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Media Literacies

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Analysis of my Final Project

The form of my final project is a series of three digital paintings named *American Gothic*. The first painting is titled *Conversation with Death*, the second is titled *Letter to Madeline*, and the third is titled *By His Stripes*. While the artworks are not directly related by subject matter, they're unified by theme and style. Each painting was created in the digital art software Clip Studio Paint.

The purpose of this series was threefold. Firstly, it was inspired by some curriculum in our Media Literacies course this Spring, such as the *Theory of Adaptation* readings, the Ekphrasis project, and the *Poetry of Penance* Films and supplementary material. This project was done to further engage with these materials, and display proficiency in the ideas learned from them. Secondly, more inspiration was found in certain songs I'd heard over the course of the semester. For example, the song *Letter to Madeline* by Ian Noe directly inspired the painting of the same name. Various other songs from an "American Gothic" playlist, where I also got the name for my series, composed of Bluegrass, folk, country, and other traditionally American genres, would help me flesh out the ideas, content, and tones for the other paintings. They all talked about similarly macabre themes like crime and death, and many were set in the 1800's American South/West, and they greatly inspired me as well. Finally, I felt a strong desire to unite these themes to similar ones found in classical European and Christian artwork, such as those of

the Baroque or Vanitas styles. Ultimately, the idea was to translate these themes and subject matters into an 1800's American setting.

Conversation with Death features a woman smoking a cigarette as she stares distressedly at the Grim Reaper, clad in brown robes and holding his iconic scythe, who sits opposite her at a small wooden table. The artwork is loosely based on a song of the same name, but only in the sense that someone is having a conversation with a personification of death. The work is largely a reimagining of the painting *Magdalene with the Smoking Flame*, wherein Mary Magdalene stares at a burning candle while cradling a human skull in her lap. Here, the candle, a symbol of the transience of life, has been translated into a cigarette, and the skull has evolved into a full-fledged skeleton in the form of the Reaper. Other than that, the painting is largely ambiguous, leaving the viewer to speculate the situation: the woman could be on the verge of death herself, and the reaper has come to take her; someone the woman loves has passed away, and the reaper is coming to deliver the news; the woman could be metaphorically confronting her own morality; or as Professor Mahala suggested, it could also be an anti-smoking message.

Letter to Madeline, as mentioned, is directly inspired by the eponymous song. A bank robber fleeing the law lies on the floor against a "buck-shot door" of a wooden shed. By his right hand is a sealed envelope, a "Letter to Madeline", his sweetheart, that he never got to mail. On his right lies an empty bottle, hinting that his life is soon to be poured out. Above him, a single eye peers through one of the shotgun holes in the door. The triangular pose of the man mimics the pietà, wherein Mary is holding the body of her Son Jesus. The color and position of the man's hat resembles a halo, which is typically reserved for saints and other holy figures. This isn't to deify the criminal, rather it is a reference to the archetype of the "noble thief" found throughout

literature. The man's limp hand grasping for his letter calls to *The Death of Marat*, wherein Marat was slain while penning his works. The three holes in the door evoke the image of the Holy Trinity, while a single eye peering through evokes the Eye of Providence. Their placement over the man in the shotgun holes illustrates God pouring our righteous judgement on an impenitent sinner, as the law has finally caught up to this thief.

By His Stripes features an 1800's American rendition of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Jesus hangs from a lynching tree in His three hours of darkness on a hill in an American countryside. The name comes from a prophetic passage about the Messiah in the Old Testament, specifically chapter 53, verse 5 from the book of Isaiah, which reads "But He was wounded for our transgression, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed." While the stripes in the passage refer to the suffering of the Messiah, I represented this verse literally by dressing Jesus in an old striped prison uniform, as "He was numbered with the transgressors." Additionally, as many verses refer to the crucifixion as "hanging from a tree", I took the term literally and translated the cross into a lynching. A cow skull lying at the foot of the tree forms an American Western evocation of the Vanitas theme, substituting a human skull for that of a cow. It's also a reference to the name of the hill of the crucifixion, Calvary or Golgotha, which means "Place of the Skull." A wooden sign on a branch reads "INRI", the traditional latin abbreviation of "Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum", which means "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews".

One ethical concern that the series could ignite is the concern that *By His Stripes*, and to a lesser extent, the *Letter to Madeline* painting, could be deemed offensive and even blasphemous. The use of imagery typically reserved for holy persons on an impenitent criminal could be seen

as reckless misuse, and the depiction of Jesus being lynched in America could be seen as overtly blasphemous, and laced with political ramifications. While this was absolutely not my intent, the concerns are not without substance. Even in defending my decision by stating that earlier painters translated biblical scenes into European landscapes, and artists around the world have depicted Jesus as carrying physical traits similar to their own, this may be deemed as me attempting to compare myself to artists who are more renowned and practiced than myself.