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MFA Thesis Catalogue

James Madison University  
School of Art, Design, and Art History

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY  
School of Art, Design, and Art History

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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR,  
SCHOOL OF ART DESIGN AND ART HISTORY  
DR. KATHERINE A. SCHWARTZ

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the 2017-18 MFA Graduate Exhibition. This catalogue documents the final thesis exhibitions of Lynda Bostrom, Katherine Burling, and Sam Posso. These exceptional artists dedicate hundreds of hours to their research and studio practice, creating an exhibition that demonstrates their perseverance, integrity, and an honest exploration of ideas.

The artists in this exhibition are creating work in response to the world they are living in, which includes accusations of collusion with a foreign power to undermine our democracy; political and economic policies that destroy the environment and reinforce chaos in the world; artificial intelligence that challenges the role of the artist by creating original work; and social justice issues debated by network sitcom characters with conservative views clashing with liberal family and friends. The exhibition challenges viewers to contemplate these issues, along with questioning our humanity in contemporary society.

Lynda Bostrom uses symbols and imaginary spaces to convey autobiographical metaphor regarding the tensions caused by societal expectations and social inequity. The use of sound enhances the viewers experiences within the imaginary spaces, providing a place to wander or to hide. Bostrom's work raises the questions: Who can we trust with our stories? How do repeated themes in life inform artistic choices? How do the stories of others become part of our own experience?

Katherine Burling constructs large three-dimensional collage to reflect upon metaphors of confusion and emptiness that may co-exist within self and culture. The images are enticingly playful and simultaneously forebodingly depressing, challenging viewers to recognize how disengagement contributes to grief and anxiety. Burling's work asks us to consider: What information can be trusted? How do historical references between characters, events, places, and periods inform our understanding of myth or reality? How is amusement used to cope with the sorrow found in world chaos?

Sam Posso infuses humor into art to challenge accepted knowledge and to invent new stories. Posso creates multilayered images that serve to critique the dismissal of complex images and ideas informing daily life. Posso's work also challenges viewers to question the establishment as an alternative to hopelessness, by considering: Who can be trusted with important matters? How can art deconstruct myths or lies to portray reality or "alternative realities"? How can humor in art provide some relief from entertainment escapism, or other human controls on life?

The questions raised in this exhibition reinforce the School's vision to radically transform ourselves and our communities through creative and scholarly work. Appreciation is extended to Cole Welter, Graduate Director, for the enormous passion he brings to the program, and to the graduate faculty for serving as artist mentors. I also thank John Ros, Gallery Director, for his curatorial assistance; Carissa Henriques, Assistant Professor of Graphic Design, for designing this beautiful catalogue, and Karen Gerard, Assistant to the Director, for managing the budgets.

Warm congratulations are extended to Lynda, Katherine, and Sam. Thank you.

Katherine A. Schwartz  
*Director, School of Art, Design, and Art History*

## LETTER FROM THE GRADUATE PROGRAM DIRECTOR DR. COLE H. WELTER

This catalogue documents the individual work of three remarkable artists: Lynda Bostrom, Kathryn Burling, and Sam Posso. As produced, this catalogue strives to present a visual and written insight (as authored by the artists) into the meaning behind their work, and to celebrate the three years of intense and impressive labor undertaken in partial completion of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree at James Madison University.

