



DEATH AND DESIRE

JOHN SLABY

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I started working on this show almost three years ago when I began *The Sign*, which was a larger version of an earlier painting. I had rarely painted so large and I so liked the results that I decided to start painting BIG, following the themes of aging and sexuality that I had explored in my last show *Inappropriate for a Public Space*. The other large still lifes followed, then the nudes. The largest, *Homage to Mishima*, may be the largest canvas ever displayed at Archway Gallery.

The large florals depict flowers in the first stages of decay. As sexual organs, they are potent metaphors for lost youth and fertility. The smaller still lifes (*The Curse*, *Death and the Maiden*) follow similar themes.

The figures offer a variety of themes: sexuality (*The Fever*), fertility (*Stonehenge*), the longing for beauty (*Homage to Mishima*), lapsarian guilt (*Adam and Eve*), illness (*The Crab*), politics (*Second Amendment*), art and beauty (*DARP*), and the peace of eternal rest (*Bosom of Abraham*). Not bad for one show, eh?

As if that wasn't enough, there's a poke at religion (*Revelation*), our image-obsessed culture (*Selfie*), the human condition (*Tourist*), and holiday disappointments (*Broken Dreams*, *Deflated*).

Please take your time to study, ponder and enjoy these works. It took me almost three years to put this show together, so please don't rush. This work means the world to me, providing meaning and purpose to my life. It is the source of my spirituality and my only hope for transcendence. Your connection to this work, your understanding, and your appreciation are vital. That's a lot to ask out of some paintings and a lot to expect from an audience. And it's not very healthy. But it's all I've got.



