel, DSC, Silver Spring, MD., 11 Mar. 2009.

tinted layer of polluted air. Through some of the feedbacks from my peers and professors during the process, they told me the scene could be either from above or below the ocean surface, which I was very pleased to hear. The ideal setting I would display this piece would be on the floor or hanging down from the ceiling in a room full of mirrors much like the scene in the movie *Enter the Dragon*²⁹ when Bruce Lee chased his nemesis into the surreal chamber. Fourthly, I intend to use this painting as a part of an installation rather than a stand alone artwork.

The fourteen part *Planet Earth*³⁰ series I had watched on the Discovery channel was very inspiring. The pristine parts of the world gave me hope that my efforts and those of my fellow environmentalists had not done in vain. At the same time I concur with the filmmakers that we should not be content and think that everything is business as usual, as many pockets of nature's beauty are disappearing before our eyes. My goal is to preserve the planet to a state of quality I have enjoyed or better for the future generation. Like the filmmakers, I intend to use my talents to make aware of the polluting environments to the general population. Waking a sleeping giant is no easy task, but it has to start somewhere by someone. I am not the first to be awakened to our immediate global environmental problem, and I certainly hope that I am not the last. To my knowledge and personal experience, being a good leader means that he must lead by example for others to follow.

The idea for the installation *Roots of Extinction* (Fig. 16) came about one early morning at the local immigration center as I was getting figure printed to become a United States citizen. My unique set of print was enlarged on the monitor for my brain to

²⁹ *Enter the Dragon*, dir. Robert Clouse, writ. Michael Allin, perf. Bruce Lee and Kien Shih, VHS, Concord Production Inc., 1973.

³⁰ *Planet Earth*, DSC, Silver Spring, MD., 20 Mar. 2009.

observe and process as the new idea start to take form in my head. The installation consist a set of human finger print drawn on sand island chains. First, I had used a rake to make the pattern of the finger print, but it was too large. Then I used a small straight comb, but it was too small. Finally, I used an original piece of equipment made by Professor Hyslin and me especially for the job. The equipment is made up of twenty one $\frac{1}{4}$ inch rods that were cut to three inches long each, and then slotted in a wooden handle single file $\frac{1}{2}$ inch apart. The idea is to make the spacing between each of the lines clear and evenly as possible. From one end of the island chain to another, I have made imitation penguin foot prints representing their long journey through the environment. I also altered the scene on each island to a degree of pristine condition and desecration irrespective to time. The future end has two scenarios, one being more desolate as we continue doing business as usual resulting in the dying eco-system, the other is recovering as our efforts finally bear fruit. The human finger prints represent all humans, we being the current dominant species have the power to change the fate of many species with our actions or inactions. It is a heavy burden on our shoulders, but we must come through for the endangered species to prevent a possible domino chain effect in the overall interweaved eco-system.

One thing I do know is that nature is very resilient. I often wonder if we were extinct, what to become of the environment? Would we be excavated up like the dinosaurs? If so would our stories be of any interest to the explorers? The program *Welcome to Earth. Population: 0.*³¹ was very informative to my knowledge. The program showed what Earth might look like based on some abandoned urban areas today, such as Chernobyl, Ukraine, after the nuclear reactor accident in April 26, 1986. On that

³¹ Welcome to Earth. Population: 0. HSC, Manhattan, NY, 21 Jan. 2008.

fateful day, at 1:23:45 a.m., reactor 4 suffered a massive, catastrophic power excursion, resulting in a steam explosion, which tore the top from the reactor, exposed the core, and dispersed large amounts of radioactive particulate and gaseous debris (mostly Cesium-137 and Strontium-90), allowing air (oxygen) to contact the super-hot core containing 1,700 tons of combustible graphite moderator; the burning graphite moderator increased the emission of radioactive particles. The radioactivity was not contained by any kind of containment vessels. Radioactive particles were carried by wind across international borders.³² Only a couple of decades after the catastrophic accident, nature have already retaken the formerly urban living quarters with mass vegetation followed by a variety of local animal population. The short amount of time for nature's recuperation is astonishing. Birds make their nest among the ruins of Chernobyl. What was once made for humans to live in is now shelter for wild animal populations. If there is a nook or cranny, nature will find a way to persevere itself against human confinement.

