Superpower

Chad R. Penner

A Creative Terminal Project presented in partial fulfillment of the

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By Chad Penner

To be approved

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By Committee Members:

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Sara Schneckloth

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Sara Schneckloth

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Project Description

My thesis project explores the relationship between the idea of American exceptionalism and America's intimate relationship with and affinity towards violence. I allegorize these concepts using popular superheroes, specifically Captain America, Superman, and Wonder Woman, which function as symbols of an idealized America. In turn, these superheroes epitomize the superhero genre's emblematic theme of resolution through conflict, paralleling America's own historical and cultural association with violence. I discuss America's obsession with violence in relation to its own idealized identity in drawings that combine superhero imagery and social commentary.

The format of my exhibition is a series of 10 large scale drawings, the majority of which will measure around 105 x 69 inches. I drew these works using charcoal and pastels on photo-backdrop paper. The majority of the compositions consist of the dynamic physical struggle between two or more figures, while others examine the historical or social implications of violence outside of the act of violence itself. All figures are life-size or larger as the composition dictates. These figures tower over the viewer, implicating them in a powerless position as victims or bystanders.

Project Justification

Current events and the present sociopolitical climate are the main factors driving my thesis project. The divisions within American society brought to a head by the 2016 presidential election, a pronounced increase in civil violence, and palpable tensions abroad have culminated in a heightened sense of uncertainty as to the state of the nation. In turn, this sociopolitical unrest is underscored by the narrative of American exceptionalism, a notion that denies America's own failings and inequities while reinforcing zealous nationalism. As such, my work is a commentary on these contrasting ideas through the allegorization of America as superpower using the superheroes of popular culture.

My research explores and questions the ways in which violence is both celebrated and minimized in certain facets of American life and culture. America's military prowess and the frequent use of said force against weaker nations and people groups, such as Native Americans and African Americans, is intimately tied to conceptions of American pride and nationalism. On the other hand, the media, government, and much of the general populace downplay or ignore systemic violence and oppression against minority groups within America's own borders. My goal in this project is to craft a method of contrasting these opposing ideas clearly and concisely through allegorical figures and superhero imagery.

Aside from the obvious play between superpowers and America as a "superpower", the superhero is an American phenomenon that encapsulates the idealistic notions of American exceptionalism along with the nation's time honored tradition of resolution through violence. The synthesis of the iconography of American superheroes with the pressing issues of sociopolitical unrest and systemic violence results in artwork that questions idealistic notions of America and its relationship to violence. In turn, the adaptation of the cultural phenomenon of superheroes functions as a bridge between the low art of pop culture and the fine art of drawing, crafting a visual language that is accessible and legible to the average viewer.

Cultural and Historical Influences

Alex Ross

Alex Ross is a prominent comic book illustrator and artist, known primarily for his illustrations in the acclaimed graphic novel *Kingdom Come*, and one of my greatest inspirations. Rather than penciling and inking his illustrations like traditional comic book artists, Ross paints in gouache, allowing for more realistic and classical renderings of figures and settings. His superhero figures are monumental and classically proportioned, evidence of a fine art education and a commitment to the use of the live model. His figures feel volumetric and fleshy, costumes are wrinkled and draped over concrete forms, and faces are rendered with a heroic humanity. His illustrations harken to the drama and solidity of Renaissance paintings in contrast to the graphic quality of traditional comic books.

Ross is a particularly significant inspiration for me as his illustrations motivated my exploration of the superhero genre in the first place. I saw his rendering of the figure as analogous to my own style and sensibilities, a means to create superhero imagery that was engaging and awe-inspiring. Inspired by the realism and monumentality of Ross's superhero figures, I have made his ideas my own, significantly scaling up my work to monumental size and rendering my figures in charcoal instead of gouache. My choice of material facilitates a darker palette and more intense sense of chiaroscuro; Ross's figure glow with light while mine are draped in darkness.

Kara Walker

Kara Walker's work discusses the dynamics of race, gender, power, and sexuality between whites and blacks since the age of slavery. While she has worked in a wide range of mediums including collage and painting, her most notable works are black cutout silhouettes of figures and settings adhered to white walls. Despite the simplicity of her medium, Walker crafts her silhouettes with a liveliness that is at once beautiful, repugnant, and erotic. Walker engages her figures in acts of sex, murder, birth, breastfeeding, and defecation, often at the same time, weaving satirical narratives that push difficult and uncomfortable realities to the forefront. Kara Walker's work is provocative, challenging, and pulls no punches. Her work asks us to face difficult questions by presenting abstract narratives that are imagined yet drip with the drama and consequence of real events.

The most inspiring dimension of Walker's work is her confrontation of difficult realities in a manner that assaults the viewer's supposed civility. I aspire to such strong social commentary through violent imagery that towers over and implicates the viewer in its action. In turn, her sense of dark satire is a dynamic I have incorporated into some of the compositions of my thesis project. However, my medium of dusty charcoal drawing and colorful costumes contrasts greatly with her clean, black silhouettes. In addition, I am dealing with power dynamics,

violence, and nationalism in American culture through allegory, in contrast to Walker's more focused discussion of race, sex, and history.

Kehinde Wiley

Kehinde Wiley's work combines classical portraiture, genre painting, and contemporary black imagery in large scale oil paintings. Wiley appropriates traditional portrait paintings (which generally portray white males) and replaces the figures with modern African American males or individuals from other minority groups. His work recontextualizes and repurposes a medium historically dominated by whiteness, placing black males in the position of power and shifting the viewer's gaze. These paintings are anachronistic; his figures copy the posture of their classical counterparts, but retain their modern fashion sense, wearing Nike sneakers, baggy jeans, football jerseys, and snapback hats. In turn, Wiley generally removes the historical settings of his images and situates figures against a decorative background, evocative of extravagant, gold, floral wall paper.