The Sign, I

Oil on Canvas, 48in x 60in, 2013



The Sign, II

Oil on Canvas, 48in x 60in, 2013



Narcissus

Oil on Canvas, 60in x 40in, 2013



Spent

Oil on Canvas, 48in x 36in, 2014



The Curse

Oil on Canvas, 28in x 20in, 2012



Death and the Maiden
Oil on Canvas, 30in x 24in, 2015



Homage to Mishima

Oil on Canvas, 96in x 40in, 2015



The Fever

Oil on Canvas, 30in x 50in, 2015



Stonehenge

Oil on Canvas, 30in x 60in, 2015



Adam and Eve
Oil on Canvas, 36in x 30in, 2015

The Vision

Oil on Canvas, 36in x 28in, 2015





DARP

Oil on Canvas, 72in x 48in, 2015



Bosom of Abraham

Oil on Canvas, 18in x 24in, 2015

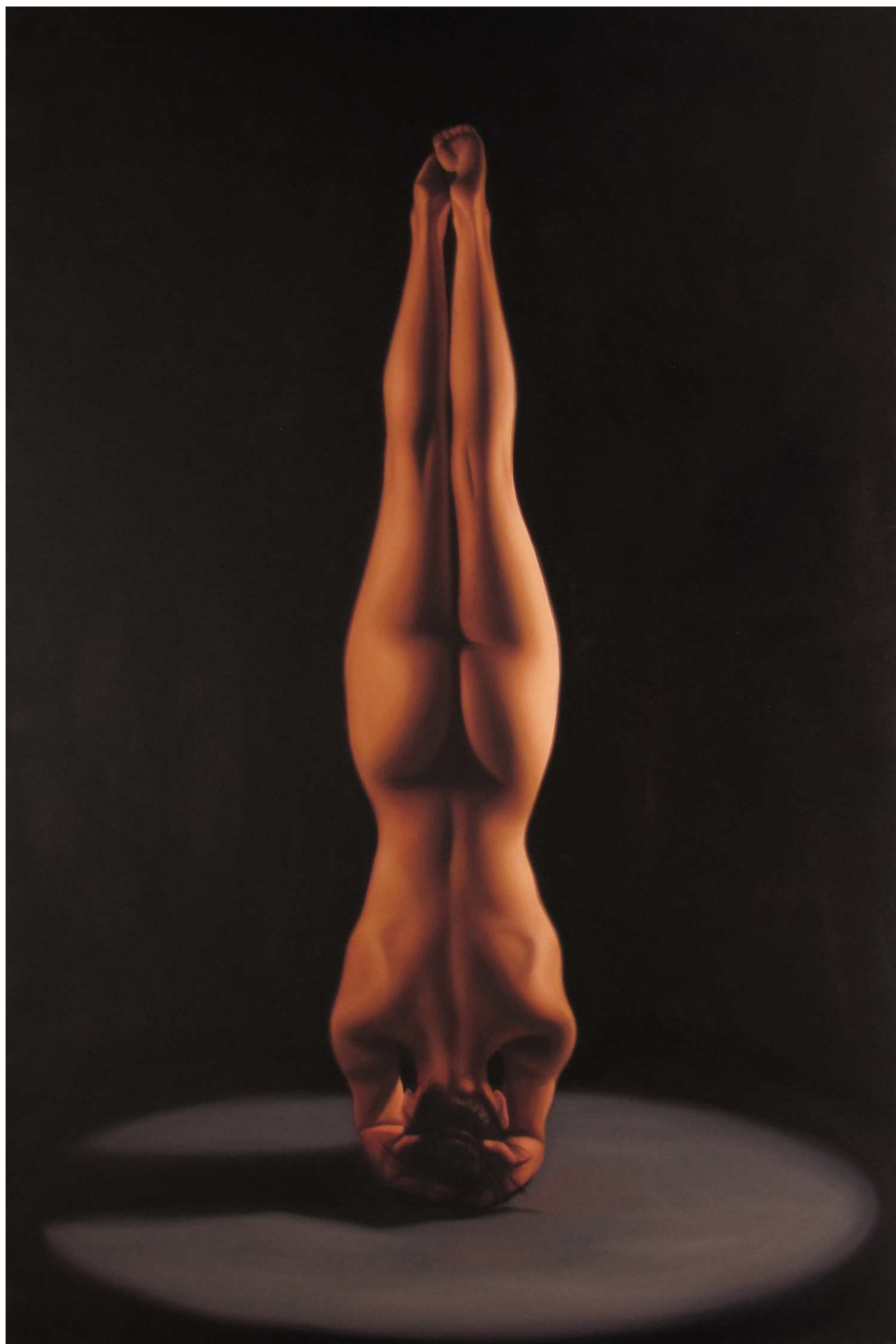


The Second Amendment
Oil on Canvas, 36in x 36in, 2015

The Crab

Oil on Canvas, 30in x 20in, 2014





Balanced

Oil on Canvas, 60in x 40in, 2015



Selfie

Oil on Canvas, 22in x 17in, 2014



Revelation

Oil on Canvas, 32in x 36in, 2014



Tourist

Oil on Canvas, 30in x 36in, 2014



Broken Dreams
Oil on Canvas, 20in x 24in, 2013



Deflated

Oil on Canvas, 16in x 24in, 2014

The Sign, I, Oil on Canvas, 48in x 60in, 2013

The image depicts a flower in the early stages of decay where one lone petal has fallen off. As with my other florals, it is a metaphor of aging. The composition is such that the flower itself is not visible and we are only left with the fallen petal in which to image the remainder of the flower and thus create our own narrative.

The Sign, II, Oil on Canvas, 48in x 60in, 2013

This is a second take on a decaying flower that has lost one petal, but in this case I show the flower in all its faded glory. The source photograph was shot with a shallow depth of field and I have captured this in the painting by making the fallen petal, the rocks and the stamen out of focus. The effect of this piece is very striking due to the size of the canvas and the high contrast between the black background and the vibrant yellow flower.

Narcissus, Oil on Canvas, 60in x 40in, 2013

In this still life, the unexplained crack in the vase has allowed the water to leak out, thus depriving the plant of its life source. The event must be recent as the flower still has its vitality and the water has not evaporated. Yet we know what the future brings and the existentialist angst it creates. I found this idea rather poignant, as if in its reflection, the flower can see its forthcoming doom.

Spent, Oil on Canvas, 48in x 36in, 2014

My wife picked these magnolia flowers from our yard and put them on the kitchen counter. In short order the pollen fell all over the black stone - as if the flower had ejaculated onto the counter (the stamen even look like sperm).

I waited some hours for the flowers to start to turn brown, catching that moment of floral middle age. In addition to the incandescent kitchen light, I used an LED from the right side which gives that beautiful blue glow to the stones in the vase.

