

“Meat of the Matter:  
Two Years of Studying the Human Form in Drawing and Painting”

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For the past year, breaking down the human body into its functional internal components has become crucial in my effort to master the human form. This quest has developed into a symbolism-laden mystery to uncover personal truths about the body I believed to live underneath the skin. My intention was to rejuvenate the importance of the body's inner world to one's existence and identity. Instead of peeling away layers of my audience's identities, however, I inadvertently discovered the hidden workings of my own identity and how it manifests through painting. In fact, the study of skeletomuscular anatomy and idea of covering/revealing parts of the self ended up being just one big metaphor for this discovery.

On the surface, my project began as a study in skeletomuscular anatomy in a Renaissance/Neo-Classic tradition for learning to render the human figure in its various forms. I believed that rigorous examination of the underlying structure of the body was essential to capturing realistic forms of the figure, from identifying bony landmarks to understanding origins and insertions of the muscles. Bones tend to provide more reliable clues to accurately rendering the form, while muscles provide an intermediary step between bones and skin. Additionally, I believed that bones and muscles of the body could present themselves as living elements without the skin as opposed to parts seen only on a dead cadaver. Muscles and bones are rarely seen outside of impersonal medical illustrations and photos of dead bodies or surgeries, so they often have heavy associations with death. The project eventually developed into a mission to uplift these inner structures to being equally important to a person's identity as his/her skin or thoughts, assuming that those people take their inner bodies for granted. To achieve this, I set out to "remix" layers

of the skeletomuscular system and skin into single figures through both drawing and painting. This included superimposing muscular and skeletal images on top of the surface figure, then peeling select regions away. However, I fell short of this original goal, once I started painting, and spending significant time reflecting on the actual nature of painting.

Removing layers of skin, muscle, bones, and even ideas acted as a means to discover the power of painting by impulse, painting by instinct. Painting that's about fast, spontaneous, last-minute, dangerous, alive – even angry. By peeling away layers of the human form, I found the furnace that fueled both my work and daily life that was simultaneously zen-like and passionate. It's a mindset governed by one's gut, hands, and legs. I could only have this epiphany once I stopped directing my ideas outward onto other people and focused them inward. Because painting is a process that involves significant involvement from my own mind and body, there's no way to completely achieve complete disinterested objectivity when trying to catch the essence of the subject matter. While my audience may attempt to infer this state of mind from viewing my paintings, it's not a lesson I can demand of them without actually experiencing the act of painting itself. When I mention painting, I also refer to drawing, since both are processes that involve active coordination between your body and perception.

### **STUDY TRAJECTORY**

Instead of following a set trajectory of work from the beginning, I allowed my course to shift from painting to painting. A large component of this was periodically detouring around the current project, and temporarily granting myself a certain rebellious freedom for my next project. This happened once during my drawing semester (pausing anatomical study to focus on figure drawing), and twice during the painting semester (halting drawing

to try new paintings, rejecting a theme for my senior seminar and painting meat). Much of this was driven by faith that I would discover whatever questions I wanted answered while engaged in mixing paints, flailing my arms about, and strike brush to canvas, rather than premeditating the significance of what I would create. For me, “What” was always clearer than “Why?”

My quest for technical mastery began as an independent study in figure painting after completing Figure Drawing and Advanced Painting. Their union was a natural marriage recommended by Professor Kevin Brady to help focus and continue my artistic growth. Running an independent study was key to removing the financial, scale, and temporal inhibitions that limited me before. The major trials for the study were rigorous observational painting of live models and working on a much larger scale than I had been used to. Some of these lessons included capturing proper body proportions, painting the form of the figure in space, and studying warm/cool color relations. Moving to a painting scale larger than my range of motion while sitting was essential to learning how to use my whole body to paint instead of just my arm. For me, that transition changed painting from a dainty craft activity to almost a full-body dance (At times I do literally dance while painting). My mark making would eventually become a record of my movement and energy, while still keeping within the bounds of a recognizable form. Upon completion of the study, I craved more knowledge of the body and the most “correct” way to represent it. I broke apart the subjects of the environment and the figure and studied them individually at Digipen Institute of Technology over the following summer.