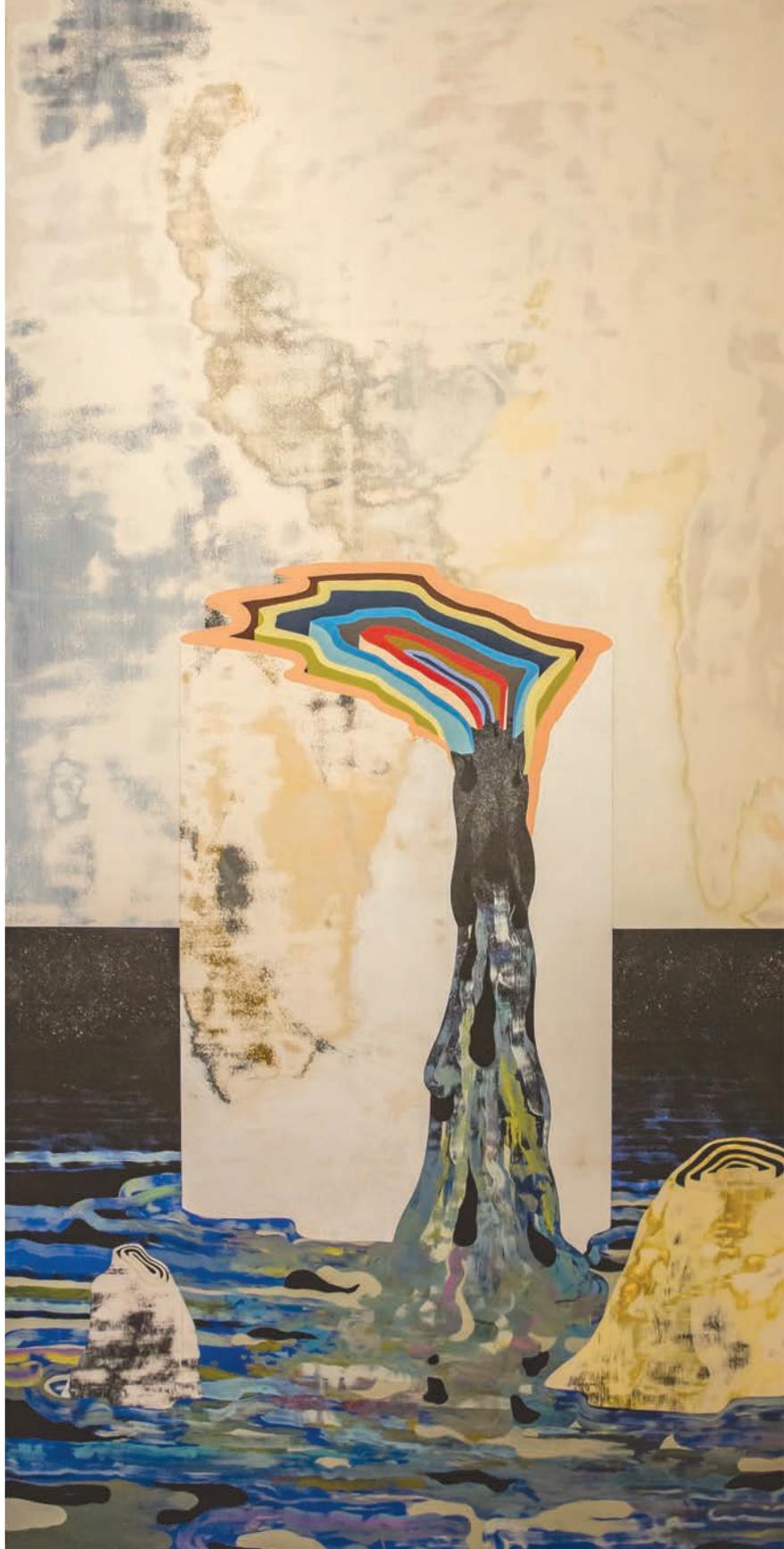
I applaud and personally wish to congratulate each of the artists whose work is highlighted in this catalogue for successfully completing this significant achievement. It has been a privilege and complete honor to be part of your artistic journey. Art enriches the meaning of life, and JMU's gift to the health of the visual arts is invested in all three of the artists highlighted by this catalogue.

With regards to the exhibition itself, what I found especially engaging this year was the inventiveness and superior craft in the execution of stimulating ideas. Each artist separately, but collectively, helped transform the gallery space into a magnificent venue that held the viewer's attention, and engaged them in reflective thought. Sometimes the emotive stimulation of the work was whimsical. Sometimes the observed response of the viewers in the gallery was curiosity. Sometimes their responses were one of surprise or shock. In every instance (including my own) the work never failed to produce an acute and intense dialog between the work and the viewer. These are signs of an efficacious and eloquent exhibition.

Exhibitions of this type don't happen by accident. They are the product of motivated students working in concert with a distinguished graduate faculty of practicing artists and scholars who are dedicated to exemplary teaching and research, and to the professional growth of each student. Once again, the 2018 Thesis Exhibition catalogue bears witness to that commitment, and to the creation of a supportive environment of personal artistic practice and individual inquiry.

