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Honors Thesis Statement

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My work deals with the notion that our understanding of death – as an inevitable consequence of life – is rationally unjustified, and further that our assumption of our own mortality serves as a self-fulfilling prophecy preventing us from overcoming this existential challenge. I see a twofold task for myself here: Firstly, to reach the viewer and get them to take such an idea seriously, and secondly, to provide a detailed and scientific rationale for the pursuit of an indefinite lifespan, as well as a plan for how to accomplish this feat. In my various pursuits, I address both components of this idea. My written work primarily deals with the latter goal, and my artwork is geared specifically towards the former. The work that I've produced for my thesis deals with the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy, and how this relates to our society's treatment of death. It serves as an attempt to break through the defense mechanisms of the viewer, to get them to realistically consider the seriousness of their life in a world where mortality is as-of-yet guaranteed, and to hopefully open their mind – through desperation, if for no other reason – to the possibility of our societal pursuit of radical life extension. It is my hope that in doing so, I might be able to inspire the general public – one individual at a time – to seriously consider and accept the very real possibility of overcoming the current mortal status of our species, and thus lift the current barriers to the research and political and economic support necessary to make such a goal a reality.

Everything that we do, from the building of nations and economies to the most mundane daily habits of individuals, is geared towards staving off death anxiety. We have even gone as far as self-medicating ourselves by inventing – unconsciously, and over a long period of time – absurd and impossibly specific metaphysical beliefs and other worldly ideologies – e.g. cultural or nationalistic identities – whose ultimate function is to shield us from our death anxiety in the form of promises of some kind of afterlife or the provision of some persisting greater order into which we can invest our identities, in hopes of somehow reaching beyond our own lifespan. Testament to our extreme aversion to thoughts of our own ultimate annihilation is the degree to which we invest in and defend these psychological barricades. We are more than willing to ruin or end the lives of individuals for merely

suggesting that our fates aren't secure in the way that we'd like to believe, a process that is clearly

pathological to everyone *except* those who subscribe to the given belief system or ideology. Even

amongst the non-religious community, our ultimate fate as individuals is something that is nonchalantly

dismissed, and then promptly ignored – it is very rarely considered with a reasonable degree of

seriousness. And let us not forget the more unconscious, everyday things that we do to try to ignore

our looming peril. Virtually anything that has to do with wealth hoarding, materialism, concerns about

status – even the enjoyment had by spending time with family and friends or appreciating a hobby can

be viewed in the light of avoiding death anxiety. Our fear of death is a fear without anything even

approaching an equal, and this explains why we have unknowingly gone to such lengths – and are

even, in a way, *programmed* – to ignore it.

There is almost no end to the mental gymnastics most people will go through in order to deny

that this process is at work within their own lives, since acknowledgment is the first major blow against

the effectiveness of these defenses. And for the vast majority of human history, this has been a good

thing – in centuries past, where technology had no hope of catching up to the point where major

lifespan-altering research could be executed in the course of a single person's life, holding out some

kind of hope for a miracle cure for death would result only in personal tragedy. It is important to note

that a large degree of this tragedy isn't actually focused on the future death of the individual in

question, but rather on the prospect followed by the reality of the deaths of other people close to said

individual. The insulating effect that a sense of unavoidability confers upon a particular death is quite

obvious when we look at the vast differences in magnitude of the reaction to the death of, for example,

an elderly person versus that a child. In both cases, the death can be unexpected, but even in the case

of the elderly person the expectation that they have a shorter remaining lifespan generally speaking is a

reflection of the growing unavoidability of any given medical emergency that might arise during their

remaining years, coupled with the generally worse prognosis due to their advanced age. A potential

death event that we assign a lower level of probability has the ability to provoke more trauma in the

observer in the event that the death actually occurs.

In the case of reflecting upon our own death, even the assumption that such an outcome is inevitable can be seen as a sort of desperate bid for agency – we can gain some feeling of control in this way. The notion that this control is in any way real is of course completely illusory, but in the case of the individual who is truly condemned by their circumstances, such delusive thinking can obviously be forgiven – this goes along with the notion of palliative care, intended to seek the next-best goal of minimizing suffering in those for whom illness-resolving treatment would inevitably be futile. Much as in current medical practice, however, it would be an error of the greatest magnitude to provide palliative care in lieu of direct treatment in the case of a patient who still has a fighting chance.

