RECONSTRUCTING STRATA LINES OF REALITY
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This problem in lieu of thesis centers around my work and involves the production of the film trilogy *Knife, Fork and Spoon*. The methodology for this project comes from my investigation of postmodernist theory and social norms. Three problems are addressed and my professional procedures and practices that helped me find solutions while working on these films are included in chapter two.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For me, Art is a filter and a way to tell stories. Time, space, humans and their lives are all parts of a whole, a whole thought and a whole story. No event, no thought and no life is an island unto itself. Something someone did 4,000 years ago allowed me to be where I am now. Art is a filter for my thoughts, my ideas and ideals and is also a voice and a language that allows me to tell stories. Working in both film and traditional two-dimensional ink on paper multi-panel drawings allows me to produce a notion or notions in a linear narrative format. Richard Avedon put a wonderful spin on Art; “All my photographs are accurate, none of them are the truth.” My goal as an artist is to filter my life and my views and attempt to tell stories.

Sometimes this goal is achieved by working in collaboration with another artist. Several of my previous works, on film and in other mediums, have come about in collaboration with other artists. I have found that most of these pieces did not start out as purely an idea to work with someone but out of brainstorming and allowing thoughts, ideas and strands of perceived reality to occur between myself and these artists. This adds to the exhilarating essence of working in collaboration with someone. I am most attracted to this process because of the nature of my life to this point. I was born into an extremely affluent family, but we lost it all when I was very young. My family owned a large commercial produce company based out of Ft. Worth and after my grandfather died
we were ravaged by “managers” who took almost every dime connected to our business. The business ended up in total bankruptcy and we ended up below the poverty line. This was just the beginning of my keeping my feet in several worlds. I have been, in order a: paper boy, construction worker (in Texas this is brutal), mechanic, pot washer at a cafeteria (brutal anywhere), studio musician, opera singer, singer, music teacher, disk jockey at a topless bar, photographer, movie critic, salesman, three dimensional computer artist, film maker and teacher. All these varied jobs and varied lifestyles have allowed and allow me to see things from more than one point of perspective. In essence I feel like I often work in collaboration with myself, so working with another is easy as cake and very, very comfortable to me. I have been working for several years in collaboration with a few artists on video works. The latest film is also in collaboration with another artist and will attempt to tell a story/stories about thought processes, lines of reality and a journey through self acknowledgment and understanding.

*Knife, Fork and Spoon* is a trilogy of animations and live video that tells a story in a traditional musical sonata allegro ABA form. I chose this musical format for my visuals and the structure of the entire piece because the story lines and subjects are initially and intentionally hard to grasp and I feel that this format allows the viewer to hold onto the divergent story and visual statement lines and visual motifs. The visuals and overall vision and tenor of the trilogy are a product of my two-dimensional work. My intention was to show divergent stories lines, points of view, themes and in the end an overall feeling that what is to one is also to all. All three stories were produced in collaboration with a fellow artist, writer and close friend Brad Benefield. The first, *Just This Side...*,
tells a story of a person who comes to realize where he or she is in a particular spot in the
world and does not like who he or she has become. The visuals are of a small Japanese
girl in a 19th century fishing village. The audio narration is a story of a young man who
is tired of working in a factory and has become disillusioned. This person then begins to
seek answers. The second piece, FeS2, deals with the journey or development of new,
but linked to Just This Side..., characters. FeS2 introduces versions of the characters
from first movie in an effort to show an attempt to reveal the inner special qualities of a
person/persons character and at the same time the mundane aspects of life. The last part
of the trilogy, 5 cents, deals with themes introduced in parts A and B but restates them in
new ways. This third piece is not included in my problem in lieu of thesis because it is
not a part of my MFA exhibition.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The focus of this problem was the completion of the first two parts of the film
trilogy, Knife, Fork and Spoon, which is a culmination of events in my life, my vision,
my skills, the enjoyment of the medium and the exhilaration of working with another
artist. These pieces attempt to tell a story in progress that deals with elements of time,
space, humans and their lives. Each part of the trilogy must work independently as well
as together in a whole unit. I attempted to link and solidify the pieces into a whole work
through the use of common frame structures, color palettes, music and symbolism. There
were some major questions that were dealt with:

1. How can the different films remain separate and still be woven into a single
work?
2. How can I represent a divergence and convergence of themes and their elements, both visual and aural?

2. How can I filter my work and merge it in collaboration with another artist into a cohesive work while keeping my own vision for the pieces and artistic identity pure?