Wiley and I clearly share a love of appropriation and an affinity towards classical imagery. Nonetheless, Wiley uses parody as a means to empower African Americans in a discussion of race, power, and prejudice, while I insert superheroes as metaphors for violence, power, and American idealism, In turn, Wiley commands a bright, colorful, and extravagant palette, dominated by saturated reds, yellows, and golds, in contrast to my subdued and darker palette.

Caravaggio

Caravaggio was an Italian painter who lived and worked from 1571-1610. A prolific painter and tragic young talent, Caravaggio is known for his high contrast, dark paintings of biblical and mythological figures and scenes. Working in the footsteps of Da Vinci and Michelangelo, Caravaggio adopted the chiaroscuro tradition of the Renaissance masters and emphasized its darkness, draping his figures in heavy shadows that are almost volumetric. In turn, he emphasizes the posture and musculature of the figure and the emotional and dynamic relationships between figures, filling canvas with figures that twist, clench, pull, and bear weight even in more static positions.

Caravaggio's embrace of shadows and darkness aligns with my own aesthetic. We situate our figures emerging out of heavy black backgrounds, sharply defined by high contrast lighting. We also focus on the human figure and its musculature as a primary subject matter, deemphasizing setting to a field of heavy shadows. This approach imbues our compositions with a heavy, dark atmosphere that pushes the figure to the forefront, while also creating a sense of mystery and drama. Our greatest contrast is in medium and the color palette it subsequently affords: Caravaggio paints in oil with rich, fleshy tones, while I favor a subdued greyscale and muted colors with charcoals and pastels.

Other Influences

1. Michelangelo
2. Jacques-Louis David
3. Chuck Close
4. Jim Lee
5. Greg Capullo
6. Frank Miller

Project Development

Earlier Work

I started working with superheroes as a visual subject matter in my first year of graduate school, tapping into the contemporary renaissance of superhero media and exploring the concept of superheroes as a modern mythology, an Americanization of the gods of Greek and Roman myth. I drew superheroes in the style of classical and neoclassical painting, while also parodying and referencing classical compositions as a means to raise the low art of superhero comics to the level of fine art. I also mimicked these compositions at their original scale, resulting in monumentally huge drawings, such as the 9' x 18' *Order Breeds Chaos*, based off of *God Creating Adam* in the Sistine Chapel. I continued to work with this melding of superheroes and classical imagery at a large scale, but shifted towards socially and politically charged commentary, using superheroes as a symbol of America in order to critique structures of power, violence, and prejudice. My subjects varied from police brutality against minorities in *Hero on Hero Violence*, based off of Goya's *The Third of May*, to the Trump presidency in *Whose Burden,* parodying Michelangelo's *Pietà*. Two years of experimentation in subject matter, visual style, and scale eventually resulted in the conceptual and visual framework of this thesis exhibition, *Superpower*.

Development of Concept

My exhibition concept began as a political and historical examination of violence and its systems in America. I intended to explore historical/cultural notions of American exceptionalism, in which America perceives itself as the ideal state, and thus devoid from prejudice, corruption, or a troubled past. In turn, these notions filter into the nation's history of foreign policy, in which the United States spreads high-minded ideals of democracy, progress, and civilization through the military conquest of or less direct interference in the affairs of other countries or peoples, such as the removal of Native Americans, the enslavement of Africans, and covert military interventions in Southeast Asia, South America, and the Middle East. This heightened, zealous militarism, tied so closely to notions of American nationalism, subsequently manifests in civil society, resulting in violent approaches to conflict resolution, the militarism of opinion, and an excessive culture of gun ownership. These notions of violence both at home and abroad in relation to America's idealized view of itself and a deliberate misremembering of history are all clearly linked in a thick web that touches upon history, politics, foreign relations, sociology, race relations, and media culture. However, such a broad, generalized scope, largely consisting of my own opinion and limited worldview, proved to be too much historical, ideological, and cultural ground to cover in a single exhibition.

Thus, I resolved to limit the scope of my thesis to violence and its implications on American culture in particular. My work is not explicitly historical or political, in the sense that it has moved away from specific references to political figures or policies. I have transitioned to an

exploration of the broader culture surrounding American violence through a more humanistic lens. However, my thesis still touches upon topics and current events closely related to American violence, such as police brutality, riots, race relations, and the debate over Confederate monuments. These references provide touchstones for the viewer to relate my created imagery to current events and issues they have experienced in the real world. I aspire to create work that is relevant, critical, and of the now, while still allowing the conceptual space for enduring reflections in the future.

American Exceptionalism and Identity

The fulcrum around which my thesis exhibition rotates is the concept of American exceptionalism and its relationship to violence. At its core the term American exceptionalism connotes an idealized view of America, its history, and its significance in the international sphere. However, exceptionalism refers to a larger set of ideologies, rooted in a Christian worldview carried over by early colonial settlers and evolved over the subsequent centuries.

The earliest examples of exceptionalist rhetoric surfaced in the famous sermon orated by John Winthrop to the colonists of the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1630. On board the flagship *Arbella* en route to the New World, Winthrop declared that the colony would "be as a Citty upon a Hill,"[1] emphasizing spiritual and social unity as essential to the survival of the Puritans while also highlighting their moral and religious separation from the corrupt church of England. Ten years later, a Boston minister, Peter Bulkely, would echo the sentiments of the Massachusetts colonists as "a special people, an only people" who "shine forth in holiness above other people."[2] Indeed, he quotes Winthrop directly, describing the colony as "a city set upon a hill, in the open view of all the earth" as "the eyes of the world are upon us because we profess ourselves to be a people in covenant with God."[3] From these two sermons originated the initial idea of the colonists as an exceptional people, distinct from the peoples of Europe in terms of morality and religious commitment and consequently an example to the rest of the world.