The span of human knowledge and technological development has undergone exponential growth in our species' path from the beginning of recorded history to the present day. Make no mistake – it is undeniable that we continue to learn and invent ever more quickly. The aggregate progress of the past century pales in comparison to the progress of the last two decades, as does the progress of the past three hundred years in comparison to the past century. This isn't necessarily due to any significant increase in ingenuity on the part of later humans versus earlier humans – though there is certainly some shift due to the laws of genetic evolution, the appearance of any intellectual improvement is mostly due to an increase in our awareness and a corresponding decrease in our ignorance, and we have a great deal further to go on this front. If it is reasonable to take pride in ourselves at all – an open question – it would certainly be more fitting to aim this pride upon what we may choose to do in our future actions, rather than misplace it upon the starting point on which the deterministic forces of the universe have landed each of us. The quickening pace of our progress is the result of a positive feedback loop involving the growth of the human population, the expansion of our sum total of knowledge about the universe around us, the democratization of political processes and a simultaneous democratization of our access to these stores of knowledge, and the utilization of this knowledge to create better implements to further these other three processes. Assuming this feedback loop continues – and history

seems to suggest that, for the most part, it will – it stands to reason that our potential ability to solve the various problems that plague us as a society and as individuals will continue to increase at an exponential rate.

As I've already mentioned, analysis of and arguments for this technical end of things falls under the latter half of the "twofold task" that comprises my work on radical life extension, and is covered much more extensively in my other written work. Convincing an audience to listen in the first place is the former half of that particular equation, and it is this side of things – the very first step, specifically – that I address in the art I've created in this thesis project. The function that I see myself fulfilling in the grand scheme of this path towards radical life extension is, for lack of a less negatively-charged word, as a propagandist against the self-fulfilling prophecy that is our species' attitude about death.

We are at a point in history where our own situation has become that of a patient being given palliative care at the cost of pursuing treatment that might actually cure the disease. Our current level of technology is not yet at the point where radical life extension is a current possibility, but I believe that we are rapidly approaching that day. It isn't any longer a question of whether or not death is a problem that *will* be solved, but a question of *when* this solution will arrive. The major factor that will determine the speed at which this process will occur will be our decision, as a society, to consciously pursue radical life extension as a goal, rather than passively develop technologies that will bring us closer to that same goal, albeit at a much slower rate. I, of course, have a vested interest in this being achieved sooner rather than later – I have no intention of dying.

As such, my work here and elsewhere constitutes my own fight against death, in forms to which I am personally most suited. For whatever reason, I feel that within my own cognition these defense mechanisms never fully deployed correctly – for me, the fear of what is at present a possibility maybe sixty years down the line has felt at times almost as acute as if it were approaching next week. For this reason, I feel that I am able to speak to the reality of this mortality-fear that is all too visceral for me, and hidden from view for others. I don't consider this to be a good thing, as my near-constant inability

to ignore this concern has resulted in various personal difficulties, and death as a specific anxiety is particularly venomous as it has the ability to reach out and touch *everything* – this has always been my most personally convincing example of the notion that "ignorance is bliss." But, if I am unable to ignore this fear, then the next best solution is to face it head-on and utilize it as motivation in an attempt to negate the object of the fear. This is my contribution.

My thesis work consists of a digital sculpture, presented as a set of printed renderings – two large-scale, contrasting side-views, and several smaller detail views. The technical process of creating the work involved utilizing digital modeling software to hand-sculpt each component of the sculpture, in much the same general way that a sculptor would manipulate clay, albeit with different specific considerations. These finished models are then rendered through a separate engine that simulates the path of photons backwards from the viewing "camera" to various added light sources. Interactions with various geometries – each endowed with specific physical characteristics, such as incidence of refraction, root-mean-square surface roughness, and the like – help to determine scattering of light paths and determine the final 8-bit RGB value for each pixel in the resulting image. This rendering process alone can take up to a day – for this specific project – of continuous computation per image depending on various factors, and the work done on the actual modeling side of the process spanned well over 1000 hours, a process beginning in March 2014. Part of this length was due to the fact that my experience with 3d modeling was nonexistent prior to late December 2013, and my familiarity with all but two of the programs I've used in my workflow – seven in total – was zero at the inception of this project. As with the technical knowledge involved in my written work about the subject of radical life extension, all of this was self-taught – partly due to the fact that our department's curriculum features digital modeling (with more of a focus on animation, additionally) as a peripheral offering lacking in the depth required for the execution of this thesis work, and partially because my broader practice has always overwhelmingly relied on a *modus operandi* of self-instruction. That said, this work can still very much be seen as a conclusion of my total undergraduate trajectory, as my practice has focused

