



THE IDIOT BOX

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Painting

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The Idiot Box is an exhibition of works including oil painting on panel, graphite and marker drawings, soft-sculpture, and even a collaborative video. Rude and vulgar characters sit in painted portraits like the mercantile class of the Dutch Golden Age. A Fragonard copy is obliterated by destructively abstract application of layers of acrylic paint, and panel-painted ghouls obfuscating the scene. The walls of the gallery itself are bursting with suggested bodily excretions. In these artworks I am considering the vulgar and rude aspects of lowbrow art and trash-culture like cartoons, comix, punk and graffiti in relation to the history of fine art, particularly the refined paintings and drawings of European traditions, and how lowbrow visual culture connects to this history.

I consider Peter Swirski's concept of the *Nobrow* as a method of both creative production and reception. Nobrow suggests that we "shave our brows" to develop an appreciation of artistic forms (and their extremes) that are associated with both the 'highbrow' and the 'lowbrow.'ⁱ I uplift the 'lowbrow' and develop an appreciation for its qualities such as ease of approachability and accessibility, stimulating visuals, humor and fictional violence that engage a wide audience, and offering reprieve from our circumstances. In doing this I collapse the hierarchy of lowbrow and highbrow to create opportunity for the normalization of lowbrow representations in the gallery space, which in turn opens space for others who want to view and create lowbrow artwork.ⁱⁱ I lift the 'lowbrow' in my work by placing it in contexts of Western painting traditions in 'highbrow' art, and drawing connections between vulgarity, humor, violence, and rudeness in the history of painting. Similar to efforts made by several artists and movements of the past, for instance *The Times Square Show* of 1980, an open access exhibition that included artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Jane Dickson, Jenny Holzer and Kenny Scharf. Similarly the 1990 *High and Low* exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art that tied pop culture humor and

violence back to works like Roy Lichtenstein's comic book inspired paintings, Man Ray's *Gift*, and Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*.

In Amy Sillman's *Shit Happens The Awkward* is described as "an art animated also by ugliness, destruction, hatred, struggle."ⁱⁱⁱ My practice contains ugliness and destruction; the exhibition presents warped faces, bashed holes through panels, and a painting is covered in smears of acrylic colors. However, I also aim for a level of refinement and resolve despite painting and drawing such ludicrous characters. The drive for this stems from a background in illustration where I studied and practiced the techniques of European old masters such as Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt Van Rijn, Francisco Goya, and Caravaggio. In learning the lessons of centuries of painting and drawing I developed an affinity for the craft and skill that goes into producing such beautiful work. Rembrandt's use of tone and value to create a sense of realism and volumetric form in the figure. Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro to produce drama and mood in a composition. The colour choices of the Rococo painters like Watteau, Fragonard, or Boucher, and how they're employed to create serene and idyllic scenes. Leonardo da Vinci's use of line and value to render the subtleties of the human body, and his extensive knowledge of anatomy. This is contrasted by my appreciation for the lowbrow in vulgar cartoons like *Beavis and Butthead* and *Ren and Stimpy*, the vitriolic graffiti of *Neckface*, or the psychedelic nightmare paintings of *Skinner*. Their mindless humor and vulgarity offer a reprieve from the dour circumstances of the covid-19 pandemic, and their fictional, cartoon violence acts as a catharsis in the contentious political climate we are living in.

This polarity of influences makes for a confusing position as an artist that I navigate through Nobrow thinking and Sillman's Awkwardness to locate and contextualize my practice in relation to the history of European painting. I look to Dutch Golden Age genres

like the Tronie and “Merry Company” tavern scenes to draw connections to the history of painting. A particular example can be found in David Teniers II's “Men Smoking and Drinking in a Tavern” where we can see figures indulging in drinks while a man urinates in the background. This painting is representative of the earthiness of the Dutch paintings which parallels qualities of characters in my paintings with their drinking, crude sexuality, and raucous carousing.^{iv}