So what is next in the future for nature? The vegetation scenery may alter due to the climate change. New species will evolve and become extinct with nature's guidance. Continents will move and form new land formations. The real question is if we will be there in the future to witness nature's change. After all we are merely a species that lived on Earth for less than a million years. When comparing to the dinosaurs, we are a non factor with our time clocked on Earth. However, in this short amount of time, we have manipulated nature to our desires to a certain extent and have climbed to the top of the food chain. Now that we are at the top, it is essential to look after the species down the food chain to keep us humans as *numero uno*. Like the old saying, with great power comes a greater responsibility. Since we have the necessary power, it is essential for us

³² Grigori Medvedev, The Truth About Chernobyl, (New York: Basic Books, 1991) 47.

to keep nature's eco-system in balance. Not only for the endangered species but for ourselves as well. There is only one Earth for all of its inhabitants. The planet is like an inter-connected spider web. When one string snaps it is not a problem. A few more it is weakened, but the main body is still intact. Further more and there could be a big problem as the spider does not have enough time to repair or make new weaves. Eventually the spider is forced to abandon its home and make a new web. No one is for certain which stage our planet is on. The educational guess is that we are somewhere between a few strings broken and a group of strings broken that could possibly lead to the collapse of the entire web. I certainly hope it is not too late for us to implement treatment solutions for the present and future environmental pollution issues. After all, the Earth is home to all of us.

PYROMETRIC CONE TABLE

Cone	Self Supporting Cones				Large Cones			
	Regular		Iron Free		Regular		Iron Free	
	Heating Rate °F/hour							
	108	270	108	270	108	270	108	270
022	1087	1094						
021	1112	1143						
020	1159	1180						
019	1252	1283			1249	1279		
018	1319	1353			1314	1350		
017	1360	1405			1357	1402		
016	1422	1465			1416	1461		
015	1456	1504			1450	1501		
014	1485	1540			1485	1537		
013	1539	1582			1539	1578		
012	1582	1620			1576	1616		
011	1607	1641			1603	1638		
010	1657	1679	1627	1639	1648	1675	1623	1636
09	1688	1706	1686	1702	1683	1702	1683	1699
08	1728	1753	1735	1755	1728	1749	1733	1751
07	1789	1809	1780	1800	1783	1805	1778	1796
06	1828	1855	1816	1828	1823	1852	1816	1825
05 ½	1859	1877	1854	1870	1854	1873	1852	1868
05	1888	1911	1899	1915	1886	1915	1890	1911
04	1945	1971	1942	1956	1940	1958	1940	1953
03	1987	2019	1990	1999	1987	2014	1989	1996
02	2016	2052	2021	2039	2014	2048	2016	2035
01	2046	2080	2053	2073	2043	2079	2052	2070
1	2079	2109	2082	2098	2077	2109	2079	2095
2	2088	2127			2088	2124		
3	2106	2138	2109	2124	2106	2134	2104	2120
4	2124	2161			2120	2158		
5	2167	2205			2163	2201		
5 ½	2197	2237			2194	2233		
6	2232	2269			2228	2266		
7	2262	2295			2259	2291		
8	2280	2320			2277	2316		
9	2300	2336			2295	2332		
10	2345	2381			2340	2377		
11	2361	2399			2359	2394		

Clay name: Casting Slip
 Cone: 5 - 6
 Color: white porcelain
 Testing: Tested
 Usage: Slip Casting
 Firing: oxidation or reduction

Recipe:	Percent
Grolleg kaolin	15.00
#6 Tile clay	15.00
EPK kaolin	3.50
OM-4 Ball clay	10.00
Silica	20.00
Ferro Frit 3124	1.50
Pyrophyllite	5.00
Nepheline Syenite	30.00
Totals:	100 %

Also add:

Water	35.00
Darvan	0.35

Comments:

You can use Velvacast kaolin instead of #6 Tile clay and Tenn. Ball Clay instead of OM-4 Ball clay. Usually use Pyrax brand pyrophyllite. Mix the Darvan into hot water before adding dry clays.

