



MIKE PSZCZONAK:
*retrospective of an
emerging artist*

MIKE PSZCZONAK: RETROSPECTIVE OF AN EMERGING ARTIST.

curated by Matthew Purvis



The Petrified Forest Gallery.
291 Windermere Rd. Unit 142. London, ON.
www.thepetrifiedforestgallery.com

Deflated man and inflated meat. by Matthew Purvis

The primary tension in the *nature morte* resides in the irony that defines it: the composition of decomposition. The ability to view the malleable as the frozen is what has allowed this genre to suggest both the permanence of death and the fleeting quality of life. It is this kind of simultaneity that frequently finds itself played out in the paintings of Mike Pszczonak, even as the rhetorical models that they are based on undergo some significant changes. In spite of how overtly stupid these paintings seem, the stupid factor functions as a surprisingly effective switch for activating the tensions in the works. One of the most basic of these is between inflation and deflation. Man is deflated, meat is inflated. His art historical referencing heightens his subject matter while it lowers art history; a gesture close in rhythm to the wheezing of the obese.

Following the prescriptions found in the theories of Renaissance still life for *verecundia*, *copia*, *varietas*, he is careful to heed the kind of warning that Alberti once made concerning the readily overwhelmed table of the picture, loaded up with the meats of memory. To paraphrase Alberti, the goal is to present ornate richness with restraint, to instill in the composition a degree of gravity and dignity (*gravitas et dignitas*). The temptation to accord excessive significance runs throughout Mr. Pszczonak's work thanks to his overt reliance on generic forms and over-familiar symbols. His reductiveness (via minimization and parody) invites this temptation as a means to fill up his negative spaces, which are always awkward and divorced from the dramatic, deflating the objects he puts on display rather than providing them with the hint of *dignitas*. Gravity fares slightly better. His isolated and pathetic hamburgers, often crushed and deformed, the marks on their bread a mockery of the gesture of the artist, tend to hover in an anonymous space. On their own, the burgers flop near an ill-defined edge of the painting. Flirting with the edge of illusionism, they never quite grapple with a believable dimensionality. Instead, they seem to shrivel at the edge, flattened to the surface, barely weighed down and not heavy enough to fall.

The question of excess can also be detected in his thematic suggestiveness. What about these hamburger-headed men? Are they still lives too? Is Mr. Pszczonak commenting on his status as an artist, something to be consumed, his identity replaced by the generic image he has fabricated and attached his name to? Though depicted in generally active guises, these figures are also rendered as pieces of meat to be digested. This would suggest such a moral-hysterical reading. *The pathetic meat head* – and not only a meat head but one which has been industrially farmed,

ground up, processed, frozen and reheated. But this interpretation is stupid, obvious and obviously stupid. I mean none of these things pejoratively. The hamburgers, like his parade of hamburger-headed types, mock significance. As much as they allude to canonical art history, they also resemble documentary or vernacular photos, whether one of the endless stream of projects concerning ethnic minorities, professions, and social outcasts or the anthropomorphic buildings of the Bechers. Always the same stupid face, now flattened on the picture plane. They may superficially suggest that they possess romantic and painterly qualities, but the more you look at them, the less they seem to. Overshadowed by the blankness that surrounds them, there is something too flat and suspiciously tasteful about them, like when a drag queen shows you their finely pruned chest hair.

As with most jokey painting, you end up stuck looking long after the laugh has died off. Few painters are good enough to make you laugh at the same joke over and over again. Fewer viewers have the talent to laugh that heartily. Pszczonak's paintings are not that funny because it is only deceptively jokey humour. When effective humour evaporates, what remains are the effects of redundancy. No longer relying on a one-to-one regurgitation of historical tropes, he pushes his sense of visual redundancy even further. This is most explicitly at play in his recent light pieces. From chiaroscuro to the Impressionists to Dan Flavin, light, like the *nature morte*, has an over-determined art historical privilege. Here, it is rendered in blunt literalness: the concept on display as a light bulb. Although the often murky palette obscures the clarity of the purpose, the redundancy overshadows any residue of the joke. In relation to the burger paintings, the light pictures bring the force of gravity even further into focus, coding it as a kind of inertia suspended over an industrial void.