METHODOLOGY

The exhibition consists of two-dimensional work and several films including *Knife, Fork and Spoon*. The first of this trilogy, *Just This Side...*, was completely created on the computer using three-dimensional software. The second part jumped into live action film-making. All film work was done in 3DSMAX, Maya, Animator Studio Pro, DeBabelizer, Aftereffects, Cakewalk and Soundforge. I built a high end computer system to produce the visuals. I set up a studio for the purpose of doing the music and voice overs. I also kept a journal to record my day to day working processes and story boards to document and kept track of ideas and both technical and artistic problems. *Knife, Fork and Spoon* and the other video pieces will be shown on traditional monitors.
CHAPTER 2

PROBLEMS

*Just This Side*... began as an idea for a children's book back in 1993. I wanted to tell a story about a little girl in Japan who loves and cares for a very special flower that symbolized for me the deepest and purest layer of the character’s self. I could see her, Mitsui, in my mind as both two dimensional drawings and as a three-dimensional being. In my mind she walked like a steam engine through a nineteenth century Japanese fishing village with all manner of people trying to distract her. I knew I wanted her to walk purposefully to her goal. Eventually, I saw her completing her journey down by the edge of a vast lake to give her flower a drink, turn, and return to her house. On a side note I think this idea was some how born from George Bailey’s little girl wanting to give her flower a drink in Frank Capra’s *It's a Wonderful Life*. By 1995 I could only see Mitsui in three dimensional space and I thought that I might do something with her in the computer animation program 3D Studio Max. This program, in 1995, was hard to use and time consuming, so I put the project aside until 1999. In 1999 3D Studio Max was still unwieldy and I thought I might attempt to complete the animation as a stop-motion claymation.

I had no real idea about the story, just a drive to complete this little one’s story of determination. The small amount of the story I did know I wanted was about a person, any person, moving through life without the mundane petty concerns that I believe consumes the everyday life of most people. I wanted to show the universality of these
mundane endeavors and concerns, this I knew for a fact. I thought that this might be achieved by use of the imagery of a young Asian girl, Mitsui, moving through time with a decidedly Caucasian male story and vocal narration. In mid 1999 a new version of 3D Studio Max came out that felt comfortable completing the project with. It was then I knew I wanted some people to help me examine and work on the different aspects of the film.

In September 1999 I contacted an old friend and writer Brad Benefield. I asked Mr. Benefield if he might be interested in writing a story or three for me. I knew I wanted to have a story about the awakening of a person's self and the struggle to confront and change what was troubling and unsatisfying about this person's life. Mr. Benefield was hesitant at first but intrigued enough to begin a story. I felt confident in his abilities but remained unsure about how it would all fit together. It was in October 1999 that I realized I needed three separate but linked movies to tell the story appropriately. In the early 1990s I began my fine art study in photography. After a couple of years I began to fixate on how to capture, through the use of long exposures, many segments of time in a scene in one frame. Ironically I now wanted to work in the complete opposite process. I wanted to try to capture one scene or story in multiple frames or movies. I felt three stories would allow me to show different developmental stages of a person constructing a reality. The importance of the different stories and the fact that I wanted three of them was initially born out of the view of life as being in three stages: birth, life and death. I worked out an overall rough plan of action and ran it by Mr. Benefield. Mr. Benefield at this meeting told me that he was frightened because of various doubts and fears he had.
He said he could not really understand where and how all these thoughts of mine would fit into his and how we could make the stories combine and communicate my ideas successfully. Even with all his fears he trusted me and began to grudgingly write the first story. I had to regularly check in with him and talk about problems with the story and our collaboration. It was only through our friendship that this project continued.

**Problem 1**

The first problem associated with this project was how to weave all three pieces into a single piece while keeping them unique in their own right. In *Knife, Fork and Spoon* I, with help, try to tell one small story about one small part of one person’s life. I knew I wanted three films but the birth, life and death theme was not quite the idea behind the separate films. I knew I wanted a statement section or A section. I also knew that I wanted a B or developmental section. I also wanted a strong restatement of the first A section with changes in place from the original one and a conclusion. This brought me to the idea about using the sonata allegro ABA musical form. This form, as stated above, contains an A section which introduces the pieces’ key signatures and several melody line motifs are introduced and established. In the B section there are changes in the time signatures, key signatures and usually takes the original motifs from the A and twists them back and forth. Usually this and other elements are used to divide and to seemingly go deeper into the structure of the entire piece. The last section is an A section in so much as it restates motifs, keys and time signatures from the first A section. Often it also uses some elements from the B or developmental section. Many times there is also A part of this last a section where a soloist explores themes and restatement of themes from all
three sections. I had decided in early 1999 that this would be the best way to examine someone becoming aware of their environment, life, lifestyle and choices they had made. The ABA form functioned, for me, just as the layers of sedimentary rock. I felt this allowed for the separation I needed but at the same time allowed for oneness or sameness. A cross section of sedimentary rock shows how each layer is independent yet dependent on its neighboring layers. This reminded me of the sonata allegro form. I could connect the layers of thought, emotion and experience in a person’s life and show their independent and dependent nature. I believe that through the use of remembrances, learned behaviors, fears and current inputs a person builds a reality. This ABA form was the answer to part of my dilemma.

