

Between the Lines

"Between the Lines" is an exploration of the many ways we can perceive the people and environs of the world around us each day. Just as light going through a prism becomes an entire spectrum, the ideas, contexts, and motivations embedded within our daily lives are always more than what they appear on the surface.

To many of us, a photograph still represents the documentation of a single moment in time- a record of something from reality that was captured by the passive tool of the camera. However, the manipulation of this documentation (whether subtle or overt) leads us to question the very basis of these perceptions, examining them more closely. By altering, adding, and combining multiple facets within the picture's surface, I attempt to describe the countless ways in which a single image can be perceived. **It is this conceptual space - that which exists between the lines of reality- I find the most interesting to explore.**

My work often takes advantage of more than one media or technique before it is completed. I do not view the formal (physical) qualities of my artwork as something separate and distinct from its conceptual qualities. Rather, the two are intertwined and compliment one another in the finished work. **The form is not simply a reflection of the concept, but an embodiment of it.** The media I use is a physical manifestation of the ideas I explore- acting as the conduit between concept and tangible reality.

Each aspect I introduce to a piece brings its own unique dialect to the creative dialogue and is inherently tied to the message intended for viewers. By combining elements that are woven into a common picture plane, I attempt to describe the multiple facets (valences, views, truths, narratives, etc..) at work simultaneously within the same image. The different ways we can view the same object, the multiple opinions regarding most issues, the varied roles we each play throughout our lives are all examples of these facets. **Like combining many different dialects into a single language, the unique ideas presented by each element interact and coalesce within the picture plane, forming a cohesive whole.** The collaborative portrait of my little sister perhaps sums this up best: "I am a student, a learner, a sister, a daughter. I am myself."

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joshua Watts". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a prominent loop at the end.

Joshua Watts, May 2011

Collaborative Portraits

This series began with the desire to find ways to increase the involvement of others in the creative process of making artwork. The individuals I worked with were not all artists- no creative talent or desire was necessary to take part in these pieces. To begin each work, an individual fills out a form that asks for basic information (name, favorite color, place of birth, etc...) This basic personal information helps to provide a starting point and context for the next section, which is where the true collaborative aspect begins to unfold:

"Please use the back of this sheet to describe yourself. You can use drawings, writing, or anything else you want. Be creative! Add pages if you need them."

Everything provided comes directly from their own original experiences and helps me find distinct ways to represent them as a unique individual. Written or drawn only by hand (sometimes even including languages that I do not understand), each person provides what they feel represents them for the world to see.

Giving the subject complete control over the content provided, I become a conduit of information, rather than a generator of meaning. Yes, I still compose the photograph and decide how to place elements provided by the subject, but the choice of what these elements are is completely out of my hands. Even during the photo sessions, I would show the results as we photographed, something I rarely do in photo shoots. By handing over control, I remove my own views and opinions from the work as much as possible, allowing the individuals featured a way to express themselves through my artwork.

Artifacts

This series began as a response to the rapidly changing physical environment of the United Arab Emirates and the remnants that are left behind as a result of this exponential development. Since arriving in Dubai, I have become accustomed to seeing an endless landscape of construction and growth in my daily life. As a result, I began to collect the materials left behind from this process- gathering objects that I would find while traveling around the landscape of Dubai and its surroundings. This exploration has continued to environments outside the UAE as well, leading to some of the more recent works.

I see these artifacts as physical records of memory- the residue left behind by the actions of people we will never know. Once collected, I integrate my own interpretation of these objects and the surroundings in which they were discovered, reacting to the information already embedded in each artifact. These found objects carry a history of actions taken by countless people and act as a starting point for the creative process. The remnants of these actions make each piece a unique record even before I begin to alter their appearance.

These remnants are records of physical action taken by unknown individuals who

have left their marks on these seemingly insignificant objects in ways that they likely never considered. The physical traces left behind are memories of past actions and serve as reminders of what we all leave behind in our daily lives.

"The Sketch Seen From Space"

The first time I ever heard about Dubai and the United Arab Emirates was from a story on the U.S. news. It featured a place in the Middle East where islands were under construction to form the shape of a palm tree, transforming what was once water into habitable earth. What fascinated me most from the news report was the origin of this massive undertaking, which had no equal on the earth and had never been attempted before: a sketch drawn by the Ruler of Dubai, H. H. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum.

I see the Palm Jumeirah as something that embodies the amazingly rapid cosmopolitan growth of Dubai to the world. Just as with the actual Palm Jumeirah, viewers can best see the overall structure of the palm installation from afar. I chose to use egg cartons not only for their physical characteristics (shape, texture, size), but also see the egg as representing a beginning, or origin, of Dubai as an international hub that is home to countless cultures, interacting on a daily basis.

To create this installation, I began by pixellating the Palm image into 10 colors that would be mixed from acrylic paint, some including sand as well. This pixellated image was then mapped onto the surface of the egg cartons, point by point. After gridding the entire image onto the cartons, the colors were then applied one at a time. Colors representing the land area of the palm were also covered in sand while wet, taken from the real Palm Jumeirah.