more on an in-depth exploration of figurative work within several different media rather than a specific focus on a single method of output. My development is better characterized as advancements within narrative figurativism, rather than advancement within any individual medium I have pursued – though I would certainly argue that I have experienced a great deal of progress in several media, I have never seen myself as restricted to, or even primarily focused on, a single mode of expression.

The sculpture itself depicts an allegorical scene from a not-too-distant future, in which a progression of shackled individuals are led forward into a grave in the process of being dug. These individuals are escorted and forced forwards by their captors, but the power dynamic between the different characters is different than the dynamic found within other oppressive situations. If the viewer looks closely, they will observe that the aggressive figures themselves are attached to the same chain as those offering resistance. This is intended to serve as a metaphor for the behavior of our species regarding death. In our attempts to rationalize and defend our collective psyche against looming and ever-approaching obliteration, we have duped ourselves into an acceptance of this fate that nullifies any emerging attempts to challenge the inevitability of this outcome. Religious leaders distract from the severity of the issue by positing an eternal afterlife, unknowingly stymieing the very real possibility of achieving a similar state within the life that we *know* that we have. Further, military, political, and economic forces have mortality encoded within their various mechanisms, creating situations that steal labor and other resources away from research in pursuit of the same end. These oppressive forces, however, end up damning themselves as well. In this way, death – and the set of behaviors that unintentionally perpetuate it – is the greatest societal foe we have ever faced, as it makes victims out of all of us, equally. My sculpture includes both the strong and the injured, and the old and the young, to illustrate this point – all are headed towards the same conclusion, and often they are motivating themselves to progress towards their own demise, in denial of the magnitude of the consequences. I have chosen to consolidate the symbolism of these various negative forces into generic symbols of power, exemplified in my sculpture as armament. Additionally, in furtherance of

my goal to present a sober depiction of the state of our self-fulfilling prophecy of death, I have set all of this in an environment of human ruin – both to contribute to the oppressive mood of the piece generally, and to symbolize the idea that as long as we are still within the grasp of death, all of the other accomplishments of our species are meaningless. My depiction does offer a glimpse of the hope that I see within the real-life analogue of this metaphor, in the form of an almost-broken-through section of chain at the far end of the sculpture. This symbolizes my belief in our ability to escape this thus-far endless cycle of mortality, but simultaneously the notion that this escape will require further toil and is by no means a foregone conclusion just yet.

It has been my observation that artists – specifically in the case of practitioners of identity-centric art, a group that I feel I've been acutely exposed to during my undergraduate career amongst students, faculty, and visiting professionals – who create work dealing with societal issues frequently do so because of a particular affinity they may feel, for a number of possible reasons, with the specific problem their work explores. The notion that artists often have a tendency to create personal work is fairly self-evident when looking at the contemporary art world, and my work – especially my recent work, this project included – is no exception. However, I would posit that the societal issue that my work focuses on is a good deal different in nature than most of the concerns tackled by currently existing issue-centric art. I say this for a few reasons: firstly, the issue that I am exploring is one that is not and has not been recognized as an issue – in and of itself, in a direct sense – by virtually anyone. Secondly, and by extension, all other issue-based art *does* in a way deal with death, in that all of these other societal problems can be ultimately reduced to satellite concerns orbiting the mother-of-all-problems that all self-aware life faces – the issue I am focusing on is unique in that it is irreducible, at least from the standpoint of practical analysis. This is a point that I've already touched on, but it bears repeating because it is particularly relevant to why I chose this focus specifically. My entire mental development could be described as an ongoing recognition of increasingly embedded and complex schemes of organization branching out from a foundational point, a process that has thus far allowed