It was not until the latter half of the eighteenth century that exceptionalist rhetoric shifted towards a civil and national discourse and away from an explicitly religious message. A prominent thinker of the Revolutionary Period, Benjamin Franklin, contributed to the recontextualization and secularization of the exceptionalist myth in his *Autobiography*, written intermittently from 1771-1790. Using his own ancestry as a framework, Franklin charts the ideological course of the American nation, from the early settlers as champions of religious freedom to Franklin's own life as a self-made man in a land of opportunity. In *American Exceptionalism*, Deborah Madsen explains Franklin's definition of the model American as a redefining of the mythology of exceptionalism, shifting its purpose from to the establishment of a new, pure church to a secular nation "purified of the corruption of European politics and a social structure based on inherited title" and "a model of democratic government and the envy of all the nations of the earth."[4] Franklin redefines exceptionalism as being tied to place (America) and its people as an inherent birthright, rather than a gift bestowed by God on his chosen people as a reward for religious commitment. In Franklin's view, being exemplary becomes synonymous with being American, an exceptional nation founded on an exceptional democratic system and, of course, populated by an exceptional people.

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[1] Madsen, Deborah L, *American Exceptionalism* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 18.
[2] Madsen, *American Exceptionalism*, 19.
[3] Ibid., 19.
[4] Ibid., 37.

Once the colonies established their independence from Britain in 1776 and assembled into the United States of America, the next major evolution of the exceptionalist narrative developed during the fledgling nation's expansion westward. After a tenuous relationship between Native Americans and American frontiersman existed for decades, Andrew Jackson ascended to the presidency in 1829, himself a hero of the War of 1812 and a longtime opponent of Native American sovereignty.[5] Jackson quickly encouraged Congress to pass the Indian Removal Act, which would force Native Americans to vacate their lands and move west of the Mississippi River, in order to allow for the "waves of [American] population and civilization" to continue rolling westward and perhaps cause the Indians "under the protection of Government and through the influence of good counsels, to cast off their savage habits and become an interesting, civilized, and Christian community."[6] Years of slow forced migration of numerous tribes culminated in the infamous Trail of Tears in October of 1838, in which the U.S. Army removed and marched 17,000 Cherokees westward, resulting in the estimated deaths of some 4,000 Native Americans.[7] While the removal of Native Americans was clearly tied to the racist views of Andrew Jackson in particular, the escalation of the Indian Removal Act laid the legal groundwork for the imminent doctrine of manifest destiny, while also clarifying the major beneficiaries of the exceptionalist narrative: landed white men.

Soon after, John O'Sullivan, editor of the *Democratic Review*, coined the now infamous phrase "manifest destiny," stating that it was "Our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions."[8] Once the Mexican-American War began in the summer of 1846, the term "manifest destiny" and its ideological connotations became widespread in Congressional rhetoric and newspaper reporting as a means to justify the war. Georgian Senator H. V. Johnson explicitly employed "the doctrine of 'manifest destiny'" in his advocacy for the waging of war, while Senator William Giles of Maryland declared on February 11, 1847 that "We must march from ocean to ocean…We must march from Texas straight to the Pacific ocean…It is the destiny of the white race, it is the destiny of the Anglo-Saxon race."[9] It cannot be ignored that in this particular quote Senator Giles makes a case for exceptionalism not just based on the broader concept of American identity, but specifically the superiority and prosperity of the "white race" in America, establishing a piece of the ideological rhetoric which would eventually incite the Civil War in 1861.

Examining manifest destiny as an evolutionary step of the exceptionalist narrative shows a clear transition from an exclusively religious justification for America's exceptionalism to a secular, civil, and often racial basis for exceptionalism, in which the collective character of the American

[5] Zinn, Howard, *A People's History of the United States: 1942-Present* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1980), 127.

[6] Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1942-Present*, 140.

[7] Ibid., 147-8.

[8] Ibid., 151.

[9] Ibid., 155.

nation itself is proof enough of its exceptionalism and its right to conquer, to prosper, and to be venerated. In *Mystic Chords of Memory*, Michael Kammen labels this phenomenon as the rise of civil religion, which coincides with a noted increase in public patriotism in the latter half of the nineteenth century.[10] As the nineteenth century ended and a new century began, Kammen argues that notions of nostalgia and the traditions they produce provided a sense of security, however vague or false, to the American public during the period of transition between the Civil War and the First World War. The rise of civil religion coincides with the depoliticizing or "centering" of American traditions, myths, and figures. Significant American figures such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln morphed from complex, flawed historical figures to popular folk heroes, stripped of the connotations of their respective political parties or their relationship to the institution of slavery.[11] Depoliticizing and making commercially viable the American past, its figures, and its traditions, Kammen argues, allowed for greater social cohesion in times of crisis, especially apt during the tumultuous period between, during, and after the two World Wars. Thus, American leaders and intellectuals mythologized, depoliticized, and molded the American past to fit the nation's particular crisis, always centered on the nation's exceptional nature, its role as a stanchion of democracy, and the significance of patriotism in the cohesion of the national character.