As a nationally recognized graduate program the JMU Master of Fine Arts degree was the first terminal degree offered by the university, yet that heritage would mean nothing without the active contributions of many individuals. Special recognition is owed to the MFA Thesis Chairs and Committee members who worked closely with the three exhibiting artists, and continues with John Ros, Duke Fine Arts Gallery Director, and to all other members of the JMU School of Art, Design and Art History's graduate faculty and support staff. I am especially grateful to the school's director, Dr. Kathy Schwartz, and to all of my graduate faculty colleagues for their continuing support, for without it I could not possibly do this job. I also extend a special thanks to Dr. George Sparks, Dean of the JMU College of Visual and Performing Arts, and to Dr. Jie Chen, Dean of The Graduate School, for their continuing attention to the program's needs as we strive to make a strong program even better.

Cole H. Welter  
*Director, Graduate Program*



# Lynda Bostrom

## Morpho: Expectations & Mutations

When deciding how to frame a concept for my thesis, I ultimately chose autobiography for a variety of reasons. It was the answer to my own question of whether to approach art through interest or experience. Why not both—interests as they relate through experiences—a wandering conversation with a friend. I thought about how stories of others become part of our own. I've questioned if painting is the medium that will most successfully translate my metaphysical meanderings into an experience that viewers might recognize within themselves. I reflect on the artwork of men and women I have never met, and how their work made deep impressions in my memory and on my heart. There is a sense of self-recognition in this language of symbols and imaginary spaces, and it gave me words that named my aching, which was to give it release. I learned how to use this language—added my own words—and now I use it to name myself, to process death, to celebrate curiosity, to hide, to express my love.

*Morpho: Expectations & Mutations* is an autobiographical body of work navigating the tension of being a human with an invisible disease, while straining to understand Western societal constructs of women. I simultaneously reject fairytales as a standard recipe for happiness, yet identify with its visual language that is rooted in the vernacular of my generation. Redefining the elements I reject or embrace helps

me to look beyond the boundaries of these constructs, and adopt an attitude of curiosity in finding a greater possibility of human connection and expansiveness.

Development sketches for *Stay Soft (Cast Off)* was the impetus for this body of work. The finished piece contains the entire lexicon of thematic elements echoed throughout the paintings in the collection: the ballroom glove (concealment/convention), figures of nature (multicultural symbolisms), severance (injury/dissolution/revealing), the liquid shadow (intangible subconscious/truth/intuition), and the island/mesa/pedestal. *American Spirit (Waves of Confidence)*, and *The Red Thread (The Idea of the Lack)*, bookend either side of this triptych, and were conceptualized afterwards. The three together read as a progression, across themes that portray the tension of rejecting or struggling with societal expectations that led to my continual denial of self.

*Gravity* is the isolated figure of the contrasexual archetypes, Anima & Animus. *Sleeping Alone* is the segments of stillness required to heal. *Morpho* is a return to the senses. *Expectations: Nobody Talks About It* is an accompanying sound piece (in collaboration with sound artist, Kendall Furrow), that unfolds chapters of sound on top on one another, blending one scene to the next. Field recordings are woven into electric, rhythmic spirals, punctuated with aural fragments,

twisted into nonsense—until opening into slow ambience and robotic chants that are nearly inaudible—an androgynous dual-voice speaking on reflections of pain. Convolutions of symphonies and crispy undulations swirl from ear to ear—inviting the viewer to travel deeper into the imaginary spaces.

