The Company We Keep: An MFA thesis Exhibition

James Clay Michael Palmer

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd/2179

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by University of Memphis Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of Memphis Digital Commons. For more information, please contact khggerty@memphis.edu.
THE COMPANY WE KEEP

by

James Clay Michael Palmer

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Painting

The University of Memphis

May 2021
The work in *The Company We Keep* is a series of paintings and drawings that examines the ideological, economic, and socio-political complexities of contemporary Southern life through interior genre scenes. The anxiety of living in a period of history that harkens back to the post-Civil War South that continues to be ravaged by violence and strife is evident within the densely packed compositions. The instability of these domestic interior spaces reflects the interiority of the body in a state of panic. Items that serve as signs and symbols of poverty and wealth are placed near each other to bring attention to the White Southern middle-class families that exist in a state of constant flux between these two poles.

The turmoil and frustration of living within this context is further expressed through the manipulation of the forms that construct figures and interiors in a jarring, dramatic manner that takes influence from the social caricature of postwar German expressionism. The twisting and turning of furniture such as the kitchen table, a traditional gathering place for White Southern families where ideas and values are exchanged, becomes a barrier that serpentines through the composition, keeping objects of sustenance and inequity just within or out of reach.

Many of the works bear close compositional relationships to merry company paintings, a subset of Dutch genre paintings from the 17th century that contained clear moralistic messages regarding excessive lifestyles. The use of classic tropes involving mirrors and characters that acknowledge the viewer blur the lines between spectator and participant, leading the viewer to question to what extent and by what parameters they participate in the othering of individuals based on social, economic, and physical characteristics.

The evolution of this work originated in early paintings regarding my beliefs as one of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Themes such as persecution and faith were examined, but on a much
broader global scale. Over time, the work became increasingly more personal and began to address personal life and experiences: moments of persecution, memories, and narratives relating directly to a Southern upbringing.

Growing up as one of Jehovah’s Witnesses in a primarily Baptist and Church of Christ community, there were always instances of intolerance and bullying within the social environment. These moments and memories are permeated by feelings of anxiety, as intolerance was exhibited among extended family members. Large family and community gatherings became sources of dread because of clashing beliefs, leaving me and members of my household feeling isolated, and as targets for ridicule and derision. Observing both my own feelings, as well as the feelings of others in my household, led me to realize that even individuals considered part of the dominant culture of a particular place can fall victim to the machinations of supremacist ideals if their ways of conducting life fall outside of the accepted norm. These observations lead to feelings of distrust, dread, and anxiety in myself towards my own family.

This sense of dread or anxiety is what lead to theoretical explorations into Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Anxiety is presented based on Heidegger’s concept of Dasein or being-in-the-world and his notion that the anxiety that finds itself central to being is situated in nothingness. Within nothingness, there is angst for freedom, and pleasure in finding freedom, while one is being-with-others. The concept of nothingness is represented through the presence of human figures that are committing everyday actions of existence such as eating, drinking, and interacting with other figures such as those in the painting *Sweet Tea Inheritance* (Figure 1). According to Heidegger, “The kind of Being which belongs to Dasein is rather such that, in understanding its own Being, it has a tendency to do so in terms of that entity towards which it
comports itself proximally and in a way which is essentially constant – in terms of the ‘world’.

These figures express their existence, or being, through the interaction with other figures and objects outside of themselves, and with the viewer.

Anxiety comes about through suspension, or freezing, of a moment in time within the work. Heidegger’s understanding of anxiety is that of the moment between the will, or the acting out on our basic survival drive, and the reprieve from acting out on that will. The act of suspending an event at a point where all activity is paused directly before its climax solidifies the highest level of tension possible within the work, and therefore the pivotal moment between anxiety and relief.

It is worth noting that Heidegger mentions that anxiety regarding being does not manifest itself during cataclysmic events of historical import, but instead arrives during moments of banality. Moments of banality that are direct fulfillments of the will, or drive for existence and survival, would be acts such as eating, drinking, and sleeping. It is within these moments that anxiety is at its highest point because the being’s duty of care is not focused upon a singular object that denotes fear, but towards the enacting of the will, the drive to survive.