As the turmoil of World War II closed in 1945 and the economy resurged in the wake of the Great Depression, relative stability returned to the United States and the need for an aggressive, unifying patriotism to weather a civil crisis waned. Nonetheless, the exceptionalist narrative would soon transform again during the conceptual conflict of the Cold War and physical conflict of the Vietnam War from 1955-75, in which the exceptionalist narrative and its militant child, manifest destiny, expanded to an international level. As we have established, manifest destiny signified not only the exceptional nature of the American people and nation, but of their military prowess and subsequent right to conquer lesser or threatening peoples. As the frontier closed and the subordination of Native Americans was completed, the target of America's manifest destiny shifted from a conquest of North American lands to a conquest of threatening ideological forces, namely communism, manifested in the Cold War and Vietnam War. The exceptionalist myth morphed to accommodate the United States' prominent role as a leader of the western world and its democratic ideals. As Madsen states in *American Exceptionalism*: "Once again, America is required to save the world from itself. Not, as in the seventeenth century, from misguided religious institutions, but now form corrupt political institutions that are inconsistent with the democratic capitalism that America is destined to exemplify and disseminate."[12] As the frontier closed, manifest destiny expands from a physical conquest of the North American continent to an ideological conquest of the world using America's military.

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[10] Kammen, Michael G., *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 204.
[11] Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 511.
[12] Madsen, *American Exceptionalism*, 158-9.

In the modern era, the narrative of American exceptionalism has become a tent pole of political rhetoric, beginning with Ronald Reagan's expansion of the military-industrial and presidential wartime powers and continuing up to the Trump administration. Interestingly, the term "American exceptionalism" was never uttered by a president until the Obama administration according to the University of California Santa Barbara's presidential records library. In a 2009 press conference in his first year of office, Obama admitted "I believe in American exceptionalism," qualifying the statement with the need for the United States to create and maintain relationships with foreign entities as a means to maintain global stability.[13] Nonetheless, Republicans and other opponents consistently decried President Obama for not qualifying America as an exceptional nation; Utah Governor and presidential candidate Mitt Romney noted "We have a president right now who thinks America's just other nation…America is an exceptional nation."[14] Donald Trump continued this heightening of exceptionalist rhetoric in his 2016 presidential campaign, basing his platform on the need to return to America's exceptional past and "Make America Great Again!"[15] In the 21st century, exceptionalist rhetoric has clearly transitioned from an unspoken but evident motivation woven throughout American history to an explicit and significant facet of American politics.

There are two significant facets of American exceptionalism to consider in relation to this thesis project: its relationship to and justification of violence and its effect on the concept of American identity. Narratives of exceptionalism from the early colonists to the present have always justified the use of violence against groups that stand in the way of America's exceptionalist destiny, exemplified by the enslavement of Africans, the expulsion of Native Americans from their ancestral lands, the taking of western land from Mexico during the Mexican-American War, the enactment of Jim Crow laws that subjugated African Americans, military interventions in South America and the Caribbean during the Reagan Administration, the War on Terror in the Middle East, and the list goes on. The might-makes-right philosophy established as part of manifest destiny allows for the mobilization of violence to further the American agenda as a kind of birthright inherent in the American myth. In turn, these instances of the mobilization of exceptionalist rhetoric clearly serve and craft a particular American identity, one that prioritizes the agenda of white males and downplays or excludes the needs of minority groups, such as African Americans, Native Americans, women, and immigrants. National identity (or more specifically its perception) is ultimately crafted by those in power and those with a voice, which in the history of the United States has largely been limited to educated, wealthy, landed white men in positions of power in politics and industry and the educated white men who have dominated academia and most forms of popular media. Thus, this thesis project is a critique of the myth of American exceptionalism, its justifications for violence, and a questioning of who ultimately benefits from its propagation.

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[13] Gans, Jr., John A., "American Exceptionalism and the Politics of Foreign Policy," *The Atlantic*, 21 Nov. 2011.

[14] Gans, Jr., "American Exceptionalism and the Politics of Foreign Policy."

[15] Engelhardt, Tom, "What Trump Really Means When He Says He'll Make America Great Again," *The Nation*, 26 April 2016.

Why Superheroes?

In turn, I have chosen to use superheroes as a means to criticize the myth of American exceptionalism, as I believe they epitomize America's particular brand of star-spangled, hyper-masculine, idealized violence. The superhero genre originated with Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's creation of Superman in 1938 in Cleveland, OH.[16] After his first appearance in *Action Comics* #1 in June, 1938 and his subsequent popularity, Superman would soon be followed by a host of enduring characters, such as Bob Kane's Batman in 1939,[17] Bill Parker's Captain Marvel in 1940 (18), William Moulton Marston's Wonder Woman in 1941 (19), and Jack Kirby and Joe Simon's Captain America in 1941 (30). These creators established the visual and conceptual framework that would largely define the genre for decades. The superhero genre eventually developed into a multimedia enterprise spanning print, film, television, toys, and merchandise, dominated by two American publishers, Marvel and DC Comics. In the 21st century, the superhero genre has experienced a kind of renaissance in popular culture in America, as evidenced by the explosion of superhero media in blockbuster movies and television. As such, the superhero genre is a relevant and timely form of popular culture that is accessible and resonant to casual audiences and longtime fans alike.

In *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, Peter Coogan lays out the essential definition of the superhero as a "heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission…with superpowers…who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume" and further breaks down the primary conventions of the genre: mission, powers, and identity.[18] First, superheroes are motivated by a selfless, prosocial mission, in which they fight for the greater good against evil forces while seeking to maintain the status quo. Second, superpowers are the most distinctive convention of the superhero, where the protagonist possesses a specific set of exceptional skills usually acquired through birthright, training, mystical endowment, or some kind of "lightning strike" incident. Finally, superheroes generally maintain dual identities, in which their real name and identity is hidden behind an alter ego. Consequently, superheroes often wear costumes that are emblematic of their origins, powers, or persona, representing the most visually evocative facet of the superhero genre. While discrepancies between these conventions obviously exist within the genre, the superhero as a genre is essentially distinct from other genres in its adherence to the conventions of prosocial mission, superpowers, and an alter ego identity and costume.

The superhero genre is closely aligned with American culture through its engagement with American history, settings, themes, and visual motifs. Superhero media is dominated by two American publishers, DC Comics and Marvel, while nearly all comic book writers and artists in the fledgling years of the genre were American, namely Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, Jack Kirby,

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[16] Wright, Bradford W., *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 7-8.