Possible Health Hazards:

Flint: free silica-wear a NIOSH approved dust mask when handling dry material

Estimated Thermal Expansion = $\times 10^{-6}$ /deg. C

Unity Formula for Ingredients:

0.229	K ₂ O	2.726	Al ₂ O ₃	12.780	SiO ₂
0.594	Na ₂ O	0.035	B ₂ O ₃	0.054	TiO ₂
0.116	CaO	0.024	Fe ₂ O ₃	4.7:1	Si:Al Ratio
0.060	MgO	0.001	P ₂ O ₅		

Percentage Analysis for Casting Slip:

68.32 %	SiO ₂
24.73 %	Al ₂ O ₃
0.22 %	B ₂ O ₃
1.92 %	K ₂ O
3.28 %	Na ₂ O
0.58 %	CaO
0.22 %	MgO
0.34 %	Fe ₂ O ₃
0.01 %	P ₂ O ₅
0.38 %	TiO ₂

Clay name: Kurt Weiser's #2 Casting Slip
 Cone: 8 - 10
 Color: Oxidation-cream white, Reduction-grey white
 Testing: Tested
 Usage: Slip Casting
 Firing: oxidation or reduction

Recipe:	Percent
Grolleg kaolin	23.30
Kaopaque 20 kaolin	10.00
#6 Tile clay	6.70
OM-4 Ball clay	10.00
Custer Feldspar	25.00
Silica	25.00
Totals:	100 %

Comments:

For every 1000 grams of dry clay weight; add 14 ounces of water, 6 grams of Darvan deflocculant, .325 grams of Barium Carbonate, .625 grams of Soda Ash.

Possible Health Hazards:

Flint: free silica-wear a NIOSH approved dust mask when handling dry material

Estimated Thermal Expansion = $\times 10^{-6}$ /deg. C

Unity Formula for Ingredients:

0.620	K ₂ O	4.108	Al ₂ O ₃	21.057	SiO ₂
0.246	Na ₂ O	0.043	Fe ₂ O ₃	0.068	TiO ₂
0.063	CaO			5.1:1	Si:Al Ratio
0.071	MgO				

Percentage Analysis for Kurt Weiser's #2 Casting Slip:

71.22 %	SiO ₂
23.58 %	Al ₂ O ₃
3.29 %	K ₂ O
0.86 %	Na ₂ O
0.20 %	CaO
0.16 %	MgO
0.39 %	Fe ₂ O ₃
0.31 %	TiO ₂