The Curse, Oil on Canvas, 28in x 20in, 2012

We love photographs, but photographs don't love us back. They are reminders of our mortality. Without them, the aging process would not be so apparent. This lily dropped all its petals providing an even starker reminder of senescence. Its photo from better days mocks its loss of vitality and sexual energy (the flower is a sexual organ, after all). The curse here can be seen in two ways: the curse of old age itself or the curse of the photograph - the hateful reminder of lost youth and beauty.

Accepted into the Visual Arts Alliance Exhibition, Houston, TX, May, 2012 and into the Marilyn Dickey Open at the Sugar Land Art Center, Sugar Land, TX, September, 2015.

Death and the Maiden, Oil on Canvas, 30in x 24in, 2015

This piece is about *vanitas* or emptiness - a reminder of the fragility of life and the shallowness of the material world and its trappings - a subject that dates back to medieval art. Death and the maiden itself is a variation on the theme of the Dance of Death or *Danse Macabre*: that sooner or later we all will have our turn. The use of a young woman invokes an erotic element and heightens the contrast between youth, beauty and fertility and its opposite personified in the image of death as a skeleton. Me, being my irreverent self, used a Barbie doll and a toy skeleton as my models.

The further story in this piece is to note that the candle, a symbol of life and a common item in *vanitas* pieces, is covered by a glass dome. It is only a matter of time before the air is consumed and the candle is extinguished - a potent metaphor. This candle holder, which looks like it clawed its way out of the pit of hell, casts a most interesting interference pattern on the table top.

Accepted into the Marilyn Dickey Open at the Sugar Land Art Center, Sugar Land, TX, September, 2015.

Homage to Mishima, Oil on Canvas, 96in x 40in, 2015

Yukio Mishima was a Japanese novelist and author of many books, plays and short stories. This painting is inspired by his novel “The Temple of the Golden Pavilion”, which is based on a true story of a young, stuttering, acolyte who burned down the temple in 1950. When asked why he would destroy a national treasure that had survived unscathed for 500 years, he replied “Because I hate my ugly, evil, stammering self”. Mishima’s novel follows this theme of an unattractive man who is overwhelmed by the timeless beauty of the temple. This theme of physical beauty - the longing to possess it in those that do not, the curse and burden it brings to those who do - pervades many of his works. Freedom and the desire to live only come to the acolyte after the destruction of the temple.

The Fever, Oil on Canvas, 30in x 50in, 2015

This young man lies exhausted beneath three pornographic pictures centered around his head – symbolic of his sexual thoughts. The fever is sexual obsession; pornography as addiction. The title of this piece was inspired by Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s “Love in the Time of Cholera” which associated love fever with choleric fever.

Stonehenge, Oil on Canvas, 30in x 60in, 2015

This archetypical female nude seems rather innocuous at first. But upon close examination, traces of menstrual blood can be seen on the lower thigh. Like most men, I have had a lifelong repulsion to the menstrual cycle. But as my wife and I have aged and this cycle has passed out of our lives, I became aware of this other aspect of the aging process and associated the cycle with youth and fertility. As such, its passing became a cause of lament (though my wife didn’t think so).

It seems that this is not often a subject of art and that most work would rather be associated with the sensual side of the female. So I chose to do something different and bring this other side into awareness and its deeper meaning of vitality. Further, I have chosen to depict the model (appropriately, a young mother) with a rather harsh, direct stare at the viewer as if to challenge any questions or judgements; as if to say “This is who I am.”

I chose the title to evoke antiquity as well as the calendar nature of the circular stones of the famous Celtic monument.

Adam and Eve, Oil on Canvas, 36in x 30in, 2015

Adam and Eve are often depicted as standing figures, usually as they flee the Garden. In this pairing I have decided to have them instead crouch. I like the drama of these poses with hidden faces and minimalist background, which captures the mood of shame and regret associated with the Fall.

The Vision, Oil on Canvas, 36in x 28in, 2015

This piece started as a study for the larger work "Homage to Mishima" and I liked the pose so much, I made a separate canvas of it. There are a number of features that attract me to this pose: the high contrast, the modeling of the back and the shadows of the fingers on the forehead.

DARP, Oil on Canvas, 72in x 48in, 2015

Oftentimes when working with a model, there are moments of spontaneity that can lead to satisfying creations. In this instance, I was shooting pictures in Archway gallery at the end of a hall where a large black and white canvas by Donna Perkins was hanging. Her work, being based on abstractions of dancers in action, provided a perfect backdrop. So I asked the model to pose in front of the piece. I later manipulated the painting so as to frame and highlight the figure. Note the large line that begins over her head (with its touch of color at its peak), curves on the left and ends at her feet. The odd title comes from the initials of my model AR and the painter DP.