[17] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 17.

[18] Coogan, Peter, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006), 30.

Steve Ditko, William Moulton Marston, and Stan Lee.[19] Superheroes narratives are often set in American locations, especially American cities such as New York City, or fictional cities based upon New York, such as Metropolis in the Superman series and Gotham City in the Batman series. Superheroes often adopt alter egos, motifs, and colors related to American imagery and symbolism, literally draping themselves in the American flag, exemplified by Captain America, Wonder Woman, Stargirl, Captain Flag, The Shield, The Patriot, Iron Patriot, and countless others. In short, the superhero genre, including its characters, motifs, settings, and themes, is inextricably linked to American culture.

Conceptually, the superhero is predicated upon the notion of resolution through conflict, in which the selfless hero defends the status quo from villainy through physical violence. Consequently, superheroes engage with themes of American exceptionalism as manifest through their moral and physical exceptionalism. Because of their extraordinary powers and heightened sense of morality, they exist outside of the limits of normal human behavior and are able to use physical violence in spite of the rule of law and due process. The exceptional nature of these characters (i.e. superpowers, costume, and extraordinary origins) endows them with the right or duty to use physical violence towards a prosocial agenda, mirroring the "might-makes-right" concept inherent in the notion of manifest destiny. As such, superheroes inherently echo notions of American exceptionalism in their justification of violence in service to a prosocial mission, their superior sense of morality, and their idealized portrayal. In short, superheroes are an American phenomenon that encapsulate idealistic notions of American exceptionalism along with America's time honored tradition of resolution through violence.

Consequently, I am appropriating and recontextualizing the exceptional nature of the morally righteous superhero by placing superheroes in situations that question their idealized preconception. The contradiction of superheroes engaged in violent acts that seem at odds with their prosocial mission serves as the conceptual connection between superheroes and American exceptionalism in my thesis project. The viewer, regardless of their level of engagement with the genre, understands that the superheroes depicted in my drawings are heroic figures (implicit in their name) and are the "good guys" in a general sense. However, the actions in which they are engaged, such as Captain America aggressively standing over and striking a nude figure in *Manifest Destiny*, appears to contradict this preconceived notion of the superhero. These contradictory ideas are meant to mirror the dichotomy between violence and exceptionalist rhetoric, in which a good or righteous agent engages in violence to achieve some idealized agenda. I am drawing a clear parallel between the idealized violence of the superhero,

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[19] There are, of course, obvious exceptions to the idea that the superhero and its industry is exclusively American. A subsidiary of Marvel, Marvel UK, operates out of Great Britain and is known for the Captain Britain character, while Canadian publishers Comely Comix and Chapterhouse Comics published the Captain Canuck series, though neither properties have enjoyed international success outside of their respective borders. Concerning superhero comic writers, two of the most significant and popular writers in comics history are the British Alan Moore (*Watchmen*, *Swamp Thing*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*) and the Scottish Grant Morrison (*Arkham Asylum*, *The Invisibles, All-Star Superman*), who have found enormous success and popularity working with American publishers.

justified through their moral and physical exceptionalism, and the violence implicit in American exceptionalism and its history, justified through the self-idealization of the American nation and its people. I intend this experience of preconceiving, contradicting, and reevaluating to create a space for the viewer to reconsider exceptionalist and nationalist ideas in contemporary American society through the lens of the pop cultural language of superheroes.

Choosing Superheroes

In the spirit of focusing my exhibition theme, I have chosen to use three specific heroes in my depictions of violence: Superman, Captain America, and Wonder Woman. I chose these three due to their popularity in comic book culture and blockbuster films and hence their heightened exposure to the average viewer. In turn, each superhero represents a different facet of civil violence and allows for more specific allegories than a single hero. Superman parallels the idealistic "city on a hill" concept of America and embodies the democratic ideals of truth, justice, and strength so closely aligned with internal conceptions of America. He is the ideal citizen who selflessly acts in the interest of the public good. As such, he allegorizes America and its people as an ideal, an embodiment of its democratic values and a source of strength for the international community. Captain America represents a more grounded facet of American society, namely its systems of government, military, and police. Draped in the colors and motifs of the American flag, Captain America acts as a direct agent of the American military, imbued with its legitimacy, rather than an unofficial vigilante. Wonder Woman contrasts with the traditional white masculinity of Superman and Captain America, yet serves a more brutal function in my work. As an Amazon warrior, clad in armor and armed with a sword, Wonder Woman allows for more deadly, menacing visuals; her brand of violence is fatal rather than oppressive. Together, these three superheroes allegorize my own interpretation of the dark side of American society and its governmental and cultural systems of oppression.

Format

Concerning the form of the exhibition, I have elected to draw these works in charcoal and pastel on paper. In contrast to paint, the use of charcoal affords a greater sense of tactility, leaving trace evidence of my hand within the work. In turn, charcoal allows for a heavier kind of dusty darkness in my high contrast, dark compositions. This heavy darkness provides a sense of mystery, unease, and melodrama to my compositions, while also pushing the subject of the figure to the forefront. This heaviness is further emphasized by the sparse use of primary colors in chalk pastels, creating a stark contrast between the costumes of the heroes, their skin tones, and the dark backgrounds from which they emerge. Consequently, the figures and backgrounds of my work are realized in grayscale with the superhero costumes drawn in color, as a means to create visual and conceptual contrast and to establish the costume as a symbol in itself, a consistent motif throughout my body of work. The emphasis on the colorful costume over the figure itself is conceptually and as well as visually significant, highlighting the superhero as clearly exceptional in contrast to other figures. In turn, this aesthetic choice emphasizes the superhero as an allegorical symbol of power, justice, violence, and American exceptionalism, rather than a mere costumed figure.