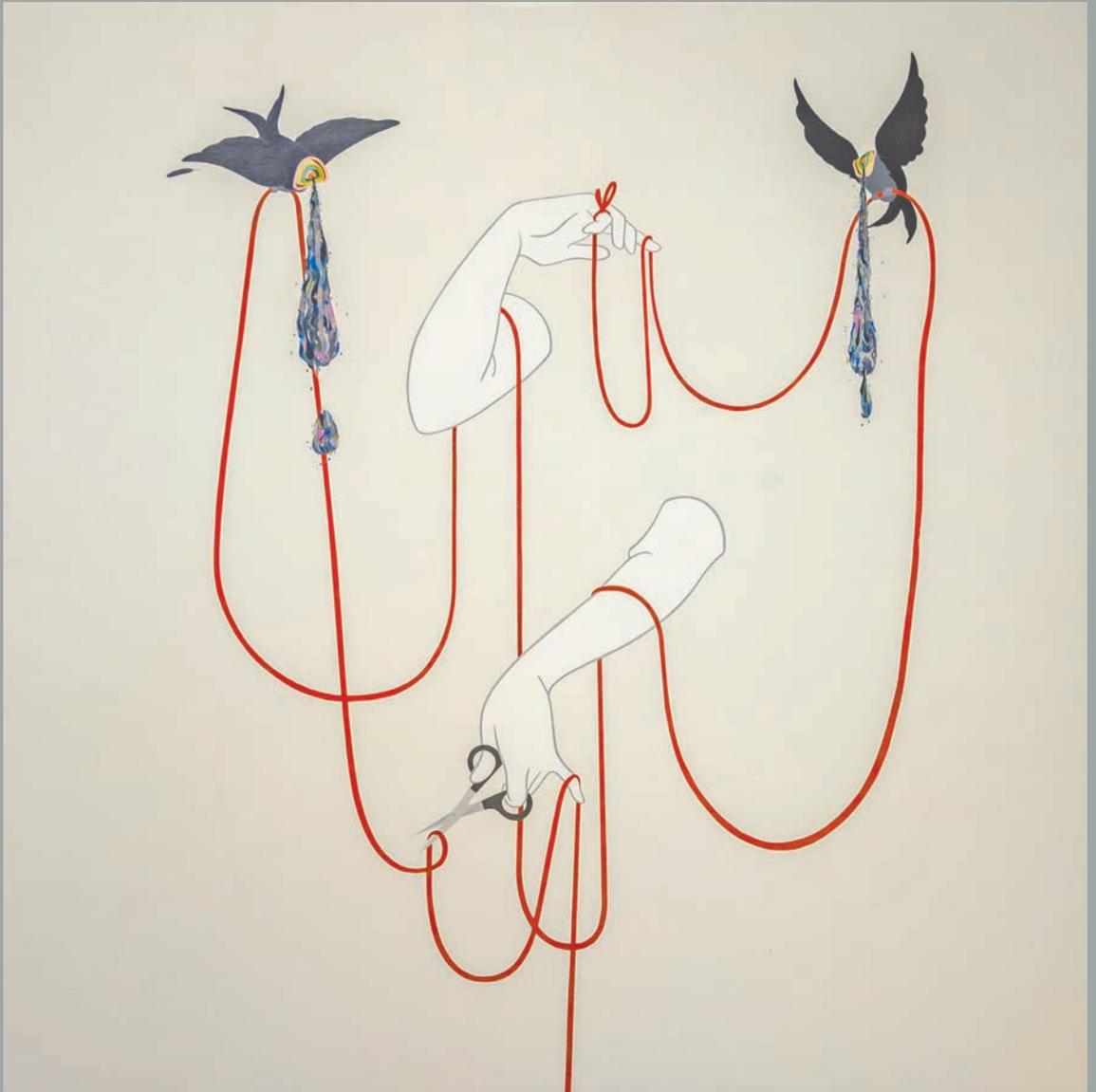
In creating narrative autobiographical work, my goal was to develop a balance of intention and vagueness. Space for interpretation allows discovery within the connotations—a mirror for my viewers (as well as myself). The paintings and audio piece for this thesis are a crystallization of experiences that are repeated themes within my own life, and the women and men I share friendships with. There is comfort in this communion: like breaking bread, having a sit, sharing spirits and truths. We teach one another how to shift from *should* to *could*—how to stay open, how to stay soft.













# Katherine Burling

So Small  
So Sweet  
So Soon



Through a visual language that combines kitsch sensibility, Eurocentric opulence, Victorian taxidermy and fairground art, melodrama and decay take center stage as metaphors for a nebulous American mourning. Rendered in plywood, sorrow percolates from various corners of the American psyche—or Twittersphere. Animals become pietàs or ornaments or petrified dumbwaiters. Wigs turn into altars, follies or monuments to that which has passed on. The apocalyptic divine sends a flood that will collapse empire. As a coping mechanism, the gargantuan toy theatre serves as a stunted articulation of the chaotically incomprehensible, asking how to best cope with a threatening world.