Fig. 1
René Magritte
The Lovers
73x54.2 cm, oil on canvas 1928



Fig. 2
Mack Liao
The Lovers
24.5x38.75 inches, oil on canvas 2006



Fig. 3
Mack Liao
The Gathering
46.75x25 inches, oil on canvas 2006



Fig. 4
Mack Liao
I see what I want to see
36.75x24.5 inches, oil on canvas 2006



Fig. 5
Mack Liao
Unexpected Ending
100x180x20 inches, installation 2008



Fig. 6
Mack Liao
Lost
16x20x24 inches, mix media 2008

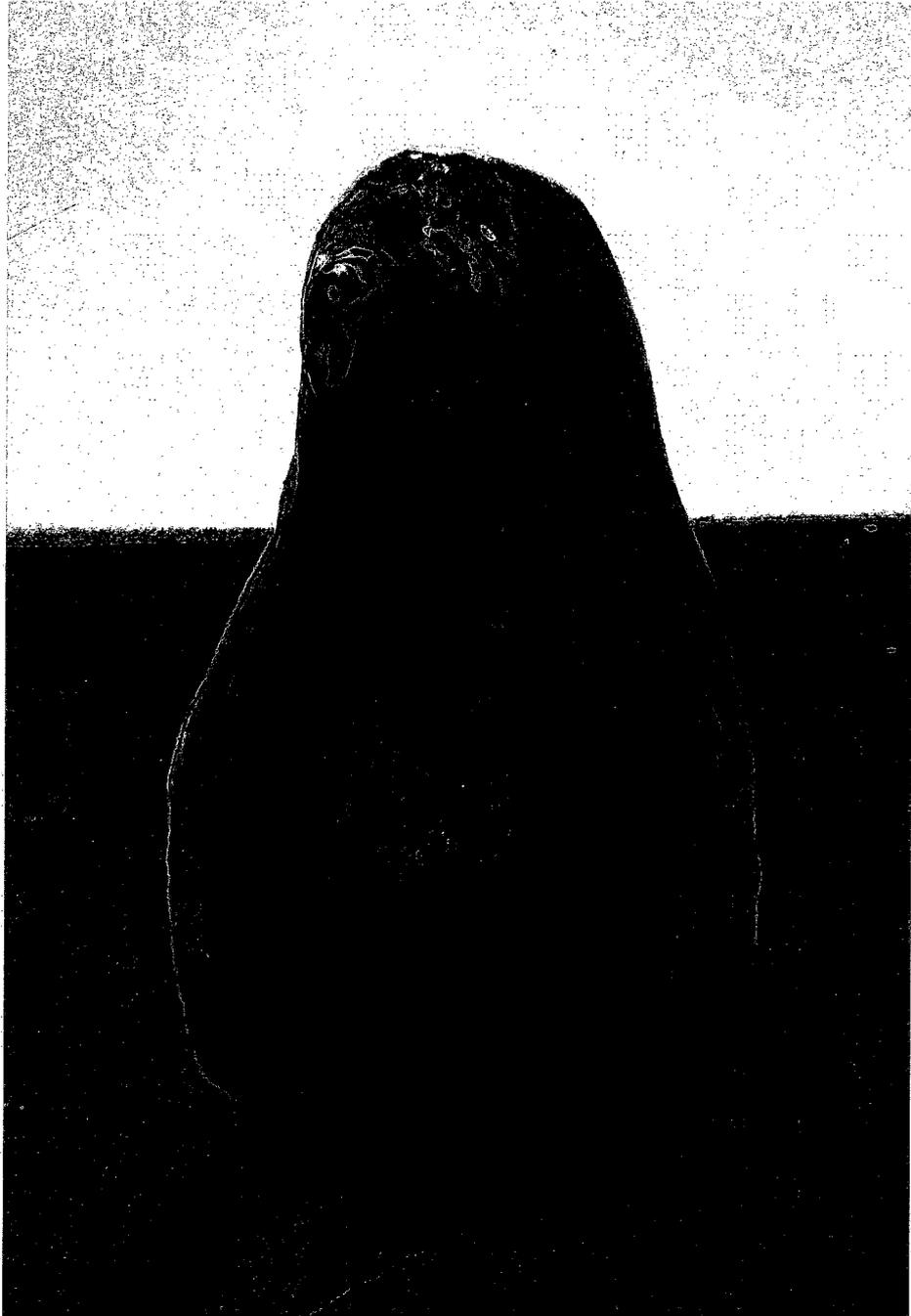


Fig. 7
Mack Liao
The Orphan
38x45.5 inches, oil on canvas 2007

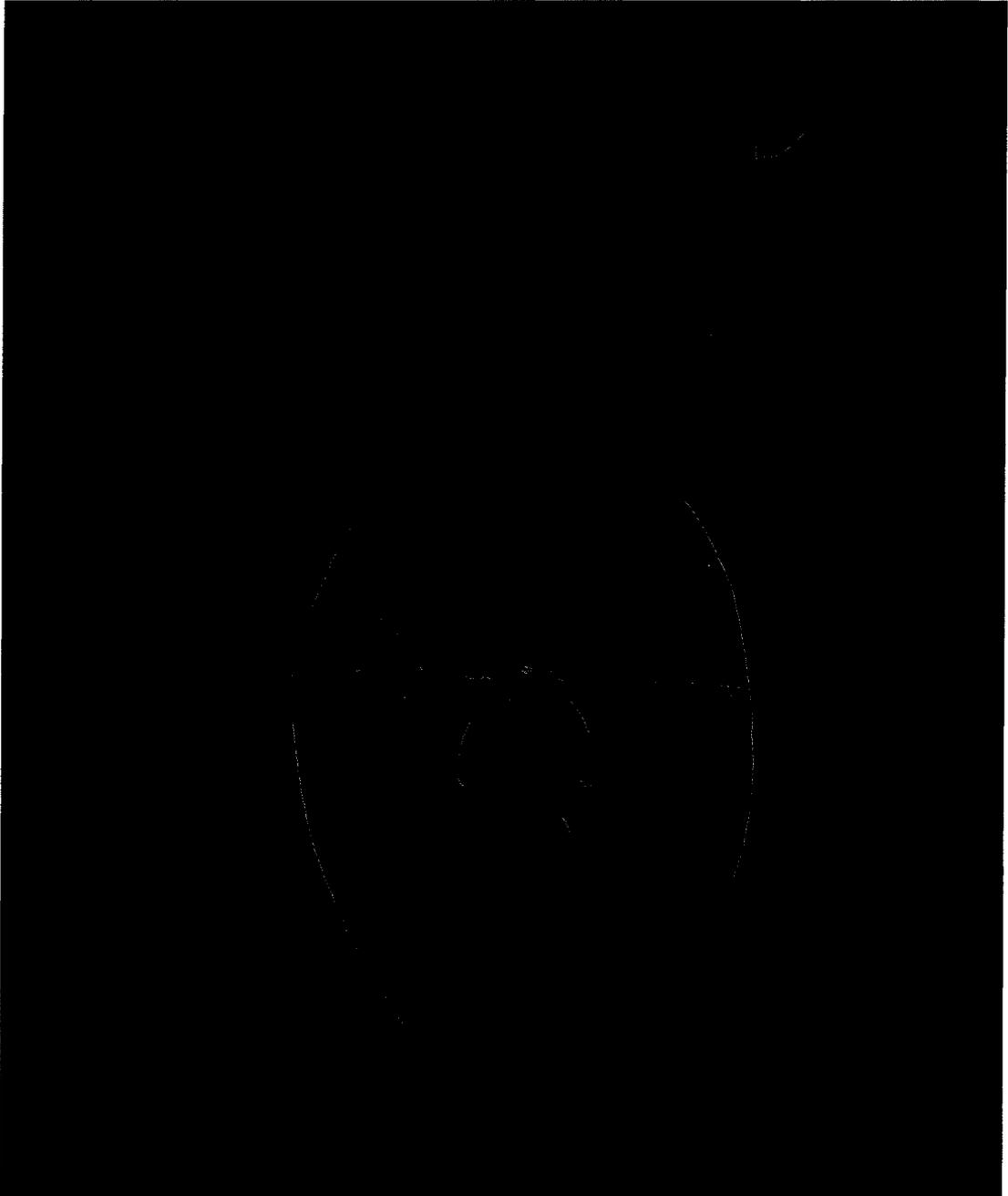


Fig. 8
Mack Liao
The Arrival
30.75x30.25 inches, oil on metal 2007



Fig. 9
Mack Liao
Edge of Existence
35x45.75 inches, oil on canvas 2007

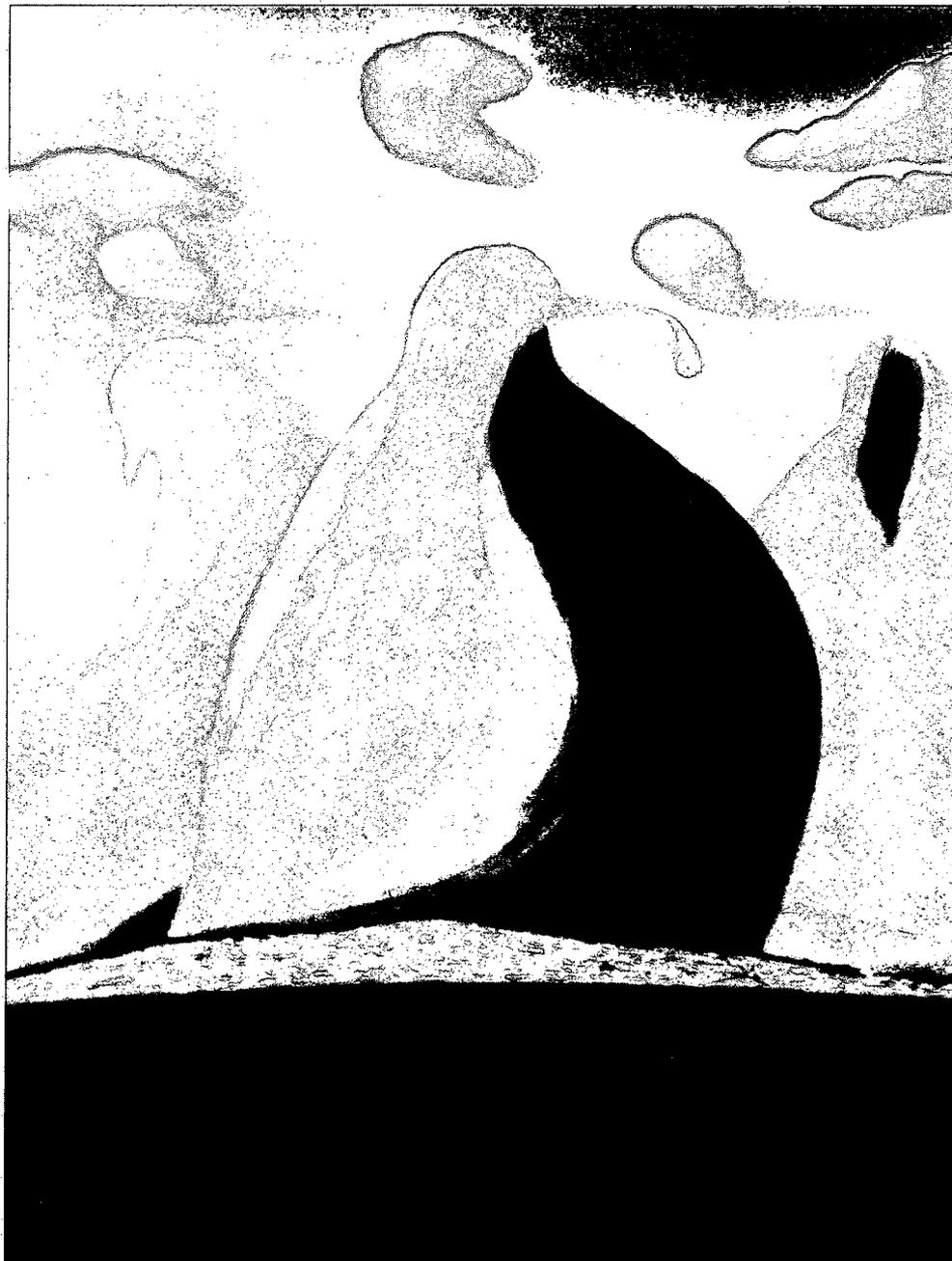


Fig. 10
Mack Liao