Scale is an integral part of this exhibition project, with all works measuring around eight feet tall and four to seven feet wide. Subsequently, my drawn figures are life-size or larger and placed in raised position above of the viewer. Thus, the viewer is dwarfed by the drawings, forced to look up at monumental figures towering over them. This experience of looking from the perspective of powerlessness is crucial to the concept of this project, forcing the viewer to grapple with dynamics of power from the position of a victim or a complicit bystander. Consequently, the viewer will question the moral righteousness and the (mis)use of power and violence implicit in the superhero concept – and by extension, America itself.

I have made a conscious decision to not literally frame these pieces in the exhibition, due in part to their size and in part to the uneven undulations of the wall in the gallery space. Instead, I have left a border of blank, grey paper around all four sides of each of the compositions, creating an organic frame of two to three inches on each drawing. This tactic fulfills the compositional function of the frame, while logistically allowing for easier hanging and takedown of the exhibition. Consequently, I am hanging these works on paper using nails and magnets in each of the four corners for minimal detraction from the works themselves.

Works

Manifest Destiny

The first work I created for this thesis project was *Manifest Destiny*, which depicts Captain America standing over a nude male figure with shield raised preparing to strike. The composition was inspired by the sculpture *Samson Slaying a Philistine* by Giambologna. The concept for the drawing arose from the recent spate of police beatings and shootings of minorities (or at least my heightened awareness of such events). I chose to depict Captain America as an allegory for police, agents of the American government and the law, oppressively standing over a male figure. The figure is nude, suggesting innocence or victimhood, beaten to the ground by the superhero figure. The physical interaction between the two figures, coupled with the contrast between Captain America's military costume and the victim's nakedness, calls into question the morality of the act and Captain America's purported role as a "hero." These established motifs became the visual and conceptual framework for the other works in the exhibition series.

Hung

My second work, *Hung*, depicts Superman hovering in midair and holding a bound figure with a noose around his neck. Superman is floating high above the viewer, cape billowing, eyes red, and his head haloed by a full moon. He holds a bound, nude figure by the frayed noose around his neck. The nude victim hangs at eye level with the viewer, allowing for communion between viewer and victim, while Superman stares menacingly from above. Here Superman allegorizes a more cultural facet of American violence, referencing the historical lynching of African Americans by American citizens. While the American government implemented systems of oppression against blacks through slavery and Jim Crow laws, civilian groups were the primary agents in the act of lynching, as a form of vigilante justice against the perceived threat of blackness against southern white culture. Thus, Superman represents the cultural patterns of oppression and violence between the idealized white man, the implied subject of the American myth of exceptionalism, and the black community. While lynching in the modern age is viewed as an antiquated action of a bygone time, the tense relationship of inferiority/superiority and distrust between white and black cultures still persists.

America's Altar

America's Altar was the first work I created for this project that did not explicitly illustrate a violent scene, but instead used satire as a means to criticize a system of violence. The drawing parodies the painting *Pilgrim's Madonna* by Caravaggio, in which two pilgrims worship before the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child. I replaced the pilgrims with Superman and Captain America, on their knees worshipping the Virgin Mary figure holding a drone missile, instead of

the infant Christ. Parodying the tradition of Madonna and Child painting allowed me to emphasize the religious dimension of violence in America, epitomized by the government's immense "defense" budget and the cultural idolization of the U.S. military. Violence in the United States is not just a physical action between individuals, but a culture and a mindset perpetuated by the nation's near religious reverence for its military and a culture of gun ownership, itself an integral part of what makes America exceptional in its own eyes. Such a deeply ingrained devotion to instruments of violence and institutionalized force normalizes and even glorifies the use of violence in everyday American life.

Street Justice

Street Justice presents a more fatally violent scene than some of the other works, depicting Wonder Woman with sword in hand standing over a nude female figure, pulling the figure back by her hair. The drawing is set in a vaguely urban setting at night with a streetlight as the only source of light. The street light haloes Wonder Woman's head, establishing a visual link to the moon's haloing of Superman in *Hung.* The composition was inspired by *Perseus Slaying Medusa*, a life-size marble sculpture by Laurent-Honoré Marqueste. The drawing references the fatal shooting of minorities by police officers in the vein of Captain America's action in *Manifest Destiny*, but with a more deadly implication, hence Wonder Woman's drawn and gleaming sword. In turn, *Street Justice* presents the female counterpart to *Manifest Destiny* in its depiction of a female assailant and victim, implicating that violence and its systems transcend gender as well as race.

Mourning the Lost Cause

The fourth work of my thesis project returned to a less graphic method of criticism, as seen in *America's Altar*. The drawing depicts Superman holding a stark white male figure who appears to be dead or unconscious, a Confederate flag draped over his lap. Superman stares pensively to the heavens as a beam of light from above illuminates the two figures. Based off of Daniele Crespi's painting *The Pietà*, the drawing taps into the connotations of the Pietà tradition, suggesting a sense of mourning for a messianic or saintly figure, a fallen martyr. The concept for the piece arose from the protests and counter protests that occurred in Charlottesville, VA in late 2017, in which various white nationalist factions protested the tearing down of Confederate memorials and statues. My work mocks the sentiments of these factions, who believe that the destruction of monuments that memorialize a romanticized view of the Antebellum South and the Confederacy, and by extension slavery and white superiority, somehow endangers white culture in America. The stark, shining whiteness of the dead figure points to the supposed decline of an idealized white culture, while the Confederate flag references this sentiment in the context of the American south in general and the Charlottesville riots in particular. In tandem with the other violent works of the series,

Mourning the Lost Cause posits white nationalist and Confederate sympathies as the one facet of the cultural foundation of these systems of violence, in which romantic notions of whiteness and its problematic history are venerated over the actual social and historical subjugation of non-white Americans.