Research into paintings that depict banal, everyday actions led to further study of Dutch still life, which served as the objects upon which these performative acts of the will take place. These still lives, which often included food and drinking vessels, could serve not only as items upon which the will of the characters could be enacted, but also as indicators of the figure’s social and economic status. Historically, the importance of the relationship between food and economic influences is present within the works of ontbijtjes (lit.”breakfasts”), also known as Dutch laid table paintings, made by prominent painters of the 17th century such as Pieter Claesz and Jan Davidszoon de Heem.

---

These paintings, usually depicting substantial amounts of food and ornate drinking vessels, were “a display of culinary luxuries...linked to religious ideas and symbols which were diametrically opposed to such abundance.”\(^2\) In the works of *The Company We Keep*, the relationship between the amount of food present on the table and the types of food within these groupings is skewed. Foods and objects that are symbolic of poverty such as canned vegetables, Vienna sausages, and tuna fish are piled underneath a direct overhead light. This contradiction of the massing of objects with their obvious nutritional lack breaks down our understanding of the concepts of plenty as well as makes a commentary upon the mindset of what it means to provide what is considered enough for the family.

Other objects make their appearance within the works of *The Company We Keep* due to their relationship with my heritage. Descended from a lengthy line of farmers, hunters, and beverage factory workers, personal upbringing is referenced with the inclusion of objects that relate directly to these occupations. Bottles of beer and soda, butchered meats, and fresh vegetables all stem directly from memories of childhood while gathered at the family’s table. These objects serve as signifiers for solid, memorable ideas of home and comfort while also indicating the presence of an economic framework that causes cheap foods like these to be present.

Further research into Dutch still life eventually led to interest into merry company paintings of the 17\(^{\text{th}}\) century, in which groups of figures are depicted enjoying food and wine to make moral commentary upon excessive lifestyles. Works such as Jan Steen’s *The Dissolute Household* (Fig. 2) serve as an image suspended in time just as the family unit has been launched into disarray. The composition also serves as a historical counterpart to the idea of suspension and stretching of a moment in time, denoted by the stopping of pouring water as it is falling from

the pitcher in the figure’s hand furthest to the right of the composition. Many of the works in *The Company We Keep* have moments of spilling, either of liquids from glasses or objects falling from the table, such as the orange glass, crackers, and plate in *You’re No Fly on the Wall* (Fig. 3), or the plates in *The Oyster Eaters* (Fig. 4).

*The Oyster Eaters* is also one of the paintings in the series that tackles morally corrupt social and political figures through the concept of banality. This painting satirizes film mogul Harvey Weinstein and actor Bill Cosby using caricature to ridicule them for their years of sexual assault and rape convictions. *The Oyster Eaters* also references Jan Steen’s *The Oyster Eater*, or *Girl Offering Oysters* (Fig. 5) in which the serving of oysters at a table is often utilized as a motif of lust. Rather than utilizing a female figure as the object of said lust, *The Oyster Eaters* instead flips the gender dynamic to focus on the perpetrators of harm, incriminating them for their disgusting actions. Both figures have turned towards the viewer in surprise, their evil deeds now discovered and brought to light by the viewer’s presence.

The work of German expressionist George Grosz informed many of the formal and composition choices in *The Company We Keep*. His biting caricature of corrupt social and political figures during post-World War I Germany became an inspiration for the artist’s critique of Southern social and political figures of the post-Civil War era. His painting *Eclipse of the Sun* (Fig. 6) utilizes Cubist formal language through the breaking up of interior spaces to create a jarring, disjointed environment in which his figures carry out their conspiring at an unassuming table, a choice that comments on the banality of the act of war for the country’s leaders.