Despite the premise of being a school for video game design, Digipen provided me with another opportunity for learning traditional modes of representation and illustration.

In one hand, I studied nature, architecture, and linear perspective; while in the other I studied human anatomy under a trained medical illustrator. Though both classes used Photoshop as their primary medium, the use of a drawing tablet kept the techniques within familiar territory. My anatomy course broke down the human body into several distinct regions, requiring us to produce orthographic views of the skeletal, muscular, and surface layers of the body, and referring us to textbook illustrations and 3D models for information. The professor mixed anatomy lessons with live figure drawing to give us an opportunity to locate newly learned landmarks of the body. Unfortunately, the anatomy class was cut drastically short to about a month, due to a prior instructor injury. Once again I was left unsatisfied in my artistic training.

At the start of the Fall 2011 semester, I built another independent study under Prof. Jim Peterson's guidance, based heavily on my incomplete summer anatomy class. With one full semester, I had far more time to draw and paint the figure, and hone my anatomical knowledge. The study began my added assumption that A: Medical illustration was boring and sterile and B: Figure Drawing was fun, energetic, and more life-like than most medical illustrations. While medical illustrations provide a certain degree of scientific knowledge missing from figure drawing, figure drawing can claim a higher degree of accuracy in representing identity and personal expression, since I'm able to work from particular individuals in the latter. Medical illustration does a better job of saying, "what it is," but figure drawings tend to do a better job of saying, "what it is doing." I hoped to magically bridge this gap of scientific accuracy and living figures by mashing together figure drawings with selected views of the body underneath the skin. For example, in my *Naked Torso* drawing, I removed the skin of the arm and face, but kept the surface of the torso. In

drawings like these I, intended to represent the skeletomuscular anatomy of the body in a living figure, similar to how *Body Worlds* poses and displays its preserved bodies. However, true objective accuracy of internal anatomy always eluded me. The point and major flaw of my study is that medical illustrations are idealized diagrams of some artist's vision of the "perfect" human body. They're amalgamations created from cadavers, skeletons, and medical imaging. I had even less to work with, since I had no dead people on hand to draw (and didn't use MRIs until later). Sometime during that semester I became overwhelmed with attempting to accurately represent all of the knowledge of the inner body and retreated into the comfort of pure figure drawing; drawing the figure without reflecting on "what?" or "why?" On reflection, that was the first key moment in identifying the true purpose of my project and, importantly, the source of my inspiration.

The following semester I decided to shift my focus entirely from drawing to oil painting. Having grown tired of mixing together different views of the body and struggling to render anatomical accuracy, I turned toward medical scans as a new source of inspiration. Prof. Virginia Maksymowicz and Prof. Kostis Kourelis originally brought up the idea of using medical imaging as an anatomical knowledge source. Images such as MRIs and X-rays have the advantage of revealing the inner structures of the body while the subject is still alive. I was fortunate enough to have access to MRIs of my mother, meaning I could match a real face to the paintings I made from them. They also possessed fascinating visual qualities: these 2D cross-sections possess both cramped, overlapping sheets of meat and howling empty body cavities. Because of their murky presentation, I saw the MRIs as a perfect match for wet and sloppy layers of oil paint. I was additionally inspired by the imperfections of the images, for they rendered every asymmetry of the person. These

images also possessed a certain bleakness to them, almost like foreshadowing the person's eventual death. They remove the surface of the human body to reveal imperfections and truths about the state of that body, truths hidden by the skin.