Liberty's Light

The fifth work of my thesis series, *Liberty's Light*, depicts Superman standing in a heroic, idealized pose with an arm outstretched holding a torch, reminiscent of the torch held by the Statue of Liberty. The torch serves as the composition's only light source, shining starkly upon Superman's face and creating deep shadows in the folds of his cape and in the background. The torchlight reveals Superman's macabre surroundings, piles of skulls and bones towering over the hero. Superman's pose is loosely inspired by a marble sculpture of *St. Longinus* by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. The drawing references the historical legacy of violence in America and the paradox of America's idealistic notion of self, considering that the nation was founded upon the dead backs of millions of individuals, primarily of minority groups. The actual land on which America was built was wrested from the hands of Native American tribes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while the economic prosperity of the South in particular (and the United States in general) was predicated on the institution of slavery until the Civil War in the 1860s. While romanticized stories of the pioneering spirit and rugged individuality of America's white protestant founders abound in popular histories, the reality is that America was founded on the backs and corpses of marginalized groups, a legacy which does not fit with popular American narratives. As the ultimate allegorization of America as an ideal, Superman's triumphant stance, holding aloft liberty's flame, embodies America's idealistic view of itself, willfully ignorant to its flawed and violent history. This rejection of the reality of America's violent, dark past is itself a form of cultural oppression, resulting in the diminishment of systematic oppression as an isolated incident without precedent, rather than the cultural root of these problems.

Do Not Resist

Do Not Resist depicts Captain America wrestling with a nude African American male, who is kneeling with his arms raised in the act of surrender. Captain America drives his knee into the victim's back, wrenching the nude's arm back with one hand while grasping his face with the other. The drawing is slightly larger than the other works in the series, measuring 8' x 7' due to its square composition, and was inspired by William-Adolphe Bouguereau's painting *Dante and Virgil in Hell*. The work references the recent spate of violent arrests of African American males by white police officers, in which the arrested are roughly mistreated, bloodied, and bruised despite their compliance with the officer. These incidents often result in severe injury to the arrested party, sometimes even death. The popular response to these fatal arrests is the admonition to "just stop resisting," hence the title of the work. The drawing also presents a

more psychological or emotional form of oppression, seen through Captain America's grasping and squeezing of the victim's face with his gloved hand. This interaction is an incredibly intimate form of physical contact, one that suggests an overt control of one human over another in such a violent context. This action symbolizes the psychological relationship of fear and control between police and minority groups, in which black victims are unfairly targeted and molested over other individuals. This climate of fear is itself a form of cultural violence, one that as a white male I've never had to experience.

Judgement Triptych

The final work of *Superpower* is a triptych that serves as the visual and conceptual conclusion to the exhibition. The triptych depicts Superman, Captain America, and Wonder Woman, the full cast of characters repeated throughout the rest of the exhibition, standing at a monumental scale and engaging directly with the viewer. In the center panel, Superman floats in midair, his right arm raised and pointing at the viewer, while his red eyes gaze down. Captain America stands stoically to his left with shield raised, while Wonder Woman stands on the right, drawing her sword in an aggressive stance. All three figures are gazing down at the viewer from a position of power.

The triptych serves as the conceptual conclusion to the exhibition through this direct interaction between drawn figure and viewer. As the viewer travels around the gallery space, they experience social, cultural, and historical dynamics of power, usually realized through the dynamic physical struggle between a superhero and a generic nude figure. In these instances, the viewer is a voyeur or a bystander, a witness to violence. In this final triptych, the viewer is engaged directly rather than obliquely, implying their guilt or complicity in the actions they witnessed. Thus, the *Judgement Triptych* serves the dual function of condemning the viewer's active participation in the misuse of power and proliferation of violence and as a call to action.

Critical Reflections/Conclusion

After the installation and disassembling of the exhibition, I found that new obstacles arose from setting up my work in the gallery space, some that I had not anticipated in the months leading up to the show. Aside from the logistics of measuring, straightening, and physically hanging the drawings, lighting the pieces was a major challenge. I had originally planned for the exhibition to be dark with sparse lights illuminating my drawings, and subsequently had worked on them both in the dispersed fluorescent light of my studio and in relative darkness. However, I had not considered the effect that focused gallery lights, as opposed to a dispersed light, would have on the jet black backgrounds of the drawings. I had considered shining the lights from above the drawings straight down to the floor, creating a spotlight in front of the drawings without shining light directly on them. However, the gallery ceiling was too low for such a tactic, forcing me to shine light directly on the drawings in a more traditional manner. In turn, the created light sources in my compositions were bright white, while the gallery lights gave off a yellow or orange glow. Despite these unexpected challenges, I believe I successfully lit the exhibition using sparse, selective lighting on the light sources of my drawings while leaving the remainder of the compositions in darkness, preserving the dark oppressive atmosphere I desired in the gallery space. Nonetheless, if I were to exhibit the show again, I would install white lights instead of yellow to better maintain the black-white color balance of my drawings.

Concerning the public response to the exhibition, I found the viewer responses to be overwhelmingly positive. I successfully created the dark, oppressive, and unsettling atmosphere I desired through lighting (or lack thereof), scale, and violent imagery. Viewers found the concept of the exhibition to be timely, relevant, and appropriately thought-provoking. In particular, various conversations I had with undergraduate students were especially fulfilling. While they asked typical questions about my inspirations or particular aesthetic choices I made, these students largely understood my concept for the exhibition, understanding the superhero as an allegory for power and justice, recognizing Superman, Captain America, and Wonder Woman as metaphors for America, and correctly perceiving the entire show as a meditation on real cultural and social oppression in America. In a more extreme example, I invited some personal friends to the exhibition reception who were not artists and had never been to an art show, and thus lacked any sense of the historical, visual, or conceptual framework of contemporary art. Nonetheless, they thoroughly enjoyed the experience and marveled at how they understood my social commentary and the allegories to which I was alluding, due largely to my use of superheroes as a populist language. Throughout my three years of graduate school, I have championed pop culture and superheroes in particular as a visual and conceptual language that is valid and comprehensible to the average viewer, allowing for a democratization of art that rejects stagnant elitism. I feel that *Superpower* and its subsequent viewer responses have legitimized that claim.