The question of separating the films with more than just the obvious separators of fades, titles and credits was troublesome. I had to come up with motifs to separate the internal components of the films. In early 2000 my first thoughts were to separate by way of individual stories and bond the pieces by way of audio and visual motifs and subject matters. The challenge of this became not to let the separation be too great or too small. Visually Just This Side... is a three-dimensional computer generated animation. FeS2 is pure live action. These elements provided obvious separation. I had to go to the story lines and the music and visual elements for the cohesive elements. All the stories had to work off each other but not too much. I came up with the main idea of showing the construction of one person's strata lines of reality in 1998. I discussed this with Mr. Benefield in 1999 and all he initially wanted from me was a main idea for the general direction of the story lines.
In early 2000 I began work on *Just This Side*... with the story Mr. Benefield had written for me. The story consisted of a young man realizing that he is living in a world with definite boundaries. He discovers people around him are not adhering to his world view and proceeds on a journey of self discovery and change. In the end he sees that there are things on the other side of the hill or curtain and moves toward a deeper understanding of how little he really knows. By December 2000 I was finishing up work on *Just This Side*... and I began to work on the second piece in the trilogy and found a name for the entire trilogy: *Knife, Fork and Spoon*. I liked the idea of having the trilogy named for and as three utensils because the name denoted three separate units but comprised one place setting. The second piece I began to call *FeS2* which is the chemical name for fools gold. This fit into my idea for the second piece being a transitional and developmental B section. I had not yet set in my own mind by this time how to keep the three separate and linked completely. I did know that I needed, and I wanted, to delve deeper into a person's psyche in this central piece.

*FeS2* is a developmental and transitional piece, and I knew I wanted it to stand alone, yet be linked to the others. Working with another artist and letting him write the stories gave an automatic level of separation to the trilogy that was needed. But, how I could keep the audiences attention and allow them to see that the visual and aural story lines were separate pieces but also one single piece of work was demanding. One rather tricky thing I came up with was a way to link the video and aural elements in *Just This Side*... and a way to link all three movies. I used the same droning voice to keep continuity. The use of the same droning voice functioned, for me, in two pleasing ways:
the first is very obvious because the same narrator automatically links the films by his vocal patterns and sounds; Secondly, the droning voice, which is introduced in *Just This Side*... and linked to the walking sequence of Mitsui, carries a continuous tenor throughout the films and forms a concrete foundation to build upon.

Upon starting *FeS2*, I knew I wanted to push the visual and the audio even farther apart. In *Just This Side*... I had used clues given by the middle of it and the only elements I knew I wanted to link it to *FeS2* was continuing the role of the narrator’s voice and possibly the use of a young Asian woman to link to Mitsui. This brought a more pure and free feeling of abandon in *FeS2*. I knew that *FeS2* was being sandwiched between two rather clear and more formal films. Being the middle child between rational siblings the form and focus of *FeS2*, I felt, could be looser as a result of being supported on both sides. I used this middle, purposefully developmental, section as a real examination of less tangible thoughts and ideas. I set out on this developmental *B* section with only linking items of the Asian woman and a Caucasian man with a deadpan narrative voice from the first piece. I also decided that a brief metered musical accompaniment would keep the two linked closely enough.

