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Professor Newman
Residency I
Critical Theory One Seminar Essay
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Reflections on Less and More



Figure 1. Robert Smithson, *Hotel Palenque*, 1969



Figure 2. Melissa Chandon, *Snow King on Yellow*, 2006 (UC Davis Shields Library Collection)

*I am for an art that takes into account the direct effect of
the elements as they exist from day to day apart from representation.*

—Robert Smithsonⁱ

In his 1972 essay “Cultural Confinement,” Robert Smithson draws a direct comparison between the museum and a jail with galleries as cells. Galleries and museums separate and isolate artworks from any real reference to everyday life. It is because of this idea that Smithson began working on pieces he called “Non-Sites” that, when placed in a gallery or museum, made a direct reference to an actual place outside of the museum that he called “Sites.” Smithson was, in a way, speaking about the process of

seeing and accurately representing a visual reference in a meaningfully complete and cohesive manner. The role the artist has in establishing the relationship between art and its reference to the world is something that interests me and drives my work. This artistic process raises a question about what we actually see in our daily life.

I think of my work similarly as a kind of archaeological touchstone for thought. In each painting, I strive to evoke a sense of “place” in the hope of evoking a memory and thus creating a familiar resonance for the viewer. I feel a social responsibility to preserve vanishing markers from our visual horizon. My aesthetic goal is two-fold: to evoke the residue of the past and to provide the viewer with a visual respite from their very busy lives. These two are not as unrelated as they might at first seem—respite in nostalgia for a simpler world may indeed be a meaningful and resonant social and political position, one that complicates the traditional association of the liberal left with the term “progressive.”

There was a defining moment when this project crystallized. I was in rural Utah on a road trip, when I spotted a drive-up burger place called the Snow King with a large neon sign that included a snowman. My photograph didn't turn out well and on my next trip one year later I decided to reshoot the diner, only to discover the building had been torn down. This resonated with me and created a sense of loss, one that I could not at the time completely explain, and brought back childhood memories of my family life growing up.



Figure 3. Photograph of me by my father, Albuquerque, NM, 1957.

The Rich Get Richer, Again

Not since World War II have the top 10 percent of earners had such a large share of total income. The shares of those in the top 1 percent and top 0.1 percent have risen to levels not found in more than 60 years.

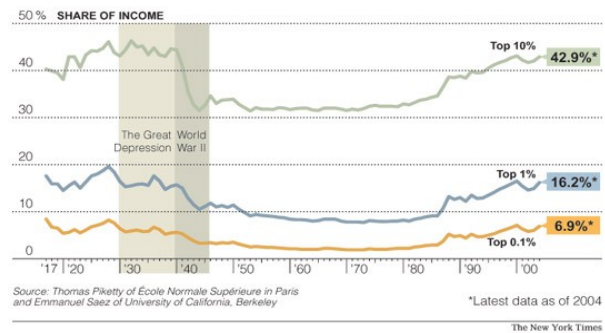


Figure 4. Taken from Anna Bernasek, “ECONOMIC VIEW; Income Inequality, And Its Cost,” *New York Times*, June 25, 2006.

I have a black and white photograph that my father took of me at the age of 5 standing on a chair in front of a kitchen sink. I have an apron tied around my waist, I am washing dishes, and I look very pleased with myself. The year was 1957, and we were living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. We were there because my father was stationed at Sandia Air Force Base. He was also attending the University of New Mexico and my mother was working on campus. Soon after graduating, my father began working for an engineering firm. Our family life was in full swing by then: my parents had three children, they had purchased their first house for \$17,000, and my mother was a fulltime housewife and seamstress for all of her children's clothing. The 1950s were an unusual period in time when the GI Bill provided many men the opportunity to go to college, pursue their dreams and build a future for their families. Life seemed rich in that there was time for family and relaxation. Our family had one TV and we watched it together. It was a novelty, a shared experience, providing a family with bonding time.

Perhaps these memories are just the nostalgic and sentimental reminiscences of what it was like to see life through the eyes of a child, but perhaps not. In 2002, New York Times columnist and Nobel Prize winning economist Paul Krugman wrote, “The middle-class America of my youth was another

country,” and this is exactly the way it feels to me.ⁱⁱ The future would seem even more foreign to the life experience of my childhood with temperatures anticipated to rise upwards to ten degrees between now and the year 2100 in the area that I live and paint. One expert said recently, "In many states across the country, the weather and landscapes could be nearly unrecognizable in 100 years."ⁱⁱⁱ Today, our senses are so bombarded with technologically enhanced stimuli—email, cell phone calls and text messages, and the like—our sense of proportion so overwhelmed by the scale of materially supersized commodities—cars, houses, televisions, sodas, bodies, etc.—and our sense of nature so increasingly disengaged from our sense of self—by climate change, genetic engineering, even plastic surgery—that it seems harder and harder to maintain a healthy, normal, measured bearing toward the world.

Smithson raises questions in order to create awareness about places that exist outside of the museum. Like Smithson, I hope to establish a relationship between the object viewed, the painting, and the memory of the viewer. In the process of viewing my paintings, vestiges of a bygone era, I do so, not to be nostalgic (or not just nostalgic!), but to raise basic questions about social, cultural, economic, and political change. Remembering what the past feels like—like Smithson’s efforts to conjure memories of what the outside of the museum gallery/prison cell feels like—is itself a way of encountering, and countering, the here and now.

One of the reasons I am so passionate about my work is that I feel the time is right. In a recent article about American's downsizing, the author stated, “A growing number of people in the U.S. are downsizing their homes in response to the collapse of the housing market, rising energy prices and concern for the environment. The trend has long moved in the opposite direction, with the average American home size, about 2,500 square feet, up 140% from the 1950s.”^{iv} This trend along with the

changes that are starting to take place under the Obama administration, encourages me that positive change is possible. A good example of this is the stimulus initiative known as “Cash for Clunkers.” In a way, it feels like what I am trying to do with my art—against the seemingly enormous scale of Hummers, McMansions, big-box shopping, and the like, I have sought for a long time now to paint a modesty of scale, a measure of restraint, a sense of proportion that I take to be the formal vocabulary of the vanishing middle-class.



Figure 5. Melissa Chandon, *VW Bus at Walmart Parking Lot*, 2008, private collection.

ⁱSmithson, Robert. "Cultural Confinement", (1972). *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings in and Around American Art since 1945*. Ed. Paul F. Fabozzi. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002. Chapter 6, Sculpture in the Environment, page 247-249.

ⁱⁱ Krugman, Paul. "The Disappearing Middle". *New York Times*. Sunday, October 20, 2002.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/20/magazine/20INEQUALITY.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Grim, Ryan. "Small Midwestern States To Be Hit Hardest By Climate Change". *The Huffington Post*. First Posted: 08-27-09 01:50 PM | Updated: 08-28-09 10:35 AM. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/08/27/small-midwestern-states-t_n_270540.html

^{iv} Bender, Kristin. "Little Boxes: The New Movement to Seriously Downsize Our Homes". *E Magazine*, May/June 2009. Vol. XX, no. 3. <http://www.emagazine.com/view/?4669>