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Been an Empire

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Been An Empire
2018 Printmaking BFA and Honors Thesis exhibition
by
Olaf Tollefsen

Thesis Director

Second Reader

Third Reader
Been An Empire
2018 Printmaking BFA and Honors Thesis exhibition
by
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[Signatures]
**Paper Summary**

This paper summaries the content and form of the 2018 Printmaking BFA and Honors Thesis exhibition “Been and Empire”. It discusses influences, processes and the individual pieces found within the exhibition.

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Introduction

*Been an Empire* is a collection of prints and drawings that tell the story of Mr. Bones.

Mr. Bones is an average man who, after suffering a tragedy in his life, embarks on a journey through a nonsensical and mysterious world in an attempt to make sense of the real world.

During this journey, he comes across various characters and settings. While he does not interact very much with the individuals, his observations of these encounters in this fantasy world bring him to a fuller understanding of the real world, which allows him to eventually return home.

This exhibition combines ideas and motifs found in various eras of storytelling, ranging from classical myths and legends to modern day films and novels.

Broad themes

The major themes of *Been an Empire* are the problems of evil, the abuse of power, and the idea of self-discovery and belonging. Mr. Bones embarks on a journey to a land that he does not understand and that he does not connect to on a personal level. The conclusion of the tale is his acceptance of the real world that he does connect with genuinely, and he comes to the understanding that it is this deep connection to the world that has allowed him to feel pain. The real world is a part of him as much as he is a part of it and to abandon it (as he does in the beginning of the story) is to abandon himself and his senses. It is this abandonment that brings about the nonsensical nature of the world he is traveling in.

In many ways, this project has evolved into a coming-of-age story, both in the story itself and in the way that the project and I have evolved together over the past year. During my search for a way to express who I am and figure out what my role is in the world, I created the character of Mr. Bones to act as a reflection for these explorations. Over the course of the project’s
development, I created images that reflected the different struggles and conflicts that I was experiencing and various perceptions of the world. The exhibition’s conclusion with Mr. Bones coming to an understanding of his role in the world fits with the typical structure and conclusion of coming-of-age stories; in particular, the final act of coming to a realization of self and place in a way that brings about the idea of having progressed from one state (generally a state of chaos and searching), to another state—one of calm and conclusion.

The particulars of the journey have more in common with various forms of creative storytelling throughout the ages. Tales such as the stories of King Arthur, the tale of Gilgamesh, the writings of H.P. Lovecraft, and more thrive in creating worlds in which characters and situations go beyond the expected. One of the primary goals of Been an Empire has been to take Mr. Bones into bizarre environments which trigger the imagination, places where the audience can continue to fill in the story with their own creativity. In pieces such as “Almost Eden” and “Nevermind” there is quite obviously a progression of narrative between the two. However, the progression and its cause are not explicit to the audience which allows for a range of interpretations and new stories as a result.

These environments and flexible world also allow for a series of images that can be used to convey the themes and motifs of the exhibition. The primary theme, aside from the coming-of-age side of the story, is the problem of evil and some of the facets of that problem. The problem of evil is the difficulty that arises when one attempts to reconcile the existence of evil and suffering in the world with the idea that life has a purpose and the idea of religion that involves benevolent creators. It is this problem that brings Mr. Bones into a state of confusion, allowing him to begin his journey. During the journey, he encounters various forms of suffering
in the world, ranging from the suffering brought about from the abuse of power in the piece “Elephant” to the problems from purposefully ignorant conformity in the pieces “Almost Eden” and “Nevermind”.

