

***The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Choices We Must Make
Or-Does it Really Matter Anyway?***

The idea of eternal return is a mysterious one, and Nietzsche has often perplexed other philosophers with it: to think that everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum! What does this mad myth signify?...ⁱ

In the world of eternal return, the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make. That is why Nietzsche called the idea of eternal return the heaviest of burdens.

If eternal return is the heaviest of burdens, then our lives can stand out against it in all their splendid lightness.

But is heaviness truly deplorable and lightness splendid?

The heaviest of burdens crushes us, we sink beneath it, it pins us to the ground...The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become.

Conversely, the absolute absence of burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant.

What then, shall we choose? Weight or lightness?ⁱⁱ

Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable*

Lightness of Being

Traveling to University of Washington studios to meet the MFA Class of 2009, I felt like a distant cousin traveling to the family reunion for holiday dinner-I saw the family again for the first time. There were the materials, the nascent endeavors, the yearning, the attempts to manifest the unseen-to discover the unknowable. Mostly there were choices-the evidence of paths trodden by these twelve as they near the completion of a transformative process.

The studios revealed the lightness of Marie Claire Bozmat's humble, eloquent objects wavering in the air on spindly, legs. Pushed by the slightest of air currents, the unwieldy, sometimes upside down furnishings radiate isolation and instability; they speak a sweet agony of crippling ennui absent of connection, environment or history. Containing a sense of a life that is literally twisting in the wind, they are tragically, unbearably light. They cannot serve us. They deny our weight.

The lens of Laurel Schulz gives us natural phenomena of the absurd using tiny Bonsai trees that, as a result of a kind of "life-support" and tightly controlled growth process, have a monumentality of form. Yet, she manipulates her images of monumental Northwest landscapes to read like tiny dioramas in a backwards natural history museum. Her work raises questions about our inability to capture and "train" the sublime of nature.

Erin Elyse Burns uses video and photography to explore the fear and awkwardness of the learning process. The unpretentiousness of her photographic style coupled with her vulnerability as she submerges her ego and risks failure, brings us to empathize with her ineptitude and pain. The inelegance of her attempts and disappointments as she yearns to get it right conveys a weighty struggle.

Bo Young Choi engages with our clothes as a kind of "second skin" representative of submission to cultural hierarchy. Her garments, constructed from recycled clothing, embody the challenges and dilemmas of particular social roles and status groups. While the white business shirt morphs into a grotesque bundle of arms for the reaching necessary to acquire and sustain wealth and position, the light feminine slip-with its pockets in all the "wrong" places for protecting, feeling, or exposing-sports a long heavy phallic casing of heavier materials. Is it a representation of female agency or does it imply violation and the vulnerability of lightness-weightlessness-in a controlling society?

Hugo Shi has developed vigorous paintings on large canvases using enormous strokes of the brush that reveal a lifetime surrounded by Chinese pictographs and calligraphy. Engaging in a negotiation between eastern and western cultures, between abstraction and representation, the artist makes images of meat that serve as a metaphor for human frailty. While I am compelled to care about the meat in this homage to Rembrandt's *Flayed Ox* of 1655, just like in the Rembrandt, it is the gargantuan, traveling slashes of paint, emerging and disappearing in and out of the ground, that I will always remember.

Robert Gardiner's vision offers a contrast to these works with a series of simple poetic paintings of about 12" square. Evocative of Northern European Renaissance paintings

created for private devotion, these contemplative realist paintings offer a reading beyond representation of the reflective surface of the vessel. He suggests a metaphor for the body as a container, the illusory transitory nature of world, and the meaning of the crucifixion.

Haley Farthing's delicate drawings of patterned underbrush, driftwood, and leafy forms reveal the paradox of small quiet moments in nature juxtaposed with the bigness of the natural world. The compositions imply a larger landscape beyond the frame while conveying a sense of time through the use of close tonal relationships and color. Her dialogue with the environment translates to her use of materials as she responds to and reveals the grain of the wood support in her panels. The works are so light; yet they reveal the edges of a weighty sublime. We catch our breath before their sensitive immediacy.

In a shock of blue paint we are welcomed to the space that Alice Case built. The large paintings offer a negative space pregnant with questions that challenge our perceptions of reality in space. While these daring internal odysseys are launched using art historical references, observation and invention are incorporated into the artist's negotiation between illusory space and the picture plane. With a bright palette and a world of courage, she questions the fabric of our reality—our memory, senses and experience— as she attempts to create an ordered truth outside the spectrum of our knowledge.

Anne Petty launches her work from the long tradition of narrative figure painting, with the drama taking place outside the frame. The viewer is implicated in spaces so large one could walk right into them. Figures respond to actions unseen. A huge shadow projected from our real space is cast across a group of figures running into the deep space of the painting. As the figures look back over their shoulders, we cannot be sure if they beckon like Fillipo Lippi's angels or flee as from threat. Is it a tragedy or a game? Are we ourselves the danger or should we be running with them?

Like Tereza in the *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, who carries her life in a weighty suitcase, Arun Sharma carries the heaviness of his life into the studio. On the cusp of fatherhood, with all of its burdens and joys, Arun questions mortality and the temporal nature of life itself. His male figure stands, life-sized, with a tenuous umbilical connecting his generative organs to the navel of an infant at his feet, but he does not—cannot—touch the child. The marks of the casting process embrace parts of the figure while the rest appears in sensitive, specificity. Is this

figure in the process of becoming? The mold he employed can only be used once. (No return possible here).

Weight and return are fundamental to the work of Ben Waterman, who uses extensive repetition of text and action in the process of creating his installations. Comprised of ceramics, text, and metal elements, his work evokes the passing of time and its traces. Concerned with an embedded replaying of history in a kind of visual palimpsest, Waterman marks his clay and earthen elements with paint and with fire. The repeated ceramic heads serve as witnesses to an unending cyclical ritual.

That brings us, finally, to George Rodriguez. His lightness; his boisterous and expansive celebration of a childhood traveling easily between Hispanic and Anglo-American cultures culminates in an entire larger-than-life ceramic mariachi band. Buoyant with lightness, swelling with crisply patterned relief, it is music made visual. It is a paradox—so heavy—born of 3,000 pounds of clay.

There is no means of testing which decision is better, because there is no basis for comparison. We live everything as it comes, without warning, like an actor going on cold. And what can life be worth if the first rehearsal for life is life itself?ⁱⁱⁱ

For these graduates, and for us, the Henry Art Gallery presents a glimpse of their artistic voyage, their return, their beginning—their lives—in the works of this exhibition. Let us celebrate the graduates' vulnerable journey of discovery and the evidence of a hurtling two years spent in an essentially romantic pursuit; Honor their lightness, their heaviness, their soaring desires and crushing burdens. Welcome them back to the "tribe" for the first time at this, the brink of their careers.

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ⁱ Milan Kundera. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 1, 3.

ⁱⁱ Milan Kundera. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Milan Kundera. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 8.