BLOOD WORKS
Melancholia, Subversion and Guerilla Art History: 
Robert Sherer’s *Blood Works*

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Centered in an antique gold, oval frame, a pair of sweet brown bunnies snuggles in their cozy *Love Nest* of grasses and heart-shaped leaves. Rendered with a mixture of naturalistic precision and picturesque sentimentality, they are also rendered with solutions of both HIV positive and HIV negative blood. Instantly the comforting familiarity of *Love Nest* (2005) becomes strange and threatening. Spectators invariably proclaim that they can tell which of the bunnies is painted with the HIV+ blood and which with HIV−, despite the reality that there is no physically apparent difference between the two. Even though the threat of contagion is fallacious due to the virus’ inability to survive for very long outside the body, the use of blood as a medium adds a plethora of associations and references to this otherwise benign image of bunnies that artist Robert Sherer is delighted to deconstruct in his ongoing series of paintings collectively titled *Blood Works*.

Defined by *Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary* as “the fluid that circulates in the heart, arteries, capillaries, and veins of a vertebrate animal carrying nourishment and oxygen to and bringing away waste products from all parts of the body,” blood has become ingrained in today’s popular imagination: “blood brother,” “bad blood,” “new blood,” “hot-blooded,” “in cold blood,” “blue blood,” “taste blood,” “blood is thicker than water...” It figures prominently in ritual sacrifice and self-sacrifice in cultures as diverse as the ancient Mayans of Central America to the Japanese tradition of “hara kiri,” (Bradburne 12) and is central to the Christian sacrament of Holy Eucharist whereby the blood of Christ is consumed for the cleansing of sin. Implicated in the destruction of life by phrases such as “blood shed,” “blood thirsty”
and “blood lust,” blood is also associated with the female menstrual cycle and the gift of life, and bloodlines have historically symbolized tradition, continuity, and the transmission of power in Western cultures. Feminist artists in the 1970s such as Judy Chicago and Mary Kelly challenged social taboos concerning natural female bodily processes by creating installations using or simulating menstrual blood. Anselm Kiefer mixed oil and blood in paintings of the early 1970s to physically engage Germany’s bloody history. In the age of AIDS, blood is suspect and feared as the transmitter of the deadly HIV virus.

As an artistic medium in Robert Sherer’s Blood Works series of Victorian-style flower paintings and memento mori still lifes, this vital fluid conjures all such possibilities, from AIDS awareness and homophobia in his earliest Blood Works to the politics and history of racism and power in Southern American culture and the Sherer family itself. While the moralistic undertones associated with the Dutch Vanitas tradition are tempered by wry humor in Sherer’s images, his use of HIV positive as well as HIV negative blood as paint in the first series of Blood Works casts them as disturbingly personal or even threatening for some viewers. Because the HIV negative blood is frequently his own, and the HIV positive blood was donated by a woman close to the artist, Sherer’s Blood Works paintings are indeed highly personal references to love, loss and potential loss. They recall the nineteenth century tradition of romantic melancholy pervasive in Victorian popular literature and art that commonly involved mourning the passage of life and love. However, Sherer’s melancholy reaches beyond mourning the loss of loved ones as it treats the loss of a way of life, something that has become part of his own consciousness, and part of the consciousness of contemporary gay culture in the era of AIDS. Douglas Crimp has identified this pervasive sense of loss with the self-deprecating conservatism prevalent in twenty-first century gay politics as signs of Freudian melancholia, a “widespread psychosocial response to the ongoing crisis of AIDS.” (Crimp 8, fn. 13)¹ The teasing morality of Sherer’s Blood Works and his informed attraction to Victoriana can also be read in the context of

¹ Crimp identifies conservative gay politics self-repudiation and identification with the attitudes of homophobia with melancholia as “the result of identification with and incorporation of the love object who has rejected the melancholiac.”
melancholic mourning, even though his dramatic initial discovery of blood as a viable artistic medium with moral implications was purely accidental.