The painting *Old Bed* (Fig. 7), and its literal depiction of nightmarish torment of Civil War General Nathan Bedford Forrest relates closely to Grosz’s painting *The Rabble Rouser* (Fig. 8), in which he brutally eviscerates the figure of Adolf Hitler through caricature and lampooning.
The figure of Nathan Bedford Forrest is a character that is widely argued in the American South, seen as a hero to Confederate sympathizers and a villain to those who fight for racial justice. Nicknamed Old Bed, Forrest serves as an undulating platform upon which tiny figures carry out acts of violence and discourse upon in a scene reminiscent of *Gulliver’s Travels*.

Consideration of the environment plays a key role in the work of *The Company We Keep*. Rather than pinpointing the still life constructions or the figures solely as the focus of the compositions, the inclusion of the environments surrounding them further contextualize personal experience within a larger historical and philosophical frame of reference. The introduction of contiguity between architectural elements that are from different periods of history and economic spheres collapses linear definitions of time within the artwork.

For example, in the ink drawing *Their Divided Attentions* (Fig. 9), the presence of an ornate tin ceiling commonly seen in mid- to late-19th century buildings are contrasted against meager furnishings, torn tablecloths, and a cubistically rendered modern television set. This choice sets the work apart from mere illustration or documentation, and instead creates a stage upon which different areas of history, and therefore time, converge. This convergence of time creates within these works a certain state of existence, or being, that allows the images to refuse the static quality prescribed to many two-dimensional images. The use of architecture and objects from previous points in history covers the aspect of the past within our understanding of time.

The present is also established in some instances in the work through the utilization of the chronotope. A chronotope is a literary device used to establish time and space relationships within a work of narrative literature. Within visual languages, like that within the work of *The Company We Keep*, time and space relationships are established using images, in this case depictions of mirrors and reflective surfaces, that exist within the compositions. Due to the time-
bending nature of the work, and the way it references multiple periods of history, it is necessary for many of the paintings and drawings to establish spatial relationships to the viewer and to involve them directly in the narrative of the work. This involvement is necessary to establish that the narratives of the paintings exist in the here-and-now and are activated through the viewer assuming the role of observer.

The forcing of the viewer to become self-aware of their assumption of said role bears a direct relationship to Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* or Being-in-the-world. “This state of Being does not arise just because some other entity is present-at-hand outside of Dasein and meets up with it…the priority belongs to Being-in-the-world as concern.” The viewer becomes involved and invested in the work not only due to their acknowledging of their presence within the work, but the concern over the ambiguity of said role.

Ambiguity over the role of the viewer is established within the individual narrative of the paintings and drawings at hand. For instance, the painting *You’re No Fly on the Wall* contains four figures seated around a table including a large, overbearing male figure in military garb, a small male child, a woman dressed in Reconstruction era clothing, and a squid-like specter whose overall shape is suggestive of a figure in the Ku Klux Klan garb of a white robe and hood. The fifth figure, or the implication of a fifth figure, is a silhouette present within the mirror that the military figure is holding that faces the viewer.

The viewpoint of this silhouette is the role that the viewer takes when addressing the canvas. It is important that the character and physical attributes of this being is unknown to us through visual descriptors, this allows instead for the person to elucidate on their own self-consciousness as they partake in this role. The viewer *brings what they have with them* in the sense that they

---

approach the role with their own sets of experiences and values in relation to the other figures that occupy the picture plane. What the viewer brings with them is what Heidegger refers to as *foremeanings*. The viewer’s reaction is entirely dependent upon themselves, and thus creates a moment of meditation where the viewer can self-examine their own inherent value systems in relation to the characters present within the work. For example, a white Southern male who harbors some type of Confederate-minded sympathies might approach the figure of the Klan member in *You’re No Fly on the Wall* with a sense of familiarity of the image (especially in its cartoonlike, humorous rendering) while at the same time have feelings bordering on objection at the direct stare of the figure and its grotesquely rendered teeth.

The same might be said for the figure wearing the tin can hat towards the top right corner of the picture plane in *Sweet Tea Inheritance* (Fig. 1). This figure is based loosely on caricatures for vagabonds, which usually consisted of a decrepit, poor individual wearing a worn-out top hat and dingy clothing. A viewer of some monetary means might approach said figure with initial thoughts of derision, only to find some sense of empathy through the characters humorous ventures and pursuit of his basic needs.

