

1991


Breakdowns

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BREAKDOWNS

**An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts**

Blair L. Benz

University of Northern Iowa

December 1991

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This Study by: Blair L. Benz

Entitled: BREAKDOWNS

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the
Degree of Master of Arts

11-25-91

Date

Steven E. Bigler, Chair, Thesis Committee

11/25/91

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ABSTRACT

"Breakdowns" is an exhibition of 12 charcoal drawings which were displayed in the Gallery of Art, located in the Kamerick Art Building on the University of Northern Iowa campus. The exhibition opened on July 22, 1991, and closed with a public reception on August 31, 1991. These 12 drawings represent the culmination of my studies in the graduate program at the University of Northern Iowa, while also constituting my M. A. Studio-Thesis for that program.

Of the 12 works in the exhibition, nine are large-scale drawings, ranging in size from 50" x 42" to 52" x 42". The remaining three pieces were smaller in size and served as preparatory studies for this body of work. These untitled studies are rougher, more immediate, and less resolved than the larger, finished works. During the initial stages of creating these works, they served as a vehicle by which I was able to determine, and begin to refine, my working method. As such, I chose to include these works in the exhibition in order to give viewers a greater insight into the processes involved in producing these drawings. The large-scale works were completed on Arches Cover White paper, while the studies made use of Stonehenge paper. Both types of paper were chosen for their durability and high conservation quality. It was essential that the paper being used would be able to withstand a great deal of abuse during the drawing process, as I wished to avoid tearing, or badly abrading the surface of the work as it developed.

Each image made use of the same working process. Based on a photograph of a model which had been taken earlier, the size of the finished image was determined. After defining this area on the paper, the entire image area was filled in with a thick layer of solid, black compressed charcoal. Once this was smoothed out by hand in order to create a uniformly dense surface, the figures and other compositional elements were "sketched" onto

the surface using a sharpened eraser. This was done in much the same way that one uses a pencil in a more traditional approach to drawing. After this stage was finished, I began to "carve" the image out of the charcoal, once again using the sharpened eraser. This subtractive method of drawing allowed for a reasonably full range of values in the finished work, as I was able to remove enough charcoal from the surface of the work to achieve a value approaching the white of the virgin paper. The method also enhanced the speed with which I was able to complete the images. In addition, areas of the drawing could easily be reworked, or compositional changes could be implemented during the drawing process, by simply recovering the area in question with solid charcoal, returning it to its initial state. In the final stage of the drawing, the eraser technique was combined with the use of charcoal pencils to render the finished image.

In both the photographic studies that I used, and the actual drawings themselves, I made use of a single light source placed above and to one side of the posed model. This method of illuminating the figures was derived from my interest in seventeenth century painting, and the work of such artists as Caravaggio and the Italian Caravaggisti, as well as Rembrandt van Rijn, Jan Vermeer, Diego Velazquez, and Jusepe de Ribera. Today, contemporary artists such as Tibor Csernus, Sidney Goodman, Matthew Mahurin, and Kathryn Myers share a similar interest in what some scholars have referred to as Caravaggio's "cellar lighting." This technique works to produce an inherent sense of drama in an image by casting deep shadows on those areas of a figure or object turned away from the light source, while creating strong highlights on the surfaces facing the light. This lends a strong sense of three dimensional corporeality to the forms being rendered. As was often the case in the paintings of Caravaggio, I chose not to reveal the source of the light itself within these drawings, unlike artists such as Georges de la Tour. Rather, it falls on the

forms from somewhere outside of the image. In this way, the light, while being the means by which the figures and the situations I have created are ultimately revealed to the viewer, also becomes a principle "player" in the drama unfolding in these drawings. It works to transform everyday reality into a psychologically powerful moment. The figures in these works are caught within a pool of light which both dispels the darkness around them and enhances the enigmatic mystery of that which is taking place. When combined with the evocative poses of the models, the result is an image with a highly suggestive and resonant mood.

As the title of the exhibition indicates, the central theme of these drawings is that of "breakdowns." The images revolve around scenes of men and women undergoing crisis situations. The drawings serve to speak to each of us as individuals, while also speaking to us as a society. As such, these works become allegorical statements about the state of crisis which we, as a nation and a society, are currently experiencing. In order to arrive at this duality of interpretation, I chose, for the most part, to avoid representing distinct or recognizable personalities. These were not intended to be specific portraits or representations of particular events. Rather, the figures are meant to represent universal Man and Woman, individually and together. To this end, faces were either covered or left in shadow. In addition to masking identity, this device acts to enhance a sense of vulnerability in the figures. Their nudity serves this same purpose, while also suggesting that the figures in the images, as well as we, the viewers, are taking part in ceremonies or rites whose meanings are not always clear. The lack of props in many of the works emphasizes a heightened sense of isolation. These are images of people who are isolated, vulnerable, and without defense.

The works in this exhibition are unabashedly narrative in nature. They are intentionally image-oriented. As such, they are meant to be "read" by the viewer. In the process of reading the image, it is believed that the drawings will serve to suggest scenarios or "stories" to the audience. It is likely that each person's reading will be different from that of another as their interpretations will ultimately be based on their individual understandings or perceptions of what the image represents. It was not my intention that there be a single reading for any of the drawings. Rather, these images, and the titles I have given them, are meant to serve as a "springboard" for the viewer's imagination, with each person's interpretation being as valid as that of another. To this extent, one of the problems that had to be dealt with was that of giving enough information to the viewers, while not overloading them with too much, and thereby limiting the range of their interpretation. It was essential that the images remain enigmatic enough to allow for this flexibility of readings.

In terms of intent and my technical approach to drawing, I see my work as being very much in line with that of a host of contemporary artists, including those already cited, who make use of heavy chiaroscuro and dramatic lighting in the process of rendering the human figure in a naturalistic, illusionistic manner. My work, and, to some degree, the work of these same artists, involves the use of narrative, symbolism, and didactic content. Similarly, the drawings in this exhibition share a sense of the allegorical concerns of Postmodernist art. The work speaks to both the individual and to the universal. Although vastly different in terms of technique and the medium used, certain of the drawings also have elements in common with the work of such artists as David Salle, Cindy Sherman, and Tom Otterness. In their work these individuals look back to other sources. They do this by means of either appropriating specific images or by recreating the "feel" of the work of a particular artist or artistic style. In several of the works in my thesis exhibition, there is a reference to history

painting and to the countless images from past art which have been derived from the Biblical studies.

I do not perceive these works to be a conclusion of any sort. They are not the final solution to the ideas and problems that I have been working with. Rather, this thesis work constitutes a strong beginning and foundation for the furthering of my studies and my development as an artist.

BREAKDOWNS

A Thesis

Submitted

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of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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December 1991

List of Slides

1. They Come In the Night, 1991, charcoal, 52" x 42".
2. Here Am I, 1991, charcoal, 52" x 42".
3. The Lamb Is Provided, 1991, charcoal, 51" x 42".
4. If I Should Die Before I Wake, 1991, charcoal, 52" x 42".
5. In Our Darkest Hour, 1991, charcoal, 52" x 42".
6. We Move From Hope, 1991, charcoal, 50" x 42".
7. Into Despair, 1991, charcoal, 51" x 42".
8. After the Darkness, 1991, charcoal, 52" x 42".
9. Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory, 1991, charcoal, 52" x 42".
10. Untitled Study, 1991, charcoal, 22" x 15".
11. Untitled Study, 1991, charcoal, 22" x 15".
12. Untitled Study, 1991, charcoal, 30" x 22".