## **BODY OF WORK**

The bulk of my study eventually became four diptychs, each focusing on a different region of the body. While I remained true to my premise of highlighting key regions of the body, the theme of my work shifted from uniting parts of the body to deliberately hiding/revealing them. Each diptych features a traditional figure painting on the left, and a "revealed" view on the right. Three of the four mimic the imagery of MRIs, while the remaining right panel still treats the skinless figure as three-dimensional. I chose each region of the body on the basis of linguistic and social associations with those body parts. These pairs all represent certain aspects of the self, localized into specific parts of the body. *Gut* addresses instinct, *Spine* addresses bravery, *Legs* addresses locomotion, and *Face* addresses personal identity. Additionally, while developing my senior show, I made sure to match the number of meat paintings with the number of diptychs, though their connections are rather loose. All together the paintings represent different layers of truth in the body

I chose to represent the torso in the *Gut* paintings because of the common phrase, "follow your gut," a saying that implies that a truer and more intuitive self lives in your stomach. The torso houses the primary organ block, but not the bodily command center. Based on those two factors alone, the phrase "follow your gut" seems rather anti-intellectual, that good decision-making is automatic and natural. In the pose I painted, the model is attempting to cover up his genitals and breasts, hiding key his sexual identity. The fact that he's covering up sensitive parts implies an attempt to protect his vulnerabilities.

The right panel tears all of that away, revealing his inner organs and leaving him powerless to the medical gaze. While I did it entirely for practical reasons, the fact that I cut off his legs also implies immobility along with vulnerability. However, even the internal view of his body cannot reveal his sexual identity, or any other qualities aside from internal structure. Additionally, both panels cut off his face, suggesting that his personal identity is missing.

The rationale behind *Spine* is simpler than the other paintings. The back was the only bare region of my mother's body I was willing to paint, and she was the only model on hand at the time of painting. The spine was a body region I had planned to paint earlier, but didn't realize how charged the imagery would be. After I finished the painting, I recalled that possessing a spine is evidence of bravery, an intriguing irony in light of my discomfort and refusal of painting my mother fully nude. Spinal imagery is also a personal symbol for complications in the relationship with my father (he's a chiropractor), compounded when it's my mother that I paint instead. The spine also acts as a foundation of upright posture and a superhighway for all nerve signals. Instead of choosing to paint just an MRI in the right panel, I decided to start with a more sculptural rendering of the skinless body that breaks away into just a cross-section. This creates a bottom-up revealing of the body.

I picked the pose in *Legs* to reflect a model pose and drawing from last semester that I particularly liked, but also to suggest a certain readiness of action. Limbs are essential to locomotion and activity, and the limbs in *Legs* are poised to take off. In the right panel of *Legs*, I forgo the MRI completely and instead opt for muscled skeleton that loses mass from top to bottom. By losing their muscles, the legs are deprived of their purpose. The structure of my study was built on constantly moving, never spending too much time to dwell on an

idea. Once again I left out the head, realizing that I omitted the command center of the body, suggesting mindless autonomy of the rest of the body.

The final diptych is a bust of my own face, the most common bodily region of recognizable identity. However, I covered up my eyes and mouth with my hands, implying that they are more important to expressing my identity than my vision and voice. Hands are the primary conduits between body and ideas, my rationale for representing my brain in the right panel. Hands are directly responsible for painting itself and represent the synergy of mental and bodily energies. Face. Hands. Ideas.

All four diptychs share an intriguing quality to them that escaped my attention during their conception: no painting makes direct eye contact with the viewer. In the case of my self-portrait, part of me *wanted* to avoid eye contact. Staring face to face with a larger-than-life bust of one's self is a somewhat disturbing experience, and speaks of the power and connectivity of meeting eye to eye. Part of my mission was to redirect signs of personhood away from the eyes and to the rest of the body, but I'll admit that such a task is a monumental challenge. Every model attempts to hide vulnerable parts of their body, but the disinterested, scientific gaze ignores their defenses. But without some sort of traditional means of facial recognition, the audience may be forced to view my work with that same scientific disconnect.