me to better situate myself within my own ultimately unprovable stream of conscious experience – in fact, this path would serve as my first introduction to philosophy proper, in the form ontology. I make this claim not in the sense that, yes, this is a fitting summary of the cognitive processes occurring in the brain of every developing human being, but rather in the sense that this is very much how the process has always appeared to me on an internal level – this "expanding map," centered on a specific foundation, served as one of my most basic such constructs. My cognitive/psychological/philosophical development has been an ever-changing process, but a visceral awareness of how the entire scheme has been a set of divergent branches, each with its own specific function and attributes, has always remained a constant. Where it deals with my own understanding of the physical universe and the "goals" to which various mechanisms are moving, I have always been inclined to follow these branches back to the source, as much so as I am able at any given time – from the behavior of the individual, all the way back through the behavior of DNA as it propagates throughout an environment (and most recently, the possibility of even further regression in the form of a theory that I've stumbled across by MIT physicist Jeremy England, positing that life exists as a mechanism to accelerate the dissipation of heat within our universe – but I digress).

I cannot help but approach practical concerns in the same manner, and as such I have always sought to seek out and eliminate root problems whenever I am presented with a surface-level concern. As such, when I look at the work of other artists dealing with the various social ills of the present, I find no interest in creating work about similar issues. This is not because of a lack of concern about said issues, or because I do not wish to see an increase in public awareness about – or, god-forbid, a solution to – these same concerns. In truth, there are a few different reasons why I feel no such compulsion – one of stronger being that, when dealing with issues that for the most part can be reduced to issues of privilege on a psychosocial level, I feel it would be wrong of me to attempt to force another predominantly-privileged voice behind the "mouthpiece" of those desiring social change when there are plenty of artists belonging to said underprivileged categories who are far more qualified to speak on

the matter than myself. Nevertheless, the primary reason I refrain from making work about such subjects is my analysis that all of these problems can be traced back to – and resolvable, perhaps more effectively so, through the resolution of – the problem of death. Based on my analysis, all of the myriad forms of human suffering ultimately stem from our thus-far imminent mortality, and are subsets of the greater suffering that this death sentence imposes upon us. So, in a way, while I am choosing to avoid the route of most contemporary issue-based art in an *acute* sense, I am actually attempting to interface with it on a more fundamental level.

Apart from stepping outside of issue-centric art proper, I feel that my work has one other significant divergence from the artistic landscape of my undergraduate career. I have already mentioned two of my rationales regarding my own non-participation in the contemporary practice of generating art dealing with identity and identity politics, and here I will bring up a third rationale, one that is simultaneously a criticism of said work. The entire point of this kind of art – mine included by extension – is to effect social change by increasing awareness of a particular issue, and I doubt that any artist working in this realm would disagree with me on this fundamental point. That said, I feel that most art of this nature is ultimately ineffective in accomplishing this goal. From the standpoint of popular opinion – particularly within academic disciplines outside of the liberal arts, the political agents who continuously give preferential treatment to these fields (albeit with the rationale of some vague "economic benefit" to be pitched to their electorate in lieu of the arguably more noble goal of empirical progress), and the aforementioned electorate, conditioned to disregard the as-depicted intelligentsia of the liberal arts disciplines and their respective wares (the relative difference in breadth of most individuals' opinions about athletics as opposed to their opinions about art is quite telling) – contemporary artists appear to be facing a crisis in their interface with the rest of the public. As those in power – and many of those who vote for these individuals – continue to encroach upon the artistic and otherwise cultural enterprises that they correctly view to be a threat to their own cultural agendas, the contemporary art world is increasingly showing the strain in the form of budget cuts, lack of