Contemporary painters such as Nicole Eisenman have attempted an outside approach to embodying examples of the Southern experience of poverty and politics that conflict with her own worldview in works like *Dark Light* (Fig. 10) and *The Triumph of Poverty* (Fig.11). In *Dark Light*, a figure dressed in a camouflage shirt and red ball cap stands above three sleeping figures in the back of a pickup truck. This figure holds a flashlight that emits dark blue light, while an exhaust pipe behind them spews thick black smoke.

While this image is certainly pertinent to depicting a certain political ideology in the South, it fails to fully encapsulate the intricacies of living in the region. Rather, *Dark Light* instead
focuses on a small aspect of being from the South. While Eisenman can give a small glimpse into a particular moment in Southern political space, she is unable to give indicators as to the causality as to why this political ideology has manifested itself.

*The Triumph of Poverty* is slightly more successful in giving background regarding the backwardness that most outsiders identify with the South. The grouping of figures forming a caravan or escort around a rusted car all embody the various faces that poverty in the region can have. However, the stagnancy of the figures, and their lack of action within the work, leaves much to be desired in depicting their will to survive and the lengths that they will go to make ends meet.

The future of my work will focus on continuing to shed light on the intricacies of the lives of middle- and lower-class people in the South. While caricatures are useful, particular care will be taken not to be completely reductive when it comes to depicting these figures who have redeeming qualities and the capacity for change.

The mingling of these characters creates a further sense of tension and ambiguity within the work. Characters that deserve clear consequences for their repulsive actions are coexisting with figures that are less likely to be labeled as such. The result is that the viewer is placed in a state of dissonance that is reflective of a personal narrative regarding the complexities of being part of a White Southern household. Questions of how a person would navigate moments of familial affection among characters of varying levels of moral haze arrive for the viewer, leaving them in a state of doubt and mistrust, triggering the effects of anxiety mentioned earlier.

There are no clear answers to the questions that these situations pose, and this is the thrust of the work in *The Company We Keep*. Paintings and drawings that operate within a space of interpretational obscurity make for interesting studio work. A sense of pleasure and rest is
arrived at through the reprieve of artistic production, allowing me the chance to reach a point of clarity regarding the complexities of my upbringing and the society in which I live. Placing the viewer in situations where their judgement is not clearly defined, and a stance is not immediately taken, can lead to making paintings that can be reapproached in a different manner upon every visit. The lasting effects of self-reflection can leave a viewer changed and allow them to find moments of meditation about their feelings of those in the world around them, particularly in the American South, and how one exists in being-with-others.
Works Cited


Figure 1. Clay Palmer, *Sweet Tea Inheritance*, oil on canvas, 36” x 60”, 2021.
Figure 2. Jan Steen, *The Dissolute Household*, oil on canvas, 42.5” x 35.5”, 1663-64.
Figure 3. Clay Palmer, *You’re No Fly on the Wall*, oil on canvas, 41” x 44”, 2021.
Figure 4. Clay Palmer, *The Oyster Eaters*, oil on canvas, 40” x 30”, 2020.
Figure 5. Jan Steen, *The Oyster Eater or Girl Offering Oysters*, oil on panel, 15.1 cm x 20.4 cm, 1658-1660.
Figure 6. George Grosz, *Eclipse of the Sun*, oil on canvas, 81 5/8” x 71 7/8”, 1926.
Figure 7. Clay Palmer, *Old Bed*, oil on canvas, 72” x 72”, 2021.
Figure 8. George Grosz, *The Rabble Rouser*, oil on canvas, 1928.
Figure 9. Clay Palmer, *Their Divided Attentions*, ink on paper, 11” x 14”, 2020.
Figure 10. Nicole Eisenman, *Dark Light*, oil on canvas, 128” x 104”, 2017.
Figure 11. Nicole Eisenman, *The Triumph of Poverty*, oil on canvas, 65” x 82”, 2009.