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COLLEGE OF VISUAL ARTS THEATRE AND DANCE

I GREW UP IN SOMEONE ELSE'S LIVING ROOM

A Reflection of Narcissus In Our TV Screens

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I didn't grow up in a hometown. Perhaps like a lot of people, my childhood was a nomadic one due to my parent's careers in the Navy. Every few years we packed up our lives and moved, and like most families we watched TV together every night, it was a rare constant in our sea of change. Though my living room changed, the Roseanne and Dan Conner never moved, Steve Urkel was always welcome though no one wanted him, and once a week Uncle Phil always had his heart-to-heart with Will. The countless hours I spent watching someone else's family has undoubtedly informed my perspective on a nomadic childhood, a fascination with suburbia, and television's affect on home life. The influence of prime time on me is as broad as my artistic vision, but I have chosen one show and one set in particular on which to focus. It wasn't until two years ago that I watched all nine seasons of Roseanne, and by the end I was wondering what I had missed all those years. I condensed nine years of the Conner's lives into six months of my own; I became emotionally invested in strangers. It struck me that I spent my time watching a reflection. It wasn't a mirror, but a faint reflection of the ups and downs and "I don't know's" of family life. Roseanne and Full House and Family Matters and Home Improvement were all reflections of reality lit by familiarity. As a painter I have always used media as a source image to create a faint reflection of something recognizable. Though recognizable, it is still only the illusion of something we understand, like me in my living room, and they in theirs. Narcissus wasn't in love with his own reflection because he lost his identity after being cursed; he fell in love with someone he didn't even recognize. As families, looking for escape or a way to deal with our own dynamics, we are doing the opposite of Narcissus; we're watching our own reflection and calling it something else. This fascination has led me to paint an image of the underside of Narcissus's' water, that nanometer of light floating just behind the glass of the TV screen, the place I grew up in, someone else's living room.

Suburbia is the backbone of the middle class identity. It was invented in the 1950's as a way to move rural populations closer to the cities, and further industrialize and modernize our culture. A migration on this scale created an entirely new group of people after the Depression and WWII: the middle class. The majority of people in the mid 20th century lived in the suburbs and worked in the cities in the booming post war industries. Throughout the later half of the century the numbers grew, and the zeitgeist was focused on this phenomenon. Capitalism, the Cold War, and consumerism all fed this idea of the nuclear family. The advent of TV showcased an hour of news, and the rest of the night the networks made shows that catered to the American Dream. The breadwinning father, the nurturing mother, the rambunctious son, and the obedient daughter, all nestled in a cozy house behind a white picket fence. Generation after Generation was given this image of American values as a welcoming gift upon birth. The shows and the families changed from the 50s to the 90s, but the same basic archetypes are carried through. Because we have been shown this family standard, we all fulfill our obligation by striving to enact it. That led to tensions in all layers of our society, the Vietnam War, Nixon's shame, the recession in the 70s, Reaganomics, and the climbing rate of debt and divorce in the 80s. All of this set the stage for one of the most realistic TV families to challenge our notions of family life.

The Roseanne living room is an iconic one [fig 1.]; it is hardly ever clean and never changed much because it reflected a real middle class family. It always baffled me when a show would "upgrade" the sets after a few season because ratings were good. How could a family actually completely reconstruct a room in their house every year? Those tropes were never used in Roseanne, so the same blanket that graced the back of the couch became just as much a character as the cast. The set never changed and gave the show authenticity. It is a very recognizable living room because it looks like yours, or mine. It was messy; it had details that might seem innocuous but mean a lot to the family, like the Godzilla figurine on the mantelpiece. The detail that was put into the space, and the genuineness it offered were unprecedented in TV history. When I explain my project to people, there seems to be a certain play-on-words when describing a "living room painting", as that often brings to mind wispy Lee

Reynolds works that only subtly coloring a room, a painting that no one considers “fine art”. I believe these are the reasons I am drawn to the image of Roseanne’s set, it was a work of art in its own right, an interpretation or amalgam of real life experience from a production of people coming together to make this believable installation. I want to explore the room brought to life in Roseanne as a study, and with my own experiences in life, look through the living rooms I’ve had at the Conner’s household.

There is something fascinating about reimagining modern technology, like the TV, as something ancient and established like oil painting. It removes the practicality and mass-appeal of program broadcasting and puts an intimate setting, like the living room, into a cold and sterile environment, like a gallery. What good does it do to capture one frame of hundreds of thousands? When the motion and time based narrative is taken away from a show that ran for 9 seasons, and edited to one image of a room, can one still be affected by it? A single painting inspired this thought, Action Painting II by Mark Tansey [fig. 1]; it is of a group of landscape painters set up near the NASA countdown clock at Cape Canaveral. A Space Shuttle has just lifted off and the huge plume of smoke falls beneath it. At first glance the painting is straight forward, but as the viewer looks at the artists’ canvases, they are all at the same level of completion. It takes only seconds for the Space Shuttle to careen far beyond our sight, yet these painters have already captured the split second moment in oil (one artist even has time to step back and observe his work). The subtle absurdity of this image is exactly how I feel about the relationship of TV and fine art. How could anyone extract and explain one split second from a lifetime of a show? This brought me to the third dimension of the piece.

I want the viewer to see the role of the living room as I see it. Roseanne’s den was on the air from 1987 to 1999, which were the 11 years of my life. In those eleven years, I lived in 5 different living rooms. When the TV turns off, we are left staring at a dull gray reflection of us in our home. I want to re-create the illusion of that reflection, however I don’t want it to be a passive aspect of the piece, I want it to be interactive and assertive. I have etched into plexiglass simple line and value sketches of each living room I lived in while Roseanne was on the air, they will be suspended in front of the painting, and the viewer can move around them, looking through one or all of the them [fig. 3]. This is a way for the audience to not only see a two dimensional painting in three dimensions, it will allow one to pick and choose how the painting is experienced; as a painting on a wall, or as a backdrop to an ethereal exploration of the stuff of memory.