The Chase
38x47.75 inches, oil on canvas 2007



Fig. 11
Mack Liao
Day
120x85x3 inches, installation 2008



Fig. 12
Mack Liao
Night
120x85x3 inches, installation 2008



Fig. 13
Mack Liao
Siren
34x44.5 inches, print on canvas 2007



Fig. 14
Mack Liao
Frio Dreamscape
90x64x12 inches, installation 2008

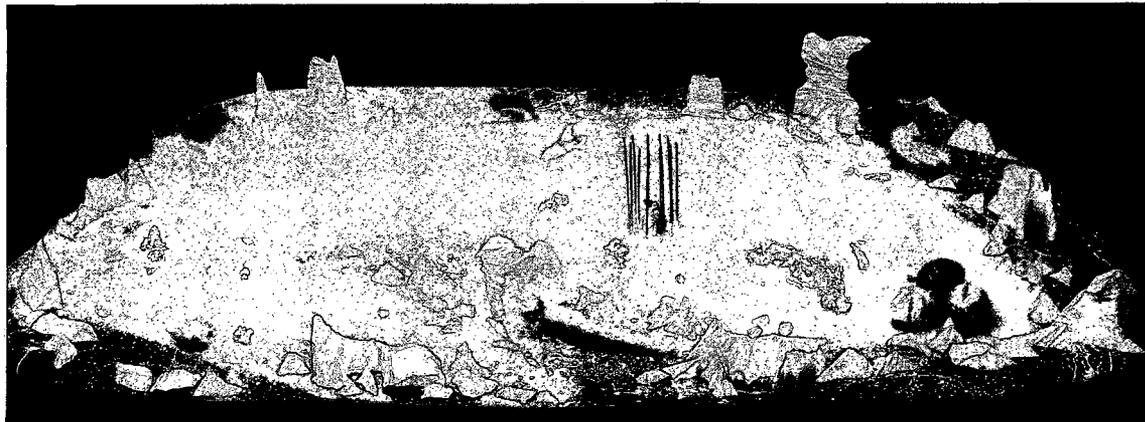
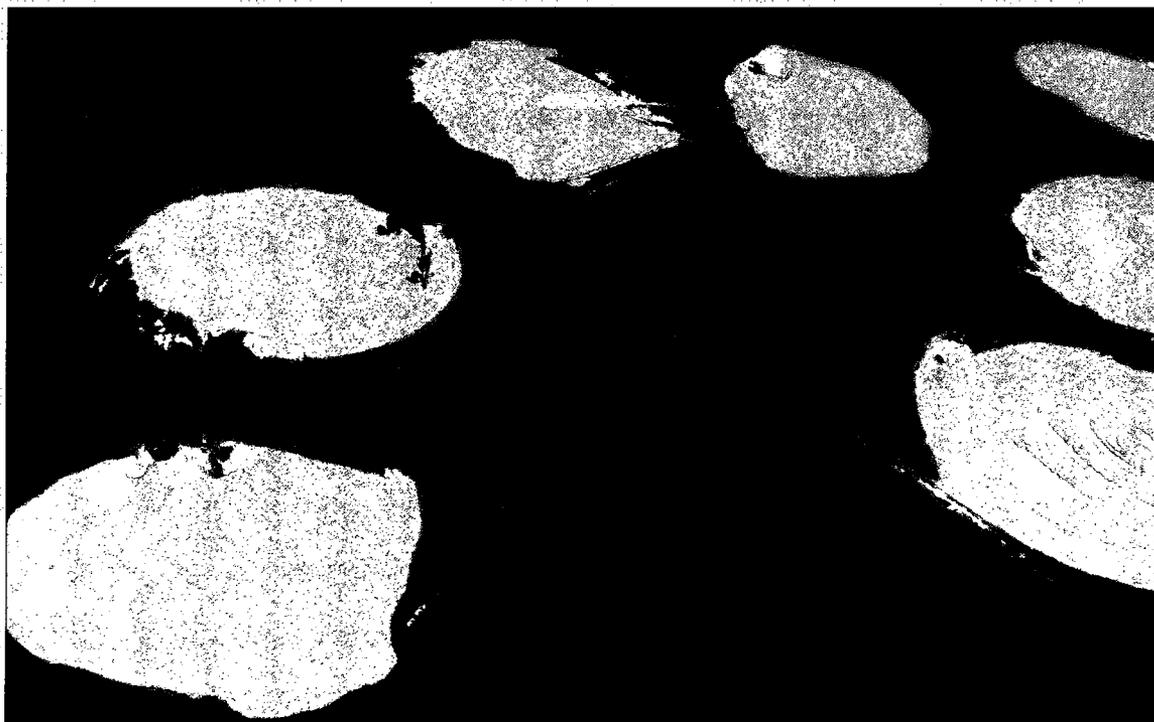