I began to concentrate on pushing the singular nature of *Just This Side*... and *FeS2*. *Just This Side*... has a story line that has a definite ending. *FeS2* has no obvious story links to *Just This Side*.... The narration came from my questioning my feelings about older men being near me or the matters of them touching me. I was raised almost exclusively by women. My father committed suicide when I was five years old and hence I have no remembrances of him. One grandfather lived far away and I was only
able to see him every few years. The other grandfather that I had in my life at this point was in a completely vegetative state because of his earlier abuse of alcohol. I never remember hearing this grandfather even utter a sentence. I was raised completely by my aunts, grandmother and mother. The only other inputs I had with men were seasonal experiences with a few uncles. While working on FeS2 I realized, right after Thanksgiving 2000, that the reason why I did not enjoy going to my in-laws for seasonal activities was because I was not used to being around older men. In late 2000 I realized I wanted to delve more into aspects of my own life in the B section. It was at this time that I described to Mr. Benefield my state of being uncomfortable around my older male in laws. Mr. Benefield had also lost his father when he was very young and said that he also felt uncomfortable around older males. I then discussed this situation with other people who lost their fathers when they were very young and all of them have an intense hatred of older men being too close to them, touching them and especially when they try to be more dominant. I then knew that this was the ground I wanted to cover in FeS2. I decided to have Mr. Benefield discuss his feelings into a microphone on this and other matters. I did not allow him to prepare for this questioning because I felt that his off-the-cuff remembrances more accurately showed how he had constructed his version of reality.

The inherent nature of this dialogue separated it from the Just This Side.... It was easy to make no linear connections to Just This Side... and hence the two became separate. One of the most exciting parts of this and one the most difficult was to separate the films to the point that if seen separately a viewer might not believe that any one piece
was part of a whole. I told Mr. Benefield that we could simply play off of themes in the next two pieces. Mr. Benefield felt that this would be difficult to do but if we could pull it off, it would be great. The use of an Asian girl in all pieces allows for continuity along with using the same male voice. I began to see these elements as enough to keep the work cohesive and allow for more deviation in story lines and themes. FeS2 with its traditional developmental nature provided no problem in keeping singular and at the same time connected through the above-mentioned elements.

Problem 2

With the form in place representing the diverging and converging themes and elements, both visual and aural, proved to be quite a difficult dilemma. In late 1999 while working with Mr. Benefield we decided halfway through Just This Side... we would start to give away the fact that the aural and visual elements were part of the same story. I decided to give certain visual clues and Mr. Benefield interjected that some color clues and symbolisms would allow for the audience to “catch on” to the diverging and converging themes. It took until March 2000 to come up with all the keys and motifs to successfully point out that the narration in Just This Side... was the same as the visual story elements.

After recording the audio narration Mr. Benefield, my wife Christa and I began working on the musical soundtrack with the idea to link the narration with the visual. Mr. Benefield and I agreed that in conjunction with a droning voice a metered and churning soundtrack worked to accentuate the story and forge a link to Mitsui’s walking. If the methodical walking was done over a droning voice and steady pulsing music would seem
to give a clue to the audience that all things were linked. At this time I began to trust that the audience would in the end pick up on the fact that the spoken words were connected to the visual elements. We continued this musical linkage in *FeS2*. This is important as a bridge not just between the visuals and audio of *Just This Side...* but between the films. We kept all this in our minds while working on the soundtrack for *FeS2*. I feel these common simple musical melodies and rhythms accentuated the connection of the films.

I knew I needed other clues in either the audio or visual to link the visual and audio ideas. The narrator had mentioned a building with the scales on the roof and Mitsui walks by a version of that house. The narrator also mentions a huge white building and Mitsui passes a huge white building toward the end of *Just This Side...*. Finally, Mitsui places a white flower in a garden with colors that have been spoken of and repeated by the narrator. All these clues cemented the sameness of the gender, cultural and age differences by the end of *Just This Side...*. I knew I wanted to make the visual and audio elements contain both male and female sides to allow for a universality clue of the experiences and stories.

I was not sure if the audience would understand a male narrator and a female visual character being parts of one entity. This was one of the biggest doubts of the project’s success that I had. I intensely wanted to make this film the story of any person. I feel that at a very basic level emotions, physical pain and pleasure are universal regardless of gender, culture or class. If anyone puts their hand in fire, other than extreme cases, everyone will pull it from the fire and make an utterance. I wanted to examine these most basic developmental layers of human experience and used male and
female elements for this reason. After showing *Just This Side...* in mid 2000 and
listening to feedback from the audience I reconciled myself to the fact that people could
recognize that the Caucasian male and Asian female elements simply showed that this
was both sides of a person constructing a reality through life experiences.