The portraits painted in oil are of imaginary characters whose design is influenced by lowbrow media and trash-culture. Using an intuitive process of production, the characters are developed out of abstract, organic forms. As the basic forms develop, I begin considering the specificities of each character's features. I build a tension between vulgarity and refinement, or disgust and beauty that simultaneously attracts and repels the viewer. These paintings sit in frames fabricated with wood and use caulking to create a shoddy allusion to the textured moulding of the frames of portraits from the Dutch golden age. This decision is determined by the similarities of these portraits to the scale, style, and techniques of the Dutch golden age portraiture, such as the layering of glazes to develop form and color, or the acidic green backgrounds of Hans Memling. The characters are posed in a similar manner to the wealthy proto-capitalists that appeared in Dutch Golden Age portrait painting. The subjects of these paintings draw from Sillman's awkwardness again, “Just having a body is a daily comedy... ..this laughable casement that is the body below, as ankles swell, farts are emitted, rolls of fat jut out, the penis does its own thing.”^v The characters' faces bulge with phallic features, their skins twist uncomfortably, they ooze fluids, and their expressions distort and pull to extremes. These caricatured expressions call to another genre of Dutch portraiture: The Tronie. Generally considered more of a study of the features, Tronie paintings contrasted the honorable portraits of the mercantile class by

depicting anonymous lower-class subjects, often with humorous, expressive, or unusual faces that made for a lighthearted, yet skillfully painted image.

A false wall has been built over the existing gallery wall to allow for the insertion of several panel works. Installed they appear as part of the wall, but now the panels become erupting openings where masses of spray-foam and fun-fur are spilling out. Thinking of the gallery as body, these panels are spilling over with organ-like and refuse material. Meanwhile, the wall sinks and rises at the seams, hinting towards the structure of frames beneath the surface, as though paintings are manifesting behind the wall. I am alluding to the creation of these works within the edifice of art. The wall excretes these materials like the detritus of trash-culture that I incorporate into my work. The body of the gallery is expelling the exhibition – my body of work.

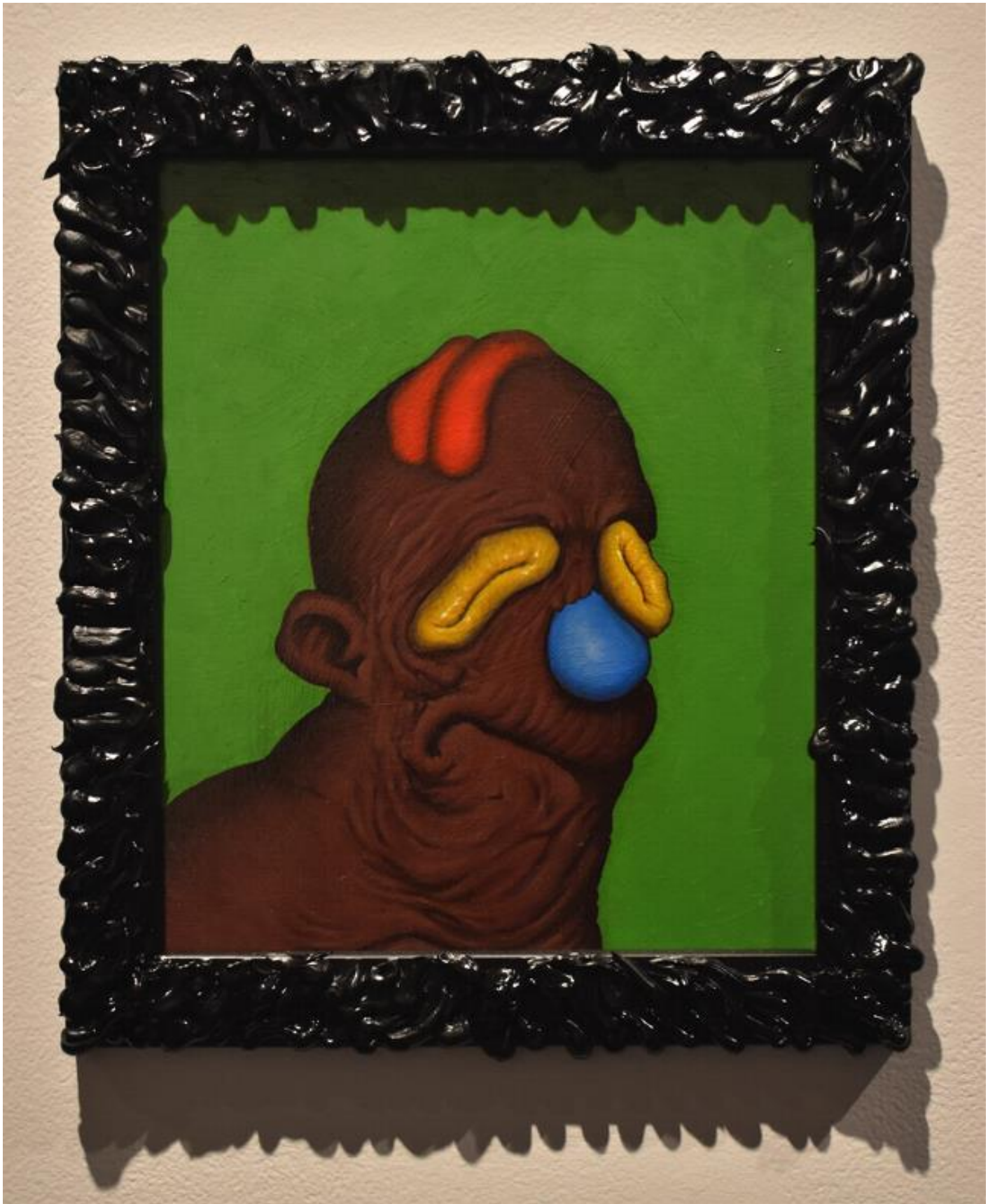
ⁱ Peter Swirski and Tero Eljas Vanhanen, "Introduction – Browbeaten Into Pulp," in *When Highbrow Meets Lowbrow: Popular Culture and The Rise of Nobrow*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 2.