Using a knife in his studio one evening during the winter of 1998, Sherer accidentally punctured a blood vessel in his thigh, instantly emitting a bright red spray from the wound. “I thought I was going to bleed out,” recalls the artist. “I had never seen so much blood before.” (19 October, 2007) In an effort to save several drawings from the bloody flow Sherer emptied a nearby jar of pencils to cover the puncture and then watched with morbid fascination as the container filled. Soon, however, his curiosity was overcome by sheer exhaustion. He bandaged his wound with duct tape, sealed the jar and placed it in his mini-refrigerator, and left the mess to get some sleep.

Rested and refreshed, the artist returned in the morning to clean up the gruesome scene he had left in his studio. His drawings were ruined, and blood was everywhere. Yet despite the grisliness of the spectacle before him, the artist noted a compelling beauty in the dried spatters that covered his work. Then he recalled the jar of blood in the refrigerator, and his traumatic memory of the previous night vanished before the myriad of creative possibilities that presented themselves. Sherer uncovered the jar, grabbed a brush, and began to experiment with his new liquid medium on scraps of paper. Very quickly he discovered that after only five to ten small brushstrokes the exposure to air caused the blood to begin clotting, so he began to experiment. Subsequent research into the nature of his new medium led Sherer to explore salienation and a variety of other anti-clotting additives and procedures.

After a wide range of experimental mixtures Sherer finally developed a solution and a process that would enable him to paint. Once applied to the paper, his blood medium dries completely within one hour. Because the iron in blood oxidizes when exposed to air, the artist has a twelve to fifteen hour period before his medium browns and ultimately turns black. To control the degree of darkening from red to brown, and prevent air from reaching the blood within the fibers of the paper, Sherer hermetically seals both sides of his paper with an acrylic polymer or clear shellac.
The specialized requirements of Sherer’s medium become highly problematic in a work such as *The Usual Suspects* (2001) that is both technically and iconographically complex. The image presents a traditional vase filled with a dense bouquet of botanically accurate depictions of flower species that naturally resemble human genitalia, attended by locusts and bees. At the lower left of the bouquet, for example, petals of a pitcher-shaped Fuchsia Flower seem to open like inner labia for the penis-shaped pistol and petals of the Passion Flower above. In addition to the traditional Vanitas reading of the ephemeral nature of life and beauty invoked by this floral still life genre, bees are associated with pollination and procreation—a fitting addition to the veritable orgy of flower forms in the bouquet. Locusts refer specifically to the eighth Biblical plague sent by God to punish Egypt. Since locusts breed rapidly and swarm indiscriminately with no leader, they also allude to the free and promiscuous lifestyle that fosters the transmission and spreading of sexually transmitted diseases.

Because individual elements in *The Usual Suspects* signify multiple meanings, meticulous rendering of each plant and insect form was essential. Sherer found it impossible to paint more than five or six flowers in one studio session, given the time constraints inherent in working with his blood medium and the complexity of his subject. To prevent the forms from blackening before he had completed the entire composition, the artist had no choice but to varnish the front and back of the flowers he had just painted, which required painstaking precision.

The very nature of Sherer’s medium foregrounds the serious implications of his playfully moralizing *Blood Works* series. As the basis for his blood solution the artist uses his own blood, which is HIV negative, as well as HIV positive blood donated by a close female friend. Viewers are frequently eager to know which portions of each painting were created with the HIV positive blood, and which with the negative. While it is impossible to see a visible difference between marks made with either blood solution, according to the artist spectators often remark that they can tell which part of a particular painting was painted with each type of blood, a false perception that mirrors the misconception that people who are HIV positive are necessarily different from the rest of society in any other tangible or substantive way.
Sherer has identified the “moralizing” aspect of his Blood Works series with “a dread of mortality,” resulting in part from his participation in the sexual liberation and “wild world of the late ‘70s and early ‘80s.” (19 October, 2007). As Crimp has noted, such moralizing is symptomatic of Freudian melancholia, and can be associated with the conservative reaction in the gay community to the loss of a culture and a way of life. According to Freud, after a painful process in which the external world becomes empty, the typical mourning subject is able to withdraw from the lost object and substitute something new in its place. In contrast, the melancholic subject has internalized some aspect of what has been lost. As a result, the loss triggers a sense of emptiness in the ego, and leads to a negative sense of self. Robert Clark of the University of East Anglia explains that melancholia might occur when something has been lost that is not clearly separated from the self of the subject. Clark cites Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) which describes melancholia as a “profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings….” In addition to the loss of individual loved ones, the onset of the AIDS crisis in the late 1970s and early 1980s certainly threatened the gay community with the loss of a culture that had become part of communal identity. Moralistic self-deprecation can be seen as a melancholic response to such bereavement.