**Problem 3**

I initially thought the problem of collaboration could be easily accomplished
however, it became such an issue that the project almost was abandoned. Mr. Benefield
and I had been in two bands together over the years and had collaborated on musical
projects very successfully. This relationship had always been a true fifty-fifty give-and-
take one, but this new project was mostly mine and this is where problems arose. After
starting this project and in our first meetings Mr. Benefield seemed guarded yet
enthusiastic. Mr. Benefield consistently came over and watched me animate. We
routinely revised the story to connect the visual and the aural story lines. I had an idea of
where I wanted *Just This Side...* and the rest to go but, I wanted and needed the help of
another. Mr. Benefield began to question everything about the project and started to try
to manipulate my work. He did not do this maliciously but, I feel, out of fear. He had to
know where every t was crossed and every i dotted. He also kept wanting to change the
focus of the work drastically. It was funny how he would bounce back and forth about
these issues. One time he would simply ask what I wanted him to do and then the next
time he would try to dictate everything. All the while I had to try to remain on solid
footing and stand my ground. The real trick was how to make this relationship not fifty-
fifty but eighty-twenty. I knew Mr. Benefield felt this and this was why he went back
and forth. I needed him to write for me, to my needs. I began to exert more control over every aspect of the films by this time which pained me deeply because of our friendship. It was a delicate balancing act because I needed the separation obtained by employing other peoples’ talents but, I had to keep creative control. This was a fight when it came to the story writing and linking elements. Toward the end of Just This Side... we started to settle into a level plane of working together. After he viewed the first rough draft, he changed his attitude. He began to see the whole view of the trilogy and started to trust me more and more. I completely understood his problems because I knew where it was all going, it was my baby, he should have been nervous and guarded. I was scared at times with this uneasy working relationship but tried my best to hold my ground and guide Mr. Benefield.

In December 2000 I began to work on FeS2 yet Mr. Benefield seemed to be very hesitant to work on this second piece. I later found out that he was still unsure about the process of collaboration and he did not want to begin work on the second piece without the first piece being completed. By early in January 2001 and Mr. Benefield and I were able to spend some time together and were able to work out the completion issue and many other issues surrounding the trilogy and our collaboration. After this time and as we began FeS2 Mr. Benefield began to give into the working relationship and he told me that he now understood our collaboration and my working methods and practices.

I found it very difficult and at the same time very easy to meld my overall scope of thought and Mr. Benefield's together. By the end of January 2001 Mr. Benefield told me that many, many times he thought I was crazy and that he would abandon the project
because in his words "we could never really do it, it was crazy, crazy talk." He also stated that in 1999 and 2000 if I had not talked to him regularly he would have indeed abandoned the project. He said it was only after the first piece finished and second piece was almost finished that he understood collaborating with me and was in fact now fired-up and ready to do more projects after this trilogy was done. I was never as nervous or as defeated as Mr. Benefield. I do recall some feelings of being “on the thin ice” but always felt more or less comfortable with the idea of collaboration and collaborating with Mr. Benefield.

It was a battle to keep my vision pure however, in the end I realized the battle filtered more honestly my thoughts and distilled them into pure work. In fact I now feel that only through collaboration could this project have embodied the original idea to explore how one person builds and rebuilds his or her own perception of reality and constructs a reality out of the various strata lines that surround them. I believe that if I had not allowed a second party to participate in this storytelling process my vision would have been too narrow and the piece’s integrity would have been compromised. I knew this from the start but it is truly only in completion that I know I was on the right track.
CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

The first two films are complete and I have time to look back at my problems and solutions and weigh them accordingly. Keeping the films separate but equal turned out to be far less difficult than I had envisioned. Diverging and converging the themes and stories was more difficult than I had anticipated. This task I had set before me was only accomplished through diligence, a bit of luck and the help of others. I was able to find the tools needed to help accurately communicate the stories. As for the collaboration or working relationship with Mr. Benefield, well it was more “labor intensive” than I had planned. However, it was very fruitful and allowed the films to successfully be completed and I hope communicates my vision and intended statement. Knife, Fork and Spoon with its components; Just This Side..., FeS2 and 5 Cents will be completed by early spring 2001. It has been a long road and one well worth traveling.
1. *Knife, Fork and Spoon: Just This Side...* Scene 2A - Mitsui with flower
2. *Knife, Fork and Spoon: Just This Side...* Scene 2B - Mitsui walking with flower
3. *Knife, Fork and Spoon: Just This Side...* Scene 5A - Mitsui walking with flower
4. Knife, Fork and Spoon: Just This Side... Scene 7B - Mitsui plants flower in garden
5. Knife, Fork and Spoon: FeS2 Mamiko
BIBLIOGRAPHY