widespread appreciation, and the like. Outside of the relatively insular world of the arts academia, which I've observed at length over the past four years, there seems to be an identifiable negative vibe – resentment, perhaps? – directed towards those who make art today, from a segment of the population that is at least vocal, if not as numerous as they may seem at first. Depictions of the stereotypical contemporary art world participant in popular culture as pretentious and ultimately inconsequential – perhaps with some truth on the first count – are taken very seriously by some. I would argue that while this turn of events is certainly a bad thing – although the degree to which this is a truly new state of affairs rather than yet another phase in a centuries-old cycle is debatable – the art world is at least partially, if not primarily to blame for this outcome when we consider contributing factors outside of the normal status-quo preserving tendencies present in any social mechanism exhibited by the previously-mentioned political forces at work. The likely unintended result of the direction that a large chunk of the art world has taken in the past few decades – from the standpoint of execution, not necessarily theme – has been the alienation of the art world from the rest of the non-art-making public, upon whom we symbiotically rely. But this is an argument that is best discussed in-depth elsewhere – suffice to say, the *end result* of what essentially amounts to a growing rift between the public and the art world, regardless of who is to blame, means that our well-intentioned messages increasingly tend to fall upon the ears of those who are already "on-board" with our social programs, whatever these messages may be. Or to put it another way, the very audience that we strive to persuade through our art belongs more often than not to the ever-growing demographic of individuals who regard contemporary art with ambivalence at best and dismissal at worst. My work attempts to break out of this cycle – both for its own reward, and because the entire endgame of the idea that I'm supporting with my work centers on public participation in efforts towards the proposed goal of radical life extension. Based on the experiences of other artists I've spoken to and myself, as well as extrapolation from observed interactions between the art world and the general public – referring specifically to those who have no vested interest in the art world whatsoever, which makes up the vast majority of the total population of

the world today – two things have become clear to me about the public's perception of art and the level of quality they attribute to it, and thus their receptiveness to the concepts it represents. Firstly, craftsmanship – both in contemporary and historical contexts – tends to be respected. More so than an appreciation of the conceptual aspects of a work of art – which is the overwhelming focus of the contemporary art world at large (to its great detriment, in my opinion) – the general public appreciates and respects art that it perceives to be a demonstration of skill, or at least the appearance thereof, regardless of whether or not this is actually the case. I have heard those within the arts academia dismiss the oft-repeated "I could have made that" rebuttal of some contemporary art as an incorrect assessment of a work that displays more nuance than the viewer is giving the item in question credit for. Regardless of whether or not this argument holds water, the perception of a work of art as being technically simple does have a real negative effect on some viewers, particularly those who aren't involved in formal programs of art education, which has the ability to compromise the message of the art itself. Secondly, and as a corollary to this first point, figurative work – a demonstration of a skill beyond the skill otherwise displayed in the given medium – has historically been highly regarded among the general public (see the historical collections of any given art museum if you don't believe me), and this continues into the present day. Figurative art represents a challenge to the artist, and this is widely understood – indeed, this difficulty is why I became involved in figurative art in the first place. Regarding both of these claims, as it pertains to the approval or disapproval of a particular work of art by a viewer, it doesn't matter if these tendencies are in any way justified – merely that *these tendencies exist at all*, in a way that has an effect on the viewer. The general public is going to be hesitant at the very least to interface on an intellectual level with art that they feel alienated from, regardless of whether or not this is a fair practice. Since I am trying to reach the largest audience possible with this work – since death is a problem to which we are all equally subject – part of my choice to use figurative imagery rests on this idea of forming a bridge between the audience and the art itself. I am attempting to give them a visual narrative that they can intimately relate to.

One of my primary influences – not just in terms of figurative quality, although this is also the case – is the figurative tradition of renaissance painting and sculpture, particularly such works intended for public observation. For me, these works form a sort of a prototype for what I consider to be a "great work," the successes of which I am obviously trying to emulate on some level in my own art. What I feel makes these assorted works so successful is the way in which they are able to marry technical mastery with a strong conceptual message – religious ideals and narratives, in their case – in order to reinforce a social goal. In the case of these works, this goal was the communication of biblical narratives to the masses, and the reification of the ideology of those in power at the time. Part of their function was as a form of propaganda, as is frequently the case with many different forms of art – and I use this term in a strictly functional sense, not necessarily in a derogatory one. While I don't agree with the intended end result of these examples of religious imagery, I cannot help but marvel at their effectiveness. This is further evidenced by the fact that increasingly secular contemporary societies continue to treasure such works, no longer for merely the religious ideology that they signify but for their own sakes as well. My hope in this work was to emulate these artists as a propagandist and evangelist – no pun intended – for a radically different humanist, or more correctly, *transhumanist,* ideology.