Excessive redundancy makes interpretation deplorable. Conceptualization cannot cope well with stupidity. Stupidity, after all, is precisely the impossibility of passing over the threshold of the conceptual. It isn't naivety since that would require the ability to overcome itself. It is intellectually sterile. This sterility is then set against decomposition. If the paintings are humorous, this is part of the reason why. They trip you up on the excessive temptation to conceptualize and knock you over. Onto your ass or your face, it doesn't matter. In this case they are interchangeable. This is also where the paintings break significantly from the tradition of the genres they reference. A *memento mori* asks for contemplation but these paintings do not ask for that any more than they ask for conceptualization. If you stare into them, nothing stares back. They do begin to seem scabby. They have the tactile quality of food that has spilt on a t-shirt and dried into a crusty residue. Under the coruscating light of a landscape dominated by Taco Bell, consciousness, or aesthetic experience as such, amounts to something less than diarrhoea.



untitled (Memento Mori)
oil on canvas
52" x 63"
2007



31 Variations of the Hamburger, (installation view), 2011.



Hamburger
oil on panel
12" x 16
2011

Hamburger
oil on panel
12" x 16
2011





Cheeseburger
oil on panel
12" x 16
2011

Cheeseburger
oil on panel
12" x 16
2011





Big Mac
oil on panel
12" x 16
2011

Double Baconator
oil on panel
12" x 16
2011





Whiplash Whopper
oil on panel
12" x 16
2011

Big Mac SnackWrap
oil on panel
12" x 16
2011





untitled(rejected passport photo)
oil on canvas
42" x 30"
2013

00002837
oil on panel
38" x 30"
2012

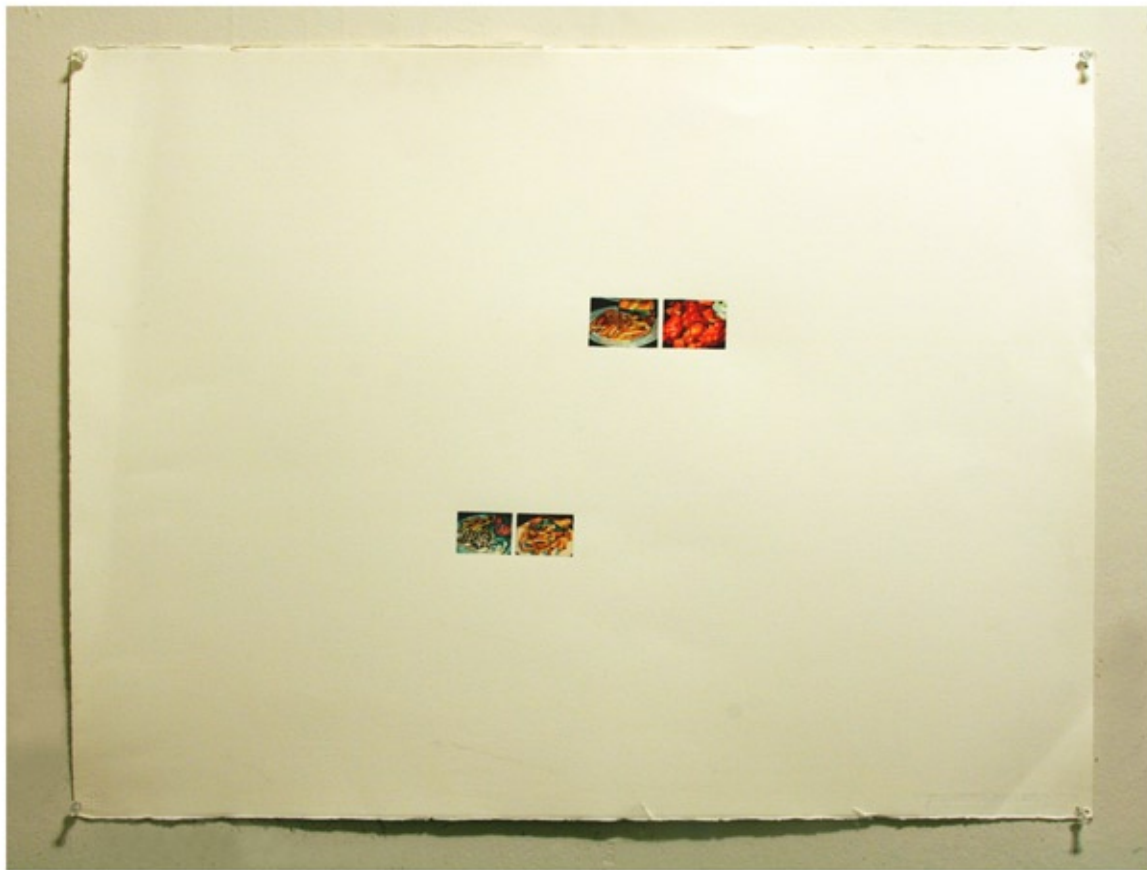




P8080-0724
oil on canvas
40" x 30"
2013



Photo ID Series (installation view), 2012



Burger/Wings/Pork/Wrap
watercolour on paper
22" x 30"
2010



Burger/Wings/Pork/Wrap (detail)
1" x 1.5" (each image) on 22" x 30" (paper)



Lamb/Pasta/Steak
watercolour on paper
22" x 30"
2010



Lamb/Pasta/Steak (detail)
1.5" x 5" (image) on 22" x 30" (paper)



A Portrait of the Artist as a Baby Cheeseburger
oil on canvas
10" x 8"
2012

A Portrait of the Artist as a Hamburger
oil on canvas
10" x 8"
2012





*A Cheesy Double Portrait of the Artist as
a Hamburger*

oil on canvas

10" x 8"

2012

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Hamburger
Drinking a Beer.*
oil on canvas
10" x 8"
2012





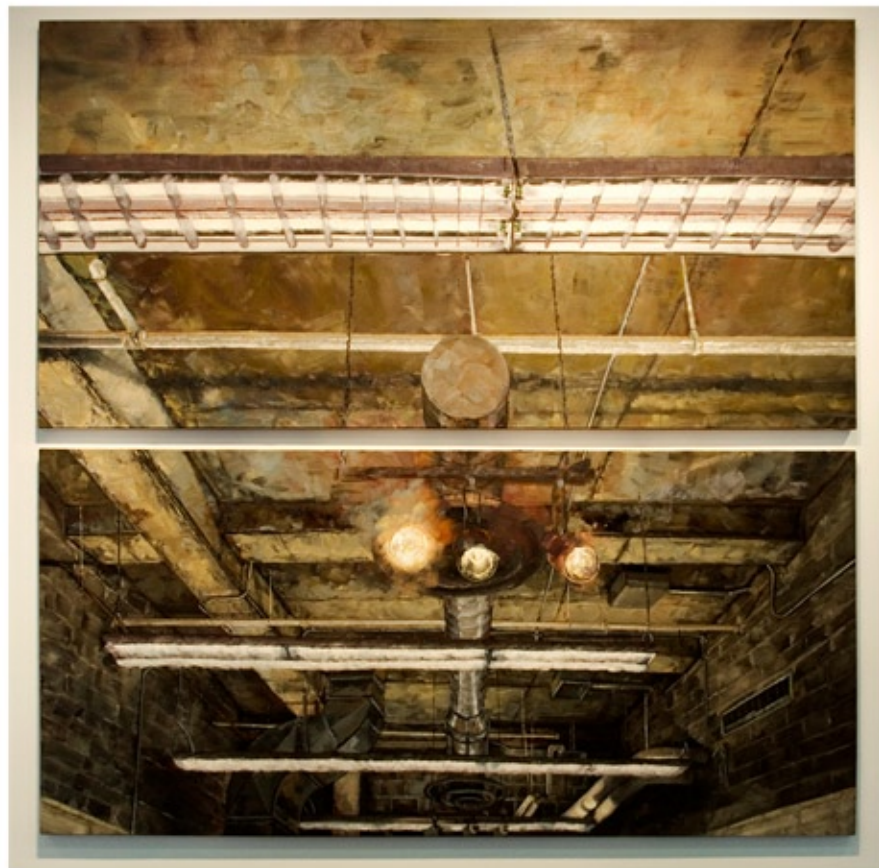
untitled (Fluorescent Bulb from Observation)

oil on canvas

24" x 48"