The comfort and familiarity of the couch-and-recliner set up is universal in American culture, I can’t think of a house I’ve visited where the set up didn’t resemble that (even at bare minimum). When we moved into a new apartment, we never felt settled until the living room was complete; our emphasis is always put on that one room, perhaps because it is the common area where all share the space. Bedrooms are very personal and often times closed off, bathrooms and kitchens have very specific purposes and histories, but the living room is the only space that belongs to everyone. I’ve never been able to tell someone to leave the living room, and if someone is watching TV, I wait until they are done to change the channel. Nowhere else in the house do we behave like this. Even the unruly Conner family obeys these unspoken rules though sometimes the children fight over the remote, when a parent comes in it is forfeited in cooperation. All of this goes to show the power, energy, and significance one room can have on a family, and that the structure of the space is ubiquitous from my living room to yours to fake TV living rooms.

Narcissus could not be torn away from the reflection in the lake, no matter what distractions were made by lovers. He simply lay on the bank of the water, slowly wasting away, longing for someone intangible. Narcissus is derived from the Greek word for sleep, or numbness. He was captivated by his own reflection in the lake, and to continue the parallel; if we are all Narcissus the TV must be our lake. The function of a living room is for rest, comfort, and escape from the real world. We all strive to be numb come prime time: sports, sitcoms, crime dramas, etc. Hardly anything can distract us, not even commercials; we invented TV trays for dinner. We stare into our glowing lake until we can no longer stay awake, wasting away until bed.

Our world's obsession with TV is permeating every aspect of our lives. We are constantly surrounded by imagery and advertisement, branding and marketing, subtle and obvious manipulation. At the advent of TV what seemed like a way to influence our society for the better has turned into an Orwellian dystopia disguised in a keeping-up-appearances parade of falseness. From my observations we are all very happy to go along with it, though. Our culture thrives on make believe, even when the lie is staring us in the face, think of the money we spend to visit Disney World. What is fake is real as long as we wish to cooperate, this is why art is such a powerful force, and painting especially. We revere the ability of an artist to trick our brains into thinking 3d space can be achieved on a 2d plane, and for thousands of years theatre and drama have kept us completely entertained. There is a Meta aspect to painting a living room from a TV show like Roseanne. Behind most of the walls and doors is a controlled sound stage, above the ceiling molding is a bank of thousand watt lights, just past the window is a painting of "outside". Does the fact that there is no wall behind the TV matter? The living room is just a set; a reflection of something that we all know exists in reality. Even though the walls are hollow and the stairs lead nowhere, the performances that happened within that space made it real. We as an audience know that at the end of the episode, Roseanne Barr and John Goodman go home to their own families and live in their own homes, but when the TV is flickering and we are captivated by it, nothing of reality exists. Like Narcissus, we can only stare at a faint reflection of ourselves and we long to be a part of its realm.

I have experienced several living rooms growing up. Though the house and the state and the country may have changed, the feeling didn't. I spent time with my family in this room. We came together for holidays, dinners, and especially TV. I grew up watching family sitcoms like Home Improvement, Third Rock From The Sun, and Family Matters. Over the years TV has grown to more closely represent the real middle class in America, shows like Modern Family and Raising Hope show a realistic, albeit campy, family dynamic. Though none of what we have now would have been possible without the groundbreaking reality of Roseanne. That show scraped off the sugar coating other network shows caked on, the characters and situations were raw, though incredibly entertaining. The show ran for nine years, and during that time I moved five times, never really getting settled in one place. The one constant I shared with shows like Roseanne was the living room; the communal altar of any home. I began researching the role of living rooms, and how I could contextualize it through art. I painted an image of Roseanne's empty living room as the audience recognizes it, and by committing the transparent image to permanent oil and panel I have obliterated the usefulness and mass-reach a TV show has. I made this one frame special by making it the only one in existence, as is the fate of most living rooms. The compound my own personal journey through my different homes, I have layered translucent "screens" with line drawings of the five living rooms I have occupied. The viewer can pick and choose his or her way of seeing the painting as I have had the ability to do.

Narcissus became the perfect frame of understanding for the ephemeral qualities of America's relationship with TV. Narcissus was cursed to be obsessed with his own reflection, at the cost of losing his identity and self-awareness. He wasn't necessarily in love with himself; he was in love with a complete stranger in the lake. Just as we are in love with complete strangers in our TV, though they are us and we'll never know or admit it. Narcissus and the TV audience have become numb to everything but their respective reflections, and that obsession will never fade until we waste away. The unacknowledged character in both of our narratives is the lake, or TV. Many might think it's just a body of water, it couldn't do anything wrong, when in fact it was the catalyst for Narcissus' downfall, it reflected back to him his visage and never stopped. Similarly the TV is always available and ever expanding in our homes. Consider the two realities, balanced by the fulcrum of that razor thin reflection, Narcissus and the stranger in the water; the family at home and the family on TV. The back of my set is the front of theirs. Narcissus has known for eternity that we watch 'them' and they'll never know we exist.

The ever-changing performance our TV culture enacts influences our own performances at home, and those performances at home influence the performances on TV. The never-ending cycle of 'self representing self' is why I want to halt the process and take my time to slowly make a work of art that has no other purpose than existing.

Figure 1



Figure 2



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