My art historical interests have always tended to focus less on modern and contemporary movements in favor of figurative renaissance works and the derivative genres they have inspired in the following centuries, although there are certainly exceptions to this rule – and specifically exceptions that are relevant to this project in particular, as I will discuss shortly. My fascination with this type of work was further stoked by a pair of visits to Italy, the second of which involved a month-long study of artwork from the birthplace of the renaissance in intimate detail, as well as examples of baroque imagery that also grew out of traditions that can be traced back to the renaissance masters. These exposures have undeniably had an effect on my own artistic vocabulary, both in terms of rendering style and in terms of narrative composition. Within this sculpture specifically, I draw heavily from the

baroque style in particular in the way that I have arranged a highly linear narrative building up to an emotional climax. I attempted to make use of an emotionally exaggerated style with grandiose depictions of the suffering of the individual actors within my sculpture, using almost melodramatic language similar to that used by Caravaggio and his contemporaries in their own attempts to advance a storyline.

In my attempt to translate elements of the baroque genre to a depiction of a future not so far from today, I have been drawn to certain contemporary artists who are likewise dealing with a similar stylistic goal. The works of Kris Kuksi, an assemblage sculptor, exemplify to me a very deliberate and successful attempt to renovate the baroque style for the present day, and the fact that his work exists in three dimensions allowed me to better imagine what such an approach would look like in a spatial work – thus allowing me to better emulate the baroque method of utilizing multiple human figures and "sub-plots" within the greater work to take advantage of multiple angles of observation, such as in Bernini's fountains amongst many other examples. I have also drawn a good deal of inspiration from Odd Nerdrum, a self-described "kitsch" painter from Norway who takes this translation a step further in that he utilizes the compositional tropes of the baroque genre without actually using any anachronistic imagery, as is the case in Kuksi's sculptures. Seeing as how it was my intent to create a semi-futuristic landscape, this inspiration was invaluable, and my affinity for Nerdrum's philosophy about art also served as a more abstract source of inspiration for my practice in general. I have also, to a lesser extent, referenced other historical and contemporary artists that I feel have done work in a similar vein – though they wouldn't necessarily classify themselves as baroque specifically – such as Josep Maria Sert, Ilya Repin, Victor Safonkin, Roberto Ferri, and another member of the kitsch school and former Nerdrum student Richard T. Scott, amongst others.

My goal of forming a bridge with the viewer doesn't end with capturing the audience's attention. When I was formulating my plan for this sculpture, I was in the midst of being exposed to the Mexican mural painting tradition for the first time. I felt particularly inspired by the ideals and effectiveness of

the artists involved in the muralist movement – Rivera, Orozco, and my personal favorite Siqueiros, as well as the socialist realist artists working in another hemisphere towards a related end. The ability of the Mexican muralists to leverage figurative imagery in art – and to specifically gear this imagery towards the encouragement and inspiration of all segments of the population, cultural "elite" and "layperson" alike, without distinction, in service of a common goal – and to use this figurative imagery to create an emotional connection with the audience, served as a great inspiration during the synthesis of my thesis. Where Siqueiros, Rivera, and their contemporaries attempted to inspire hope for positive change in their audience of the Mexican public, I am instead trying to inspire existential horror – albeit in service of a larger positive change, but again, my work is supposed to serve as the uncomfortable first step to shake the viewer out of their defense-mechanism-inspired complacency. Though my work discusses a more global ill than the political and economic goals of the Mexican muralists, I feel that my sculpture draws quite a bit from both the egalitarian strategy of the muralists as well as elements of their visual style – in a way, I like to think of this sculpture as a derivative mural, but in three dimensions (technically two, in print form).

One of the general criticisms I have grown to anticipate when producing figurative work using digital methodologies revolves around the relative legitimacy of art produced in this way. While "new media" in art have no doubt flourished, there continues to be a good deal of hesitation regarding the idea of reevaluating older artistic paradigms – specifically figurative and/or realist sculpture and painting – in the context of new technologies. While this is in no way universal or even necessarily representative of the contemporary art world, concerns about technical "cheating" and the relative worth of digital art have been raised by some, amongst both artists and non-artists alike. While the latter complaint can largely be dismissed as "medium chauvinism," the former criticism indeed presents a troubling attack on certain forms of digital art. I believe, however, that an argument against this point can be readily summoned, as said criticism revolves around an arbitrary distinction between various employments of technologies by artists.