ⁱⁱ This is what I consider a "brow-based" hierarchy of visual culture that takes its origins in the classist and racist pseudo-science of phrenology. The measuring and study of skulls that was used to make judgements of the intelligence and character of different races, and is now used to dismiss supposed "lowbrow" culture.

ⁱⁱⁱ Amy Sillman, "Shit Happens," *Frieze d/e No. 22* (2015): 76.

^{iv} Earthy in multiple senses: crude or indecent, uninhibited or natural, and of this world

^v Sillman, "Shit Happens," 78.



Lapierre_001 **Effhead #1**, 2021, Oil on panel, caulking, spray paint, 12 x 14 inches



Lapierre_002 **Revolting Wall**. FAB Gallery Installation: Feb 21 – March 18, 2022



Lapierre_003 **Effhead #3**, 2020, Oil on panel, caulking, spray paint, 12 x 14 inches



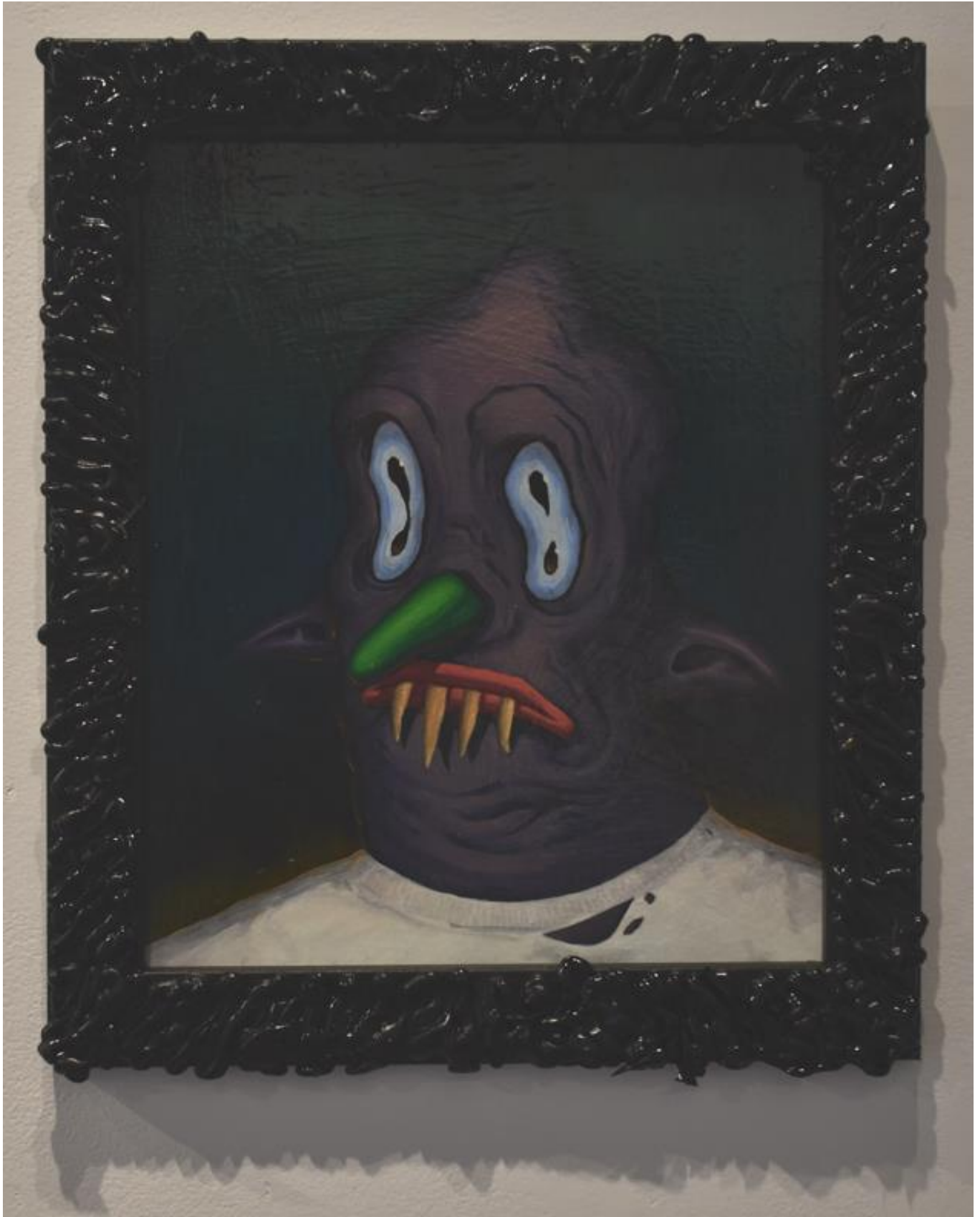
Lapierre_004 **Effhead #5**, 2020, Oil on panel, caulking, spray paint, 12 x 14 inches



Lapierre_005 FAB gallery installation: Feb 21 – March 18, 2022



Lapierre_006 **Effhead #8**, 2020, Oil on panel, caulking, spray paint, 12 x 14 inches



Lapierre_007 **Effhead #9**, 2020, Oil on panel, caulking, spray paint, 12 x 14 inches



Lapierre_008 **A Game of Hot Cockles**, 2021, Oil, Acrylic, Resin, Fun-Fur on panel, springs, spray paint



Lapierre_009 **Effhead #10**, 2021, Oil on panel, caulking, spray paint, 12 x 14 inches



Lapierre_010 **Effhead #11**, Oil on panel, caulking, spray paint, 12 x 14 inches



Lapierre_011 FAB gallery Installation: Feb 21 – March 18, 2022



Lapierre_012 **Effhead #13**, 2021, Oil on panel, caulking, spray paint, 12 x 14 inches



Lapierre_013

Left: **Facedragger**, 2021, Graphite on paper, 23 x 35 inches

Center: **Fastwalker**, 2021, Graphite on paper, 23 x 35 inches

Right: **Surveillant**, 2022, Graphite on paper, 23 x 35 inches

Background: Miscellaneous sketches, 2019-2022, Ink, graphite, gouache on paper



Lapierre_014 **Fastwalker**, 2021, Graphite on paper, 23 x 35 inches



Lapierre_015 **Untitled**. 2021, Mixed media installation

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