This project could not have been completed without the help of the following artists: Dina M. Bin Masoud, Fatma Tariq Al Qassim, Ghalia Al Aqili, Hessa Abdulaziz Abbasi, Madiya Abdulla Bin Hazaim, Mariam Almulla, Mira Mohammed Salem, Muna Mahdi Al Marashi, Noora Abdulrahman Dakhan, Sharina Bin Sulayem Alfalasi. Thank you all. Also, a very special thank you to Mohammad Imran Hussain, the Senior Manager (Sales and Marketing) of Arabian Farms Development Company, and his wonderful staff, for generously donating all of the egg cartons used in the project.

"Everyday Rituals"

This work was conceived as an exercise in daily perception, forcing me to examine moments within my day and decide what best to present to viewers. Every day, I would write a line of text describing a moment or event from the day. Then, I would mix a color for the day, using acrylic wash. This wash takes many hours to dry and was left overnight. In many ways, I see this as a self-portrait from November 21st, 2010 until the paper was finished on January 31st, 2011.

By recording a color and line of text each day, I found myself beginning to see my

surroundings differently- looking for events each day that would be a part of this daily record. When a pedestrian jumped into my driving lane on the way to work early one day, it became something unique to record, rather than an annoyance that bothered me all morning. As the piece progressed, I found myself noticing details within my daily environment that I had never paid attention to before. In many ways, this record is a reflection and result of finding new ways to see my daily activities and surroundings- looking through a new set of eyes through the creation of this work.

I do not believe that you can summarize an entire day with a single color and sentence of text. However, I do think this record can give viewers a small hint of my daily life during the dates this work was recorded, perhaps providing some context for the pieces created during and after the duration of this piece.

"Today I...

- 21.11.10 ...enjoyed the warm weather.
- 22.11.10 ...spoke to a group of young students.
- 23.11.10 ...got out of a traffic ticket after an obviously illegal turn.
- 24.11.10 ...realized that zeitgeist is always found in hindsight.
- 25.11.10 ...ditched two parties and called family back home.
- 26.11.10 ...did laundry and cleaned the flat.
- 27.11.10 ...restocked my Nag Champa supply.
- 28.11.10 ...almost hit a pedestrian on the way to work.
- 29.11.10 ...finally got back to my workout routine.
- 30.11.10 ...took a wrong turn into the desert.
- 01.12.10 ...was sick and went to recover at my pool.
- 02.12.10 ...cleaned my studio and got it into working order.
- 03.12.10 ...agreed to let someone clean my flat.
- 04.12.10 ...decided to visit the desert once a week.
- 05.12.10 ...tried to think in metrics.
- 06.12.10 ...revisited my work from Haiti.
- 07.12.10 ...let someone clean my flat.
- 08.12.10 ...saw a helicopter drop a student to university.
- 09.12.10 ...tried to describe something impossible to describe.
- 10.12.10 ...couldn't hear out of my right ear.
- 11.12.10 ...got things moving again.
- 12.12.10 ...learned a new use for olive oil.
- 13.12.10 ...was woken at 3am by a dragonfly in my studio.
- 14.12.10 ...looked for the dragonfly, but couldn't find him.
- 15.12.10 ...got a new set of ears.
- 16.12.10 ...went to the desert.
- 17.12.10 ...still haven't found the dragonfly.
- 18.12.10 ...couldn't call home.
- 19.12.10 ...freaked out the cleaner when he saw my darkroom.
- 20.12.10 ...saw my aloe start to bloom.
- 21.12.10 ...was buried in administrative life.
- 22.12.10 ...STILL haven't found the dragonfly.

23.12.10 ...found something that shouldn't have been lost.
24.12.10 ...realized my artistic toolbox is bigger than ever.
25.12.10 ...called home.
26.12.10 ...remembered how fun it is to watch paint dry.
27.12.10 ...sorted all the stuff I've been collecting.
28.12.10 ...started looking at sign language again.
29.12.10 ...saw a month's work in progress.
30.12.10 ...found the dragonfly.
31.12.10 ...spent 3 hours trying to get a taxi.
01.01.11 ...recovered.
02.01.11 ...figured out what "Tokyo Message" should say.
03.01.11 ...saw 20 students come together.
04.01.11 ...went to a different part of the desert.
05.01.11 ...sat in DEWA, filling four sketchbook pages.
06.01.11 ...experimented with the unfamiliar.
07.01.11 ...had sushi delivered to my door.
08.01.11 ...sorted the studio.
09.01.11 ...saved the contents of a friend's icebox.
10.01.11 ...looked at a cutboard in a different way.
11.01.11 ...went to the desert.
12.01.11 ...lost a few hours of my life to a movie.
13.01.11 ...started searching the neighborhood for new scrap.
14.01.11 ...continued the search for egg cartons.
15.01.11 ...watched as two cars managed to bottleneck an empty 3-lane road.
16.01.11 ...tried Lebanese potatoes.
17.01.11 ...found a new street two blocks from my place.
18.01.11 ...remembered why I moved here.
19.01.11 ...got some rain on my windshield.
20.01.11 ...went back to my old neighborhood.
21.01.11 ...got to enjoy the rain.
22.01.11 ...realized I see flamingos on the way to work every day.
23.01.11 ...saved a cashier 100 dirhams.
24.01.11 ...was given three language options to talk on the phone.
25.01.11 ...looked at work from many years ago.
26.01.11 ...had 300 egg cartons donated for a project.
27.01.11 ...talked to an old friend.
28.01.11 ...drove by a herd of camels on the way to work.
29.01.11 ...went to a new mall.
30.01.11 ...checked the temperature in 5 countries.
31.01.11 ...started packing for a short vacation.