

CASE STUDY: PHOTOGRAPHIC CUBISM – FRAGMENTING A STILL LIFE

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CLIENT Digital Imaging ART 125 / Professor Deborah Krikun

PROJECT TITLE CUBISM: Still Life with Owl and Fish

DURATION Fall 2013

TEAM Kathleen Corgan

DESCRIPTION The requirement of this project was to create a fractured image from one or many photographs, with the reference of a Cubist Masterpiece to guide our composition and structure. Our source images could be those found on the internet, photos taken from our own libraries or specifically for the project. The images needed to be broken apart, distilled or repeated in order to capture the essence of their form and their implied relationship to light and space.

RESEARCH Early research began with searching Google Images to find works by painters and sculptors whose style appealed to me. I initially envisioned a more graphic, 2 dimensional approach, such as the later Cubist painting of Charles DeMuth (“I Saw the Figure 5 In Gold”) or that of contemporary Brazilian artist Rafael Vicente’s Brazilian cityscapes. However, I continued to be pulled by the fractured, 3 dimensional nature of the essential Cubist painters, Cezanne’s still lifes, as well as the figurative painting of Braque and Picasso, Boccioni’s “Unique Forms of Continuity in Space”, and though not considered a Cubist, the drawings of Giacometti.

Among my concepts was the idea to do a still life with a fish, as I thought its scales and shimmering surface would provide good subject matter for exploring the refraction of light. It was only after beginning work on the fish still life that I finally found the reference painting which could serve as my template, Juan Gris’ 1915 painting “Still Life With Checked Tablecloth”. This was the work which I felt struck a perfect balance between its subjects’ two-dimensional essence and their existence in a three-dimensional space.

STRATEGY Immediately upon starting the project I knew I would want the most possible flexibility in representing my subject matter from any desired perspective and in any scale. I didn’t want to be hampered by the same limitations I encountered in the Hyperrealism project by using images that I couldn’t manipulate to their fullest extent. After doing initial thumbnail sketches on possible compositions, I collected or procured all the elements to be used in the still life and photographed them myself, methodically shooting frames from numerous angles from level to overhead and on to the other side, as well as 360 degrees around each element. I also shot versions with differing light sources when that later came into play, though I knew I could also employ the Photoshop Reflect tool in certain situations to change a lighting direction if the subject direction was not critical. All this would ensure the utmost flexibility when compositing the still life.

CHALLENGES I met with a challenge not too far into the project when I brought all my photographed elements into the Photoshop canvas and began to have trouble visualizing where to place the layers I wanted to fracture and build. I had created many pieces already, but they were getting crowded out by the rest of the still life elements in the attempt to have it “look” like a still life; plenty of layers with great looking gradient overlays, inner glows and drop shadows, but nowhere to put them. There were plenty of Cubist masterpieces I had been admiring, but what was missing was a single masterpiece to reference. It was then that I discovered and chose one of Juan Gris’ still lifes and finally had a template to work from.

I also realized I had to create better still life from my own elements, this time with the depth and traditional setup similar to the Gris painting I had chosen. Keeping virtually only the fish as the common theme, I re-photographed my staged still life with all new elements and re-photographed each one in the same manner as before. Now the fracturing began to make sense, and with a newly enlarged canvas to work on (thanks to the advice of Professor Krikun), there was room to dissect and expand the various parts.

As the still life began to take shape, and pieces were filling the canvas, I once again felt something was missing. I had incorporated segmented pieces of the fish and other still life elements, reduced other parts to descriptive outlines and two-dimensional shapes and patterns, but the image needed more structure, and at the same time more of a push and pull between two- and three dimensions. Earlier, Professor Krikun had suggested using type as an element, and sure enough, there it was in the Gris painting. The addition of type in a favorite and locally themed background poster was a great solution, as well as the addition of a

monogram I had designed and inscribed into the still life's wood table. In addition, again in reference to the Gris painting, the addition of perspective lines to direct the flow of fracture and define a grid were very helpful in creating an organizing structure within which the still life could exist.

The last challenge presented itself in the printing, particularly in trying to keep the rich darks that look so good on the screen from becoming too muddy on paper. One solution was to lighten some of the darker areas a bit, trying not to lose too much of their moodiness, but also I will be printing to transparency film and backing on white to see if that will help capture some of the translucency built into the image.

RESULTS The Cubist was by far my favorite project; the elements in my still life were objects all very dear to me, and to be able to study them and represent them in a newly imagined way was challenging and rewarding. I appreciated the idea of endless possibilities brought to fruition using simple and distilled frameworks, and would look forward to working this way again, each time experimenting with the balance between two and three dimensions, value and color variations, and space and time differences. I feel that like the Hyperrealist project, this project could also be pushed much further, albeit in the opposite direction, resulting in a series of more and more abstract interpretations in the effort to discover the barest amount of form that can still convey the essence of the subject.

POSTSCRIPT After two photographic sittings in both thawed and frozen state, we grilled the fish whole; a nice sized Red Snapper. It was delicious!