The concern lies in the notion that by using techniques such as digital sculpture and post-processing in pursuit of realistic depictions, artists are somehow lessening the quality and authenticity of their work compared to artists who achieve similar results using more traditional workflows – in other words, this practice is seen as "cheating." This is somewhat comparable to the distinction drawn between commodities which are mass-produced and those which are "hand-made." My first counter to this idea is that realism achieved through these newer means is in no way a simple task in and of itself – a misconception likely drawn from applications of digital technologies in other areas of daily experience – and the skills required to produce such a result are in no way fully, or even mostly separate from the skills required to achieve similar results traditionally. As someone who developed competency in realist techniques using traditional methods – both in two-dimensional and three-dimensional media – prior to learning the corresponding digital techniques, I can attest to the fact that a substantial portion of the task of realism occurs when the artist isn't even actively manipulating the medium in question. The greatest challenge of such work, based both on my own experience and on essentially every account of figurative practice that I've ever seen, lies in the interpretation of a physical reference and the translation of this spatial data into accurate manipulations of the artist's tools to produce a result that our same perceptual set identifies as congruent with the basis object. This challenge is amplified tenfold when dealing with representations of human beings, particularly of the face – this process requires an entirely different retraining of our perception, since the human brain utilizes a different mechanism to process facial characteristics than when we process other visual information. This retraining is shared by any artist dealing with realistic representations of the world around us, regardless of media – as such, a large bulk of the skills required to produce realist imagery is the common between traditional and digital workflows.

Secondly, I would argue that this criticism of digital augmentation is confusing two different evaluations of an artist's practice – one of skill in a particular technique, and one of successful creative output. The use of technology in art is absolutely not a new phenomenon – in fact, it is hard to imagine

that art could even be created without some form of technology in the first place. Artists creating

realistic work "the old-fashioned-way" are still taking advantage of technological developments within

their medium. In fact, one could point to a number of different "old-fashioned-ways" in which the

technology involved in the execution of the work in question varies in terms of sophistication. When

we evaluate the practice of, say, a sculptor who uses a hammer and a chisel to craft their work instead

of modeling the work through digital means, we can judge the artist on the basis of skill, but this

judgment will only be appropriate in terms of the specific techniques said artist is making use of.

Obviously, we can make the claim that the artist's work requires greater skill *with a hammer and chisel*,

but to fail to assign this declaration of skill to a particular type of action is to make our judgment vague

to the point of meaninglessness. Likewise, we can say that the digital sculptor's work requires greater

skill with the tools that were used in the creation of his or her work. This doesn't preclude evaluations

of skill – and the ultimate relevancy of skill to art can of course be argued as well – but it does

necessitate that these evaluations are made along a common set of criteria. If we instead evaluate the

artist based on their raw ability to create works that achieve their artistic intent and quantity matters, the

artist with the technological advantage is almost certainly going to fare better, all else being equal. I

believe that a large number of artists, if not most, would believe that this goal is of a greater personal

importance than any skill-specific goals – myself included. To these artists, digital art ought to ideally

offer an appeal, since in the hands of an experienced practitioner these methods allow for a generally

faster throughput. Given a theoretically limited timeframe in which we have the opportunity to

produce work, being able to create work of the same quality but more rapidly could be a very good

thing. This isn't to suggest that the skills developed by the old-fashioned-way artist aren't themselves

valuable – the labor put into developing a skill, whatever it may be, is worthy of respect. But we must

realize that when we are evaluating artists, we need to keep in mind that we may be looking at two

distinct sets of goals – goals focused on the artistic output itself, or goals focused on the development

of a particular skill. It would be unfair to judge an artist's success in a given matter based on a goal that

they were never intending to achieve in the first place. Ultimately, it all just depends on the goal a particular artist is trying to accomplish. For these two reasons, I feel that attacks on the legitimacy of digital approaches to figurative art are quite misplaced. I am fully convinced that if Michelangelo were around today – or any other technical figurehead of centuries past, for that matter – there is a very good chance that he would be utilizing these same technologies for these exact reasons.

Few people, outside of those who are on the very brink of death, have ever truly contemplated their own mortality in an unmediated way. There is an often unrecognized distinction between an awareness of the *concept* of one's own mortality, and an acute awareness of the grim reality of what mortality holds in store for us as individuals. This is where we find perhaps the strongest psychological defense mechanisms found in the average human individual. Through this work, I have sought to engage with and interrupt these defense mechanisms in an attempt to reveal the direness of the situation we find ourselves in. It is my hope that in doing so I am able to lend support to the emerging pursuit of radical life extension, and in the process take my own steps to break this self-fulfilling prophecy.