Bosom of Abraham, Oil on Canvas, 18in x 24in, 2015

Though overtly sexual at first glance, this piece is really about the desire for the nurturing comfort and safety of the feminine - a desire that manifests itself at any age; hence the choice of using a grown man. The child-like fetal position expresses both the fulfillment of this desire, his vulnerability and his connection to the inner child. I chose this title which is a Biblical reference to heaven thus associating paradise with the feminine.

Second Amendment, Oil on Canvas, 36in x 36in, 2015

Symbolic of this country's love affair with guns, this woman cradles the shotgun as though she was nursing an infant. The model chosen, AR, is a young mother and thus an ideal fit for the piece.

The Crab, Oil on Canvas, 30in x 20in, 2014

When the ancient Greeks first identified it, they called it 'the crab' because of the shape of its malignant growths. Today we call it the same in its original Greek: *Cancer*.

This work is a homage to those unfortunates who suffer from this malicious illness.

Balanced, Oil on Canvas, 60in x 40in, 2015

I have always found beauty and grace in the practice of yoga and was fortunate enough to come across a model that did serious practice. Though I shot many wonderful poses, I was drawn to this headstand due to its unusual nature: this is not painted often (and certainly not from life!).

Selfie, Oil on Canvas, 22in x 17in, 2014

This image shows me and my large landscape "Perspectives" in my studio. The mirrors and phone create an infinity of reflections, none of which shows my face. The perfect selfie.

Accepted into the Lawndale's "The Big Show", Houston, TX, July, 2014.

Revelation, Oil on Canvas, 32in x 36in, 2014

This is my interpretation of a scene from Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 10, in which Peter, while sleeping on an empty stomach, receives a vision from god showing him all the once-banned, non-Kosher foods of the world that he could now eat. It is this episode that allowed Christians to abandon the strict Jewish diet and thus increase the appeal of Christianity. (Dropping circumcision was another big boost.) But when I read this story the first thought that came to my mind was "Bacon cheeseburger!" which is as non-Kosher as you can get.

Accepted into the Assistance League of Houston Exhibition, Houston, TX, February, 2015.

Tourist, Oil on Canvas, 30in x 36in, 2014

I based this painting on a photo I shot in India over twenty years ago. This photo has haunted me for those many years and I have painted this image twice before. I was appalled at the level of poverty and hopelessness which characterized the lives of so many people in that country. I had never experienced anything like it and can only hope that the problem has improved with the passing of time. As I photographed this family at the well, they took notice of me, which is why they look out from the painting. There is a certain accusation in their look (or I project that it is there) which provokes shame - the invasion of their privacy, the callousness of the tourist, and the discrepancy in our economic status brought about by the sheer luck of the place of my birth. How easy that our situations could have been reversed.

Accepted into the Visual Arts Alliance Exhibition, Houston, TX, March, 2015 and the Marilyn Dickey Open at the Sugar Land Art Center, September, 2015.

Broken Dreams, Oil on Canvas, 20in x 24in, 2013

This started as a light-hearted piece depicting a broken ornament as symbolic of holiday disappointments. Then I noticed that my studio and I were reflected inside the broken ornament...and that it mirrored the reality of my life.

Accepted into the Visual Arts Alliance Exhibition, Houston, TX October, 2013 and the Assistance League of Houston Exhibition, Houston, TX, February, 2014.

Deflated, Oil on Canvas, 16in x 24in, 2014

A piece on holiday (and life) disappointments. These inflatable holiday figures look good at night, but during the day they are lifeless relics of their nighttime selves. That's an undersized self-portrait on the right. I'll leave it to you to find the deeper meaning.

First Place winner at the Visual Arts Alliance Exhibition, Houston, TX, October, 2014.

The logo features a stylized, elegant arch that starts on the left, curves over the word "Archway", and ends on the right. The arch is composed of two thin, dark lines.

Archway Gallery

December 5, 2015 - January 7, 2016

On the Cover:

Blurry Self-Portrait

Oil on Canvas, 18in x 24in, 2015

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