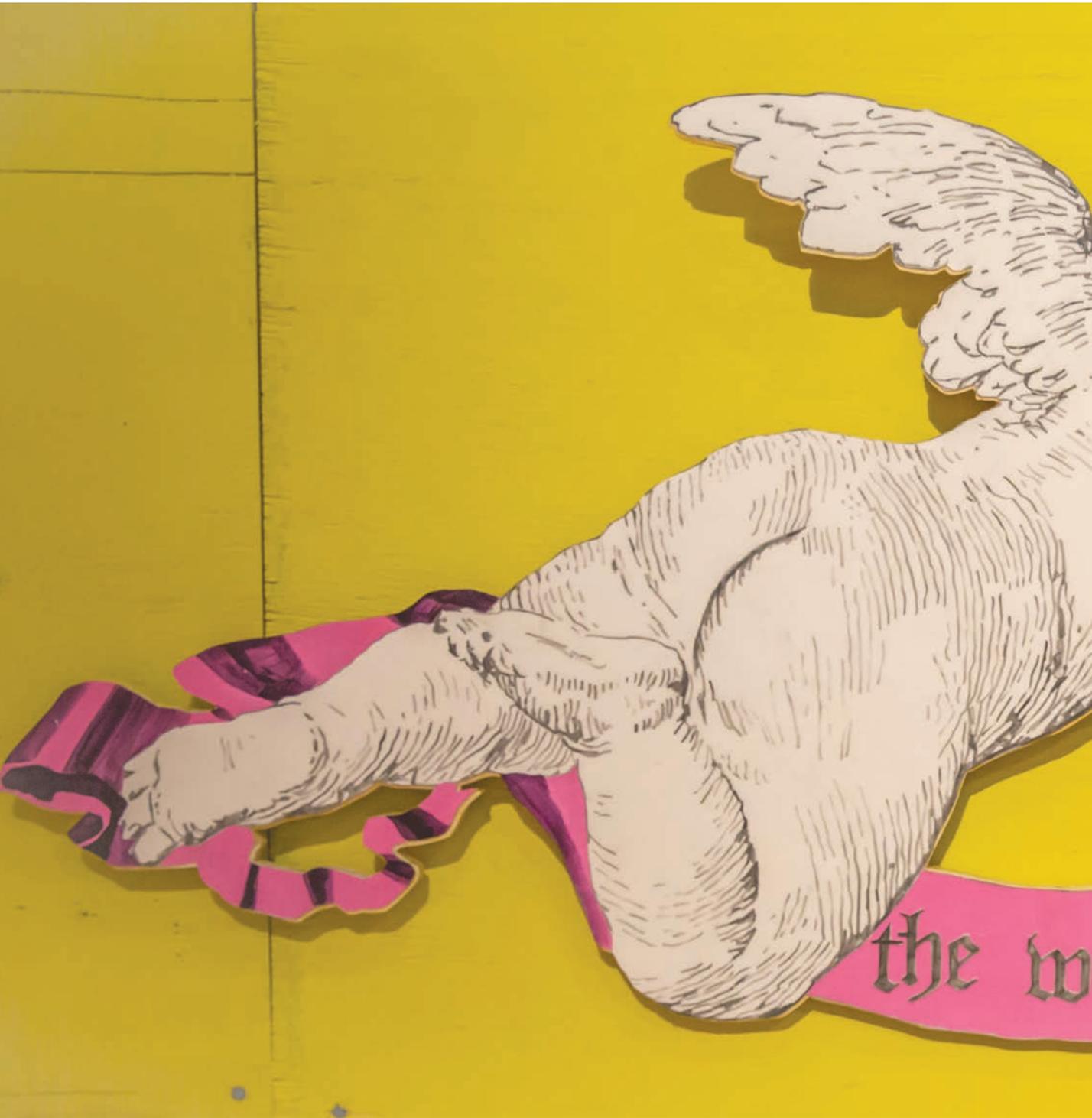
My work is a type of three dimensional collage, whose unfixed parts allow for continuous recombination and remixing in the process. The pieces assemble as a collection on the wall and slowly fraternize with each other, leaving space for splicing and recontextualization. Fixing paper to wood forces the drawings into space, creating a scene large enough to envelop the viewer; a space in which the fantasy and spectacle of the imagined narrative become quasi-real while wholly unreal—like they did as a kid at the fair. Flattening space and compressing chaos into a three-dimensional form allows me to create metaphors of confusion and emptiness that coexist both within myself and in our culture; representational drawing aids in narrative invention and the creation of space that is set apart from the habitual world.