Despite the success of *Superpower*, I believe I will go in a new direction with my future work. I will continue to work with superheroes as a visual language in the realm of social, political, and

cultural commentary, as I believe there is much fertile ground to tread with this concept. While I was and still am passionate about the issues I explored in *Superpower*, the dark and violent nature of this work was draining on my psyche. It is a heavy space to immerse oneself in for an entire year and I certainly feel the emotional fatigue of the endeavor. Thus, I believe my next series will inhabit a more humorous space. My initial concept is to examine and assess the hero worship of American historical and political figures by dressing these particular figures in superhero costumes. However, their costumes will be ill fitting, too loose or tight, wrinkled, and with capes too long to manage, symbolizing the frequent failure of these significant figures to live up to the lofty expectations placed upon them. In a way, I am continuing to discuss the failures of American exceptionalism using the language of superheroes, but through a more comical lens rather than a dark, serious, and violent one.

Survey of Literature

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Appendix

Superpower (Installation View). 2018. Columbia, McMaster Gallery.

Superpower (Installation View). 2018. Columbia, McMaster Gallery.

Superpower (Installation View). 2018. Columbia, McMaster Gallery.
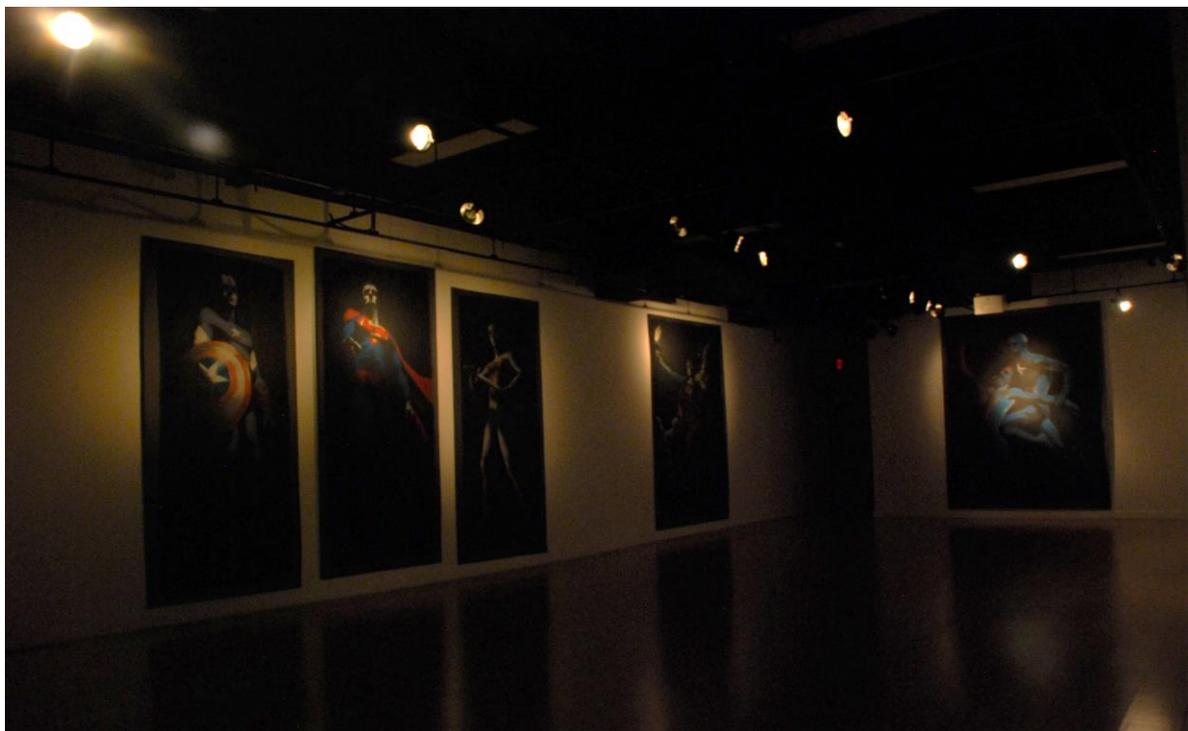
Superpower (Installation View). 2018. Columbia, McMaster Gallery.

America's Altar. 2017. Charcoal and pastel on paper. 104 x 66 in. Columbia, McMaster Gallery.

Manifest Destiny. 2017. Charcoal and pastel on paper. 105 x 69 in. Columbia, McMaster Gallery.

Hung. 2017. Charcoal and pastel on paper. 106 x 69 in. Columbia, McMaster Gallery.

Street Justice. 2017. Charcoal and pastel on paper. 104 x 69 in. Columbia, McMaster Gallery.

Mourning the Lost Cause. 2018. Charcoal and pastel on paper. 106 x 69 in.

Columbia, McMaster Gallery.

Do Not Resist. 2018. Charcoal and pastel on paper. 104 x 81 in. Columbia, McMaster Gallery.

Liberty's Light. 2018. Charcoal and pastel on paper. 103 x 70 in. Columbia, McMaster Gallery.

Judgement Triptych. 2018. Charcoal and pastel on paper. 105 x 150 in.

Columbia, McMaster Gallery.