In “Mourning Beyond Melancholy: Freud’s Psychoanalysis of Loss” Tammy Clewell identifies a modern process of mourning that moves beyond the Freudian model of melancholy to embrace an affirmative and active reaction to loss that better suits Sherer’s subversive sensibilities. In Freud’s “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (1915) written in response to the cataclysm of World War I, Clewell notes that Freud addressed the loss of “many of society’s most cherished ideals: the steady march of progress for the state; the moral disposition of human being beyond racial and national boundaries; the power of human reason to curb violent desire.”(58) Instead of suggesting that society replace such lost ideals with new ones (a conservative reaction not unlike the conservative reaction to AIDS within the gay community, as cited by Crimp), Freud exposed these lost values as illusions, and concluded that violence, as in wartime, was an
inescapable fact of human existence. According to Clewell, in “Mourning and Melancholia” Freud “defined this aggression as a symptom of melancholia in which hostility originally felt for another is internalized and directed at oneself.”(59) To break this cycle of melancholia and adequately mourn the loss, the sufferer must detach from identification with the object of loss by repudiating and defaming it. However, Clewell notes that in *The Ego and the Id* written in 1923, Freud redefines melancholia to suggest that “by internalizing the lost other through the work of bereaved identification… one becomes a subject in the first place.” In other words, Clewell contends that by positioning the experience of significant loss at the origin of subject formation, Freud establishes such experience as fundamental to the development of the ego. Freud’s later work eliminates the distinction between melancholy and mourning, making the former a condition of successful mourning. (63) Since identification with the object of loss is thus a critical component of mourning as well as fundamental in establishing the separate existence of the self, the mourning subject affirms ambivalent bonds to what was lost as a condition of its own self and existence. Clewell concludes that Freud’s later work presents the possibility of “mourning beyond melancholia, a response to loss that refuses the self-punishment entailed in blaming the lost one for our own contingency and enables us to live in light of our own losses… [and] helps us, finally, to establish an intimate, indeed ethical relation between past and future…. ” (65)

The naughty morality tales woven into each of Sherer’s *Blood Works* images fit Clewell’s affirmative model of “mourning beyond melancholia.” For example, *Trojan Bouquet* (2006) depicts an arrangement of eight single roses, each encased in a condom, held in a Greek krater decorated with a scene of two male youths reclining on phallic shaped pillows. “Trojan” obviously refers to both the brand name of a leading manufacturer of condoms, and to the subject matter depicted on the vase: Sherer refers to the subject matter as “A safe sex bouquet for circuit party boys” like the ancient Trojans, which makes this painting “about personal protection.” Ironically, as the artist notes, the “Trojans were destroyed because they let down their guard” for a beautiful object. (Sherer, 16 March, 2008). Like the ancient Trojans, people who continue to “let down their guard” and have unprotected sex further the transmission of
HIV. Sherer’s painting humorously admonishes such reckless behavior, while proffering the possibility that we might learn from history and avoid the same mistake. The loss of many friends and an entire way of life as a result of the AIDS crisis, coupled with survivor’s guilt, has prompted Sherer to move past self-deprecation and melancholia and affirmatively define himself as a “cultural terrorist” who can effect positive change through his art.

By 1982 Sherer had become more serious about his art and his career, spending evenings and weekends in his studio instead of partying with his close circle of friends in midtown Atlanta. Since he had come from a rural southern background, he felt at a disadvantage trying to compete with his cosmopolitan peers. Most of his core group of buddies from those “wild” years were manifesting symptoms and dying of AIDS, and Sherer believes his dedication to his art, a “self-imposed punishment,” saved him from a similar fate. (19 October, 2007). He recalls that a classmate at the Atlanta