**Influences**

My influences for this collection of images is wide and ranges from the symbolists and the work of Redon, to the art deco and the work of Harry Clarke. Artists among those who have influenced these works include Gustave Klimt, Egon Schiele, John Bauer, Kay Nielson, Fritz Eichenberg, Lynn Ward and Barry Moser. These artists have appealed to me both in their styles and in the subject that they portray. Klimt and Schiele combine the stylistically beautiful with dark undertones about the realities of the world that they perceive and struggle to comprehend or to overcome. At the same time, their images often depict a story for the viewer to unravel, placed within the combinations of extravagant details and expressive lines; Schiele especially has a way of using line work that I believe to be very moving and expressive. Redon and the other symbolists fascinate me with the way that they used fantasy and fantasy imagery to express and evoke states of mind. Art critic Albert Aurier described the movement as meant to “clothe the idea in sensuous form”, which captures the essence of what I find compelling in their work. Redon specifically has been a direct influence on several of my pieces including “Mr. Shine”. His images carry a surreal fantasy quality to them, often walking a fine line of dark and playful. He captures the imagination of the viewer and draws them in while also depicting themes of light and dark.

Through illustration, the remaining artists Clarke, Bauer, Neilson, Eichenberg, Ward, and Moser, all capture something about illustration that I find delightful. They all capture the
excitement of stories, and their images are full of little details to get caught up in, much like the
details of the stories that they illustrate. For the most part, their work centers around myths,
fairytales, and tales of the unknown and the bizarre. The way that they create their images plays
off of these stories, bringing them to life and adding to them. The images themselves stand on
their own without the words that inspired them such that a viewer can come up with the story on
their own, filling in the gaps as necessary. Stylistically, I enjoy their work, and I also find the
level of detail captivating. These artists also have a strong sense of formal composition, often
focusing on high contrast and dynamic gestures within their work. Harry Clarke especially has
influenced my work stylistically. My work tends to be under contrasted and lacking bold
emphasis, but Clarke’s use of black and white to create visually impactful images has inspired a
bolder use of lights and darks in my own work. Clarke also worked in religious stained glass.
He incorporated much of his darker imagery with the religious imagery and in doing so produced
some of my favorite Catholic stained glass. This duality between his work on a stylistic and a
thematic level, and the ways that he chose to unite the two, has had an impact in the way that I
view the work that I create. My work now ties together better as a whole, rather than a collection
of individual pieces.

Exhibition as a whole

The exhibition of *Been an Empire* is comprised of 13 images: two drawings, three relief
prints, five lithographs, and three intaglio prints.
The first image in the exhibition is a 27”x38” image created in charcoal and watercolors. It depicts the main character, Mr. Bones, with an expression of sadness and anguish on his face. In the background looms four dark figures, each with a white face devoid of detail, save an indication of an eye and the side of a nose on each. This image serves to set the stage for the series. It establishes the protagonist as Mr. Bones and the conflict of his mental confusion and
unhappiness. The antagonists are the watchers, figures who imbue the idea of a pressure and a force witnessing Mr. Bones’ actions and the choices he makes. Whether or not these figures are good or bad is not obvious, though they are intended to convey the pressures and confusions that Mr. Bones is feeling. This image is created using charcoal and watercolors for several reasons. The direct interaction of the artist to the final image on the paper while working is an element not found in printmaking, as the print is created with a barrier of process between the artist and the finished print. While this does not restrict the level of personal connection with the piece of the range of expressive marks that can be performed within printmaking, the marks made when working in printmaking are always in reverse, and often dependent on the printing process to determine their final form. In working directly on paper, this step from the initial mark to the final mark is less present and this direct contact allows for a certain expressive stroke that is distinct to the medium. This stroke is most present in the face of Mr. Bones, whose details are formed with charcoal lines quickly drawn and watercolors applied liberally and then rubbed off with a cloth, creating textures and streaks. The figures in the background are similarly created using techniques that produce a finished look that would be difficult to achieve in printmaking. The main body of the figures are layers of watercolors, and on top of those are layers of scratched and rubbed acrylic paints, creating textures and lights and darks.
“Four Bottles in a Room Full of Field-Like Things”

Four Bottles in a Room is a six color reduction lino print. This image depicts a door leading into a room containing a grass field and four larger than life bottles. This is the first stage of Mr. Bones’ journey. It establishes firmly that Mr. Bones is no longer in his own world; instead, he is somewhere quite different. The image is intended to be surreal in nature, creating a sense of otherworldliness to set the tone for this new world. The motifs of the four bottles also serve as a reference to alcoholism, and a progression into insanity or lack of control, which could be a factor in Mr. Bone’s journey.

