

Sacred Heart University

From the Selected Works of Nathan Lewis

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**The Hand That Finds, The Hand That Feeds, The
Hand That Fails: An Installation of Sketchbook
Drawings by Nathan Lewis**

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/nathan_lewis/5/



Nathan Lewis, American, born 1971, "The hand that finds, the hand that feeds, the hand that fails", Installation: sketchbook pages, mixed media 2012

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Roger W. Rogers Gallery

Much is made nowadays of the lack of connection between contemporary art and the public. Perhaps this schism exists because the contemporary artist's creative process is widely misunderstood by the general public, who remain attached to outdated 19th century notions about artmaking.

While art has evolved dramatically to accommodate new genres, media, resources and theoretical frameworks, the public's view of the artistic process still hinges on Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetes' characterization of the artist as a romantic genius who relies on inspiration to transform emotional expression into art. The truth is that the artistic process for most contemporary artists has more in common with the mechanisms of Darwinian evolution than the mythological sculptor Pygmalion's obsessive romanticism.

I equate the creative process with Darwinian evolution because both processes depend on accidents, or rather productive accidents. In evolution these accidents take the form of spontaneous mutations, which are usually deleterious, sometimes neutral, but on rare occasions can unintentionally result in adaptations that enhance the fitness of individual organisms and their offspring. In art these productive accidents alert the artist to new compositional devices, techniques, or strategies for communicating meaning. The ability to recognize and exploit a productive accident while avoiding or reversing the unproductive ones consequently becomes one of the artist's most important skills. The willingness to fail becomes both a virtue and a necessity.

The problem, of course, is that the viewer is accustomed to seeing only the resolved, completed works of an artist, and therefore has no inkling of the trail of accidents, failures or unintended consequences that established the aesthetic, technical or conceptual qualities of the finished product. When our cultural definition of virtuosity demands the creation of a work that appears effortlessly resolved and polished, the work's rambling genealogy and messy birth must naturally remain hidden. In a perverse way we are prevented from seeing the elements that would tell us most about the work, and by extension the artist. Often it is only by looking at the artist's sketchbook and preparatory studies that a work's evolution is revealed because it is there that the artist feels free to make mistakes or fail without the consequences of being exposed to public criticism.

This installation of the sketchbook pages of painter Nathan Lewis provides us with a valuable opportunity to observe the evolution of his work firsthand. Lewis's sketchbook is filled with his energetic drawings, compositional studies, technical experiments, anatomical and architectural studies, and copies of masterworks.

His sketchbook is a repository of visual reference material and ideas, an optical instrument to record the process of visual experience as it occurs, a workshop for resolving the mechanics of composition, a classroom to learn from his predecessors, and a laboratory for open-ended, even escapist experimentation where he invites the kind of accidents that will allow his work to grow and develop as these studies evolve into finished oil paintings.

His sketchbook is also a means for Lewis to engage the history and traditions of painting. He explains his intent as follows, "When I'm painting I almost consider it a battlefield where the present and history have to come to terms together. Things have to contend with each other in the picture, so I'm constantly looking back at history, but also trying to relate to the present." This engagement with both the history of art and contemporary culture helps Lewis to weave dense and rich allegories that invite the viewer's interpretation.

In these sketches and studies we see Lewis blend humor, literary, historical and mythological references and storytelling to explore the elements which allow his paintings to create a kind of Narrative Humanism. The studies are unified by his devotion to naturalistic representation, which he explains as an attempt to "get back to that moment of experiencing whatever it was that my eyes saw before I named it."

Nathan Lewis is an Assistant Professor of Art at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut. His paintings can be viewed on his website: <http://www.nathanlewisart.com/>
-Andries Fourie, Curator, Roger W. Rogers Gallery