2012

Studio Lights from Observation
oil on canvas
71.5" x 72"
2013





Click to Enlarge
oil on panel
12" x 16"
2014

Kitchen Light
oil on canvas
16" x 20
2014



EDUCATION:

Department of Visual Arts, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario
MFA Candidate, 2015 (anticipated completion date)

Faculty of Education, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario
Bachelor of Education, 2009

School of Fine Art & Music, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario
Bachelor of Arts Honours, major in studio art with a minor in French studies, 2008

École de la Langue Française à Trois-Pistoles, University of Western Ontario, Trois-Pistoles, Québec
Explore Program, 2006

Faculty of Art, Ontario College of Art & Design, Toronto, Ontario, 2005

St. Clair College of Applied Arts & Technology, Windsor, Ontario
Ontario College Diploma, Tradigital Animation Program, 2003

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS:

Retrospective of an Emerging Artist. Petrified Forest Gallery, London Ontario. (August - September 2014)

Painting (Jared Peters, Mike Pszczonak, and Matt Tarini). Michael Gibson Gallery, London, Ontario.(June 2014)

VSVSVS vs Bright Brown (off-site gallery). Toronto, Ontario.(December 2012)

Not Much. Family Thrift Store and Wally's Gallery (artist run event), Guelph, Ontario. (September 2009)

Insights 2009: A Juried Art Exhibition. Wellington County Museum and Archives, Fergus, Ontario. (June - September 2009)

No Common Ground. Paul Petro Special Projects Space, Toronto, Ontario. (August 2008)

stART Exhibition. Studio 21, Halifax, Ontario. (March - April 2008)
This Must be the Place. Zavitz Gallery, Guelph, Ontario. (April 2008)
40th Annual Juried Art Show. University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario. (March 2008)
untitled (God is Dead, Painting is Not). Zavitz Gallery, Guelph, Ontario. (January 2008)
Asbestos You Can. Zavitz Gallery, Guelph, Ontario. (November 2007)

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND PUBLICATION:

SSHRC Joseph-Armand Bombardier CGS Masters Research Scholarship, University of Western Ontario. 2014 - 2015
Ontario Graduate Scholarship, University of Western Ontario. London, Ontario. 2014-2015 (declined)
Western Graduate Research Scholarship, University of Western Ontario. London, Ontario. 2013 - 2014
Chairs Entrance Scholarship, University of Western Ontario. London, Ontario. 2013
Insights 2009: Painting Award, Wellington County Museum and Archives. Fergus, Ontario. 2009
Elissa Barnard, "Difference Strokes at Studio 21." *The Chronicle Herald*, Halifax, Nova Scotia. March 25, 2008
Faculty Painting Award, Juried Art Show. University of Guelph. Guelph, Ontario. 2008
"Rope Ladder: A Catalogue of Selected Undergraduate Art." Jeunesse Press, Guelph, Ontario. 2007
Dean's Honours List, University of Guelph. Guelph, Ontario. 2005 - 2008

ARTIST TALKS:

Visiting Artist. Nipissing University, North Bay, Ontario. (April 2013)

VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE:

Western Open Studios, Co-Organizer. University of Western Ontario. (March 2014)
Fine Arts Network, Social Coordinator. University of Guelph. (September 2007 - April 2008)
College of Arts Student Union, University of Guelph. (September 2006 - April 2007)

Mike Pszczonak: Retrospective of an Emerging Artist.
August 8, 2014 - September 7, 2014

Exhibition Curator: Matthew Purvis
Essay by: Matthew Purvis
Design of Catalogue: Mike Pszczonak

www.mikepszczonak.com

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