“Mr. Bones and the Watcher”
The next two images are paired together and are made in lithography using the same stone with alterations to create a second image. These two images depict Mr. Bones walking through a forest and encountering a tall figure that lacks both bodily details and facial details. This character is the Watcher and is a reoccurring character and movie throughout the exhibition. In the second image of the two, the trees around Mr. Bones have sprouted hands and there is a
second figure behind him created in chine collé. These images are long and thin to create a sense of scale and loom to the figure of the watcher. The first image is the moment of encounter, while the second image is the moment intertwined with the emotions of Mr. Bones. The trees have grown darker, spindly hands have sprouted from their tips, and a second figure has appeared behind him. This second figure is made of black paper covered with golden geometric designs. These designs serve to add an air of surrealism to the figure as well as act as a visual nod to the works of Harry Clarke and Gustav Klimt.

“Pointed”
The next image is a 9”x12” black and white relief print. It depicts two hovering figures, both with little detail to their faces. The first figure is robed in black and points with one outstretched hand to the viewers right while the second figure, wearing a robe full of patterns and swirls, remains quiet behind the first. This is a transitional piece in which Mr. Bones is pointed from his initial encounter with this world to the journey which he will be taking. It signifies to continual movement that will bring about the journey. This piece was heavily inspired by the work of Harry Clarke and Gustav Klimt.

“Hand in the Wind”
This image is a four-color reduction print depicting swirling skies above several dunes. In the sky are two moons while the dunes hold a submerged hand and a strange portal, and on the horizon is a line of figures all in the same pose that resemble figures in a cave painting. This is the second stage of Mr. Bone’s journey as he begins to encounter the peoples and civilizations of the world he is now in. The figures in the background hint at inhabitants that aren't human, and the hand buried in the sand indicates the layers of age to this world.

“Almost Eden/Nevermind”
The next two images are intaglio prints that, much like the two lithographs earlier in the series, are two stages of a print. The first image, “Almost Eden” depicts a fantasy landscape inhabited with simple bodies and faces like the moon. They live in founded dwellings, and in the far background there are several watchers. The second image maintains the same layout as the first, but now there is a central shaft of light in the center of the image, and the limbless, simple figures of the inhabitants have become much more human in their shape, looking rather like mannequin dolls, and are in the process of running away from a shadowy horned figure in the center. These pieces are inspired in part by Renaissance images of Eden, the world after the fall of man, and hell. The first image shows a large collection of inhabitants, all of whom look nearly identical. They all believe themselves to be special and unique, but in reality they have created a happy world, one that they believe to be a form of Eden. In doing so have all become copies of each other. The second image depicts the end of the small world that they have built. While chaos is forming in their midst, they lose the few features that they had while at the same time becoming much more gestural and expressive.

“Down Below”
“Down Below” was originally created as an illustration from the book *Hidden Cities*. It depicts a city that relies on water from underground wells and whose inhabitants have create a belief system based on the gods that they think are underneath the surface. This image doesn’t state whether or not the creatures below the city are good or bad, or even worthy of a god-like status, but serves rather to portray the dependence of the city on this belief that they hold.
The next image is a small lithograph created in manière noire of a small human figure depicted simplistically with a detailed elephant above it, enveloped in smoke and clouds. In this section of the story, Mr. Bones has come across a large tribe of nomads who all share a love and a desire for elephants, who they view as magnificent creations to be treasured. However, all of the elephants are possessed by a rival tribe. The rival tribe is constantly mistreating and abusing the
elephants, and the first tribe is in a constant state of sorrow while seeing something they love be mistreated so.