Historical references abound, providing an anachronistic mashup of characters, events, places and periods. The import of their inclusion is to mirror America's own understanding of history, facts, amusement and myth; a space which increasingly fails to delineate any differences between the four categories. It's a Disney-like strategy, the product of a hyperreal American sensibility that prefers to disengage from the present rather than process the past. In so doing, it pairs Mark Twain with Benjamin Franklin as starry-eyed contemporaries who narrate American history at Walt Disney World. What do they ask of history? And what do they ask of myth?

The expression of grief and anxiety in my work is manifold. Death enters the Western imagination, taking from us our smallest and sweetest beloved. The calamity is imminent, foreshadowed by the rotting fruit-child, the lightning strike and dead flowers as memento mori. The altars are set, the coiffeurs are waiting. Is it a celebration, or a mourning? The flood is coming, the thunder rolling in, the deluge to set right the incorrigible wrongs of humankind. But somehow it is still a joke.

The weeping woman, the reviled other, the myopic self-pity, the cacophony of the dying, the rotting, the lost, and the child-like compete for self-expression. Anticipated tragedy and staged artifice demand mourning and contemplation alongside history and fiction. Despite the faux melodrama, this still theatre of fake grief has an earnestness that struggles to express itself.



















# Sam Posso

## Pop-A- Washington

My creative work in this exhibition focuses on critiquing the accepted, collective American knowledge and deconstructing myths of history, time, and place to create new series of stories and spectacles. Throughout this body of work, I reference roadside attractions, PT Barnum's traveling curiosities, and Americana through repetitive action and the depiction of the many versions of our founding father as well as the inclusion of *take-aways*—souvenirs from this temporary space. In this way, you, the viewer are able to reconstruct imagery through reminiscences, long after the work ceases to exist. The decades-long traveling show of curiosities that made Barnum wealthy beyond his wildest dreams, flourished at the expense of its exploited gullible, entertainment-seeking audiences. Their meager pocket change was surrendered in exchange for a front row seat to human oddities, embellished tall-tales, and historical farce. This is the jumping off point for my own work—or my own composition of a story born in a believable lie. As the multiple layers of each piece build, my version of the story cannibalizes other parts of the legend and the mythology related to our shared historical knowledge. This is all spurred on by the visual cues of time and the familiar physical image of George Washington.

In the small town I'm from, Spooner, in Northwestern Wisconsin, we could boast of our own roadside attraction. A mini golf course on the edge of town displays a cowboy hat-laden muffler man, known as Big Mel. This larger than life cowboy, constructed by the International Fiberglass Company, helped develop my fascination with roadside attractions as a child.

A more presidential themed attraction in my town was a urinal that John F. Kennedy was said to have used during a campaign stop at the Buckhorn Tavern in downtown Spooner. The importance of finding a link to greatness for a rural town shines brightest when locals instruct tourists to use the same toilet as this heroic president of the working class, cut down in his prime. These sites offer portals to the past, whether it be the figurative past, constructed by the historical legend touted on a plaque in front of the monument, or a simpler past, when a large fiberglass statue was enough to stop the family car in its tracks to snap a roadside picture next to the awkwardly proportioned character.

The work as a whole is not easy to take in in short bursts. This is by design, and a criticism towards a "quick look and move-on" type of viewer. All of the pieces come across as a criticism of the ease of access and dismissal of extremely complex representational images that we interact with on a daily basis. This focuses on the human controls of life displayed as time, monetary transaction, entertainment escapism, and the bowing to patriotic establishment who we hope are constantly negotiating for our lives to not end in a giant mushroom cloud. Through the deconstruction and reconstruction of myth and time, this work creates for a short duration an extremely humorous outlook on issues that leave most of the population hopeless.



















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