While I was developing my four diptychs for my independent study, I was attempting to pursue a subject completely removed from the human form in another class. Painting meat was an impulse to reject any sort of conceptual premise. Frustrations of trying to "figure out" identity through the body led me to pursue a subject matter I believed didn't have an identity, something that was already dead. I was exploring the aesthetic of

the industrial and dirty in my landscape painting class, which later expanded into painting fish from the local seafood store. One grotesquely butchered halibut inspired me to paint the slimy sheen and fleshy ambiguity of fresh meat. As time wore on, the forms of the meat grew more recognizable. There was something explicitly not human and somewhat unglorified about these carcasses. No other qualities except for physicality of the subject matter compelled me to explore it through paint. The hope that meat would be free from the cold gaze of critical analysis propelled me through the series. Painting a subject exclusively because “I damn well wanted to.” To my dismay, I found meat to be fairly relevant to my quest to represent the human form, as my techniques for rendering each were somewhat identical. For a while, I couldn’t quite put my finger on how the meat paintings connected to the figure paintings. Initially I believed them to represent an additional step to the diptychs as a result from removing some other layer of the body, this time the layer of actual personhood. However, I could never quite justify this assertion, so I let it drop. Instead, I naturally uncovered their significance through continued painting. I actually felt a greater sense of accomplishment with the meat paintings and figurative works than with the “underpaintings” (anatomical works), so I suppose my satisfaction lies with the material rendering of my subject than its conceptual rendering.

## **REFLECTIONS**

It was the actual action of painting and drawing that connected me to my work and my work to each other. Trying to concentrate on how my painting relates to my ideas tends to pull my attention away from the painting itself. When I focus on painting or drawing and cast off worries of *what* I am doing, I can sink into an almost spiritual state of autonomic

action, where my hands and eyes coordinate in harmony to produce an image. I consider it a very physical process in which I act on my impulses and instincts, instead of working toward a rational direction. This state tended to manifest best in subjects that suited my art style, such as lumpy bodies or moist meat cubes. The premise for the project provided the opportunity to record my movement, gestures, and spontaneity through making art, but I would have made that record regardless of the premise. More importantly, the work catalogued *my* actions as opposed to others. Originally, I had set out to discover truths about human bodies in general, but realized that I could only learn truths about my own. Those truths are the fulfillment of sensory engagement union with my work. Expecting my audience to understand deeper aspects of their selves was foolish when A: action was essential to activating awareness of my body and B: all of my subjects were reimagined through my own lens. Scientific knowledge of the body didn't help reveal any of this, it only served as the vehicle for discovery. I did, however, manage to isolate "layers" of the self that ran parallel to layers of the body, as my project shifted from physical concepts to more metaphoric concepts. For me, the surface layer or skin of my project was its concepts and proposals. The internal, anatomical layer ended up being the paintings themselves, records of my movements and reflections of my self. Yet, at the same time, the paintings are extensions of myself.

Later in the development of my study, I began considering how other extensions of myself factor into painting and my questions for self truth: my long-time passion for interactive media, the "academic" term for video games. It has occurred to me recently that playing video games and painting have a fair bit in common. Both rely heavily on hand-eye coordination to operate, especially in skill-based games. Video games often encourage the

player to customize some sort of avatar, tempting him or her to reflect his/her ideal self. Painting has courted that struggle for self-expression for centuries, but video games allow one to simulate action and various aspects of life, such as adventure, romance, or even domestic life as that avatar. Is that avatar a truer rendering of the Self than the appearance of your actual body? To some people, yes, though it's not within my power to make that judgment on their behalf. However, that's not even the most important connection. Where video games intersect the most with painting is diverse sensory engagement. Both mediums provide tactile and visual feedback for every action to which the artist or player must respond. In the case of painting and drawing, the artist is incorporating the external world into their work, while in the case of video games the player is interacting with a completely fictitious one. Regardless, both forms provide engagement and escapism. Also, much like painting, video games encourage mastery over a variety of task and completions of various journeys and quests.

Finding truth in the body and paintings is a personal journey. While I can ask the viewer if pictures of their bones (someone else's) grant them new insight on their bodies, I can't force that impression on them. Ultimately the implications of my study gradually released themselves during the painting process instead of beginning the study with those theories. My study encouraged me to trust in the work itself to find whatever question I propose before I make something. Most importantly, it reinforced my love of painting and pleasure I get from engaging myself in it. I still wish to continue studying human anatomy in all its forms, but regardless of the subject, I will find contentment in engaging myself in the action of painting.

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