“Sid the Unhappy Fish”

Next is a two-part image created in intaglio. Much like “Almost Eden” and “Nevermind”, it is created using a reworked plate for the second image. It shows a whale in different positions in both sides of the image. This whale is Sid the Unhappy Fish, a lonely whale that Mr. Bones encounters as he begins a journey across the sea. Sid is unhappy because he is alone in the ocean; he feels isolated from the rest of the world. There is also a level of irony within the piece as the character Sid is not actually a fish, but rather a whale.
The next image is a two-stone lithograph of a small Viking longboat on stormy waves as a screaming face emerges from the clouds above it. This is Mr. Bones’ second encounter in his journey across the sea. Mr. Shine is a being that has a great greed for gold. He loves the way that
it glistens, and his greed has, over time, transformed him into a raging storm, caught up so completely in his own needs and desires that he has ceased to be aware of anything except himself, and as a result has become a destructive force of nature. His intention is not willingly bringing about destruction, but is as a by-product of his greed destructive nonetheless.

“Mountain City”

The penultimate image of the series is also a two-stone lithograph comprised of a city with the moon above it, framed by the shape of a hunched figure printed in two colors of purple. The city
in the image is known as Mountain City and has been built up over the course of thousands of years to become the shape and size of a mountain, with levels of buildings all stacked up upon each other. Every several hundred years or so, a portion of the inhabitants of the city grow dissatisfied with the city itself, so they begin building a new city on the previous one and those who still dwell in it. Over the years, the top layer grows smaller and more exclusive, and the city will continue to grow in this way until it either collapses or the very top of the city is merely a single man, sitting all on his own.

“King”
The final image of the series mirrors the first in style and material and depicts the same person, Mr. Bones, this time with an expression of calm as he wears a crown surrounded by feathers. This piece symbolizes the conclusion of Mr. Bones’ journey. In “The Beginning”, he was distraught and confused. Now, he has come to accept the nature of the world with the good and the bad in it, and he has accepted the fact that he is connected to the world. He comes to understand just as it shapes him, he shapes it. The feathers represent the freedom that has come with this understanding and acceptance, while the crown shows the responsibilities and duties that come with that acceptance. The crown and the concept also allude to the archetype of the Fisher King, a man who protects the Holy Grail both in the physical representation of it and the virtues it stands for. The Fisher King is deeply connected to the land to the point where he is crippled because of the presence of death and sin in the world, much like Mr. Bones at the start and throughout his journey.

Exhibition overview
The *Been an Empire* Exhibition opened on Sunday, April 8th, at 7:00 pm at the McMaster Student Gallery. Attendance was good and an artist talk was given at around 7:40 to approximately
30-40 people. For the most part I am pleased with the way that the exhibition turned out. The number of works was adequate for the amount of space and the variety of the works seemed to engage the audience. There were several technical aspects that could have been executed better about the exhibition. At 7:00 the refreshments weren’t quite ready and I relied on the help of a few friends to get everything ready on time, but was unable to get the titles of the pieces up before the exhibition started. The Title Card and explanation for the exhibition also proved tricky as I had not gotten the proper material to mount it to the wall. In regard to the work itself, while the range of image types and sizes served to exhibit the skills that I have picked up at USC, the story telling aspects of the exhibition could have benefited from either more unity within the pieces or a more deliberate flow within the images. There were also a few images that I was less pleased with than the others, such as “Sid the Unhappy Fish” and “Four Bottles in a Room”, as well as several pieces that I thought were quite strong, such as “Pointed” and “Mountain City” that I would have liked to have used as the basis for a few more images.

**Process and changes**

The majority of these images are made using a few varied printmaking techniques. The process of designing and creating this exhibition involved several key changes to both the material and the story. Over the past two semesters this project has changed quite a bit. While the original plan was similar to the final product, there were several phases where new concepts and ideas were added, only to be discarded later. One of the largest ideas that was considered for a time and then edited out was the idea to have the portraits play a large role in the exhibition. The portraits would not be directly related to the narrative but would be intestines with the rest of the images. While I believe that this is an interesting concept and I intend to work with it in the
future, for this exhibition it was serving more to muddy up the ideas that I was already working with and throw off the visual unity of the exhibition.

**Conclusion**
The planning and execution of the *Been an Empire* exhibition was full of learning and growth. It taught me a lot about planning and scheduling and forced me to be critical about the artistic choices I was taking. The growth and knowledge I have gotten from this experience will be important moving forward as an artist and a person. While there will always be room for improvement, I am pleased with what I have accomplished and I look forward to my next project.