

Joshua Korenblat
Maryland Institute College of Art
Mount Royal School of Art
April 23, 2010

MFA Thesis Statement

Lecturing at Oxford University, the novelist EM Forster delineated the threads woven into a text: The Story; The People; The Plot; Fantasy; Prophecy; Pattern and Rhythm. Sprightly and incisive, these lectures would later comprise *Aspects of the Novel*, a slim yet potent storytelling treatise published in 1927. As a writer and an artist, I seek to tell stories with words and pictures. Freely, I interweave Forster's timeless principles of writing with a contemporary art practice. *Story* derives from *history*; when we tell a story, we share a history. *History* originated not in the verbal realm, but in visual art and architecture, the historiated capitals of medieval Europe. Imagine nuns in Italy, strolling by a row of columns in their convent, each one adorned at top with biblical sculptures: Jonah and the Whale, for instance, or Abraham and Isaac. Such images would help to edify and instruct an audience who shared a common visual language, even if they could not read or write.

In visual art today, such shared imagery exists primarily in popular culture, fragmenting the practice of a more literary narrative art, and often leaving it in need of further explanation. Yet certain visual forms achieve a gestalt and convey an emotion or mood regardless of time and place: an imposing boulder conveys strength; a column soaring to the sky, an aspiration. With images balanced between the general and the

descriptive realms, and with incidental detail common to photography limited, a contemporary artist can begin to tell a meaningful visual story to an audience that does not share a common religion, socioeconomic status, or world-view.

Regarding the tendency to see history as a progression that leaves prior storytelling styles obsolete, Forster says, “We cannot consider fiction by periods, we must not contemplate the stream of time. Another image better suits our powers: that of all novelists writing their novels at once. They come from different ages and ranks, they have different temperaments and aims, but they all hold pens in their hands, and are in the process of creation.” (28)

My storytelling practice filters through a similar unifying lens. I peer beyond “the limitations of date and place,” (42) and their attendant styles, which might change through the years in a mercurial way. Rather, I am most interested in creating a work of art that resonates emotionally with my audience. When I paint with a Chinese brush, for instance, I seek an expressive essence, a swift and present quality that transcends the art historical context from which it was once used, and yet which conveys an emotion that a long ago Taoist monk might have felt and that can still be felt today. This creates a mood, a fantasy or dream that lingers with an audience long after the peculiar details of a work of art have faded from memory. Edgar Allan Poe called this ambience the “single powerful effect,” and he sought above all else to steep his stories in a memorable mood.

Before a work of art can be understood intellectually, it must affect the viewer emotionally. We cannot truly understand an idea without first feeling that idea; through visual metaphors, artists make abstractions more palpable and human. Artists do not seek to identify their world through labels; they create an experience that seems familiar, yet

illuminated in a wondrous and strange light. By working in this mindset, the artist attains a social responsibility: he or she imbues once jaded concepts with a newfound meaning. The writer James Baldwin believed in this social duty as well; he claimed that in fiction, every individual is a minority. In a work of art, convenient labels and abstractions fall away, and we see each other with a more unique humanity. Art lends insight into how individuals relate to their community, and allows its audience to see the possibilities present in a changing consciousness.

In *Sewing Pins*, my thesis story and gallery exhibit, I present a cohesive story through multimedia: still images in painted and digital form, audio, text, and sculpture. The audio differs slightly from the text, just as a spoken story strays from a recorded narrative. In this story, a young and homesick art student, Stan, finds a sewing pin between the floorboards of his warehouse studio. He becomes friends with Leland, an insightful worker in the warehouse. A constellation of stories begins to spin out from this pin, and the history of this place, an old garment factory, becomes more present.

At the story's apex, Stan briefly glimpses the presence of his late grandfather, a tailor from Russia—a presence at once distant from Stan and intimate to him. In this way, Stan begins to appreciate the present more: the community, family, and friends in which he shapes his creative and ethical identity.

Nostalgia, commonly defined as a yearning for an idealized past, threads through the consciousness of all of the characters in the text, and even in my storytelling brush. But I humanize the oft-derided concept of nostalgia—so often twinned with sentimentality, that first reserve of unearned emotion—by imagining the world-view of a Russian immigrant tailor with accumulating words and lyrical pictures, unordered and not

part of linear time: at one moment, nostalgia takes fleeting form in a visual metaphor, a wooden synagogue, and another, the “mystic music” of snow crunching under slushy boots, related in text and the spoken word. The painted images of ghostly tailors in a warehouse space and wooden synagogues are not illustrations depicting a specific scene in the story; they are experiences in point-of-view. Contoured lines of ink suggest an attempt to draw closer to the figure of the grandfather tailor; the palette of black, gray, and white gives the images a distance and reserve that does not quite step into the colorful present, even though the mark-making suggests that these images are still luminous and forming.

This tension between past and present also informs my storytelling structure and exhibition sequencing. I combine the narrative form of storytelling with the lyric form. In the Western tradition, these two storytelling forms developed along parallel tracks: in ancient Greece, Homer spoke of narrative histories while Sappho strummed a harp and sang lyrical poems. In narrative stories, a protagonist progresses through linear time, confronted with a series of escalating challenges and difficult decisions, which culminate in a decisive moment, and then a brief denouement. In lyric stories, however, time is not an informing element; rather, the poet meditates upon a singular object until it assumes a more transcendent form. An entire poem might be about the moon, for instance, or a pair of sandals, or even a sewing pin. Though a lyrical narrative might seem contradictory—one impulse seeks the romance of forward motion; the other, love and stasis—in truth, a story can be told lyrically, through unfolding, patterned images of contrasting emotional resonance. This juxtaposition of images creates interest and mystery in the mind of a reader: in the *Sewing Pins* text, I pair imagistic contrasts, such as a rusty bicycle pump in

a scene defined by sun-white cherry blossoms. At the same time, I weave these images into a narrative that fits within a more linear progression, defined by characters and relationships.

In *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster touches upon narrative: “We have defined a story as a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. ‘The king died, and then the queen died,’ is a story. ‘The king died, and then the queen died of grief is a plot.’ The time sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again, ‘The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king.’ This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development.” (130) By mystery, Forster means the artist must share with his or her audience the very process of discovery that he or she undergoes while making art, as there remains always a mystery at the heart of art. Mystery immerses an audience in a familiar yet strange fictive world, a setting for inquiry, possibility, and ultimately, a changed consciousness.

By telling my story with the swift and suggestive strokes of a Chinese brush, I engage in an elliptical conversation between creator and audience, propelled by qualities defined by Forster: memory, intelligence, and imagination. The audience must participate in the work of art’s imaginative completion. I hope that my audience connects with my work by accessing personal memories, so that each person’s experience of apprehending the story will remain unique. The artist William Kentridge calls this exchange between creator and audience generous: the artist no longer has possession of the art, and its story will change with each person who engages with it. With words and pictures, I practice the art of storytelling, an act of creativity and generosity.

Work Cited

Forster, EM. *Aspects of the Novel*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1927.