Fig. 15
Mack Liao
Penguin Isles
30x42 inches, oil on masonite 2008



Fig. 16
Mack Liao
Roots of Extinction
120x 85x4, installation 2008



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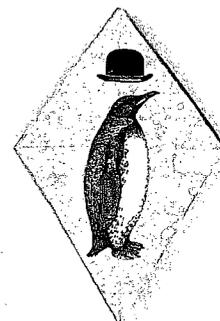
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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Selective Employment History

UTPA- Teaching Assistant from 2007-present
 - Student Assistant from 2006-present

Education

MFA- due to graduate in spring of 2009 from University of Texas-Pan American
 BFA- Graduated from Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ with a Cum Laude in 2004
 Associate Degree- Graduated from Mesa Community College, Mesa, AZ in 2001
 High School Diploma- Graduated from McClintock High, Tempe, AZ in 1998

Solo Exhibition

"Edge of Existence" MFA Exhibition at the University Gallery, COAS Building, University of Texas-Pan American, 1201 W. University Dr. Edinburg, TX 78541-2999 from March 1-15, 2009

Selective Group Exhibitions

"The U.S. Open Outdoor Sculpture Show" Exhibition at the Art Building & Theatre Grounds, Mesa Community College, 1833 W. Southern Ave. Mesa, AZ 85202 during NCECA 2009

"South Texas Tea" Exhibition at the Urasenke Foundation, gijsbrecht van amstellaan 5, 1181 ej Amstelveen, the Netherlands from March 19, 2008 in Amsterdam, traveling to Rotterdam in April 2008

"UD Regional Competition" Juried Exhibition at the Beatrice M. Haggerty Gallery, and was awarded a Merit award by juror Val Cushing, Dallas, TX 2007

"12x12x12 Exhibition" Juried Exhibition at the Landmark Arts Gallery, Lubbock, TX 2007

"Monarch Migrations" Juried Exhibition at the D'arte galleria, 115 E Jackson, Harlingen, TX 78552 for the October's Second Thursdays Art Walk of 2006

Group Exhibition at the Trunk Space, 1506 NW Grand Avenue, Phoenix, AZ for Art Detour in the 3rd week of March till April 2006

"Seize the Clay" Juried Exhibit at the West Valley Art Museum, 17420 N. Avenue of the Arts Surprise, AZ 85374 from January 19- March 19, 2006

BFA Exhibition in Ceramics at Gallery 100; PO Box 871505, Tempe, AZ 85287-1505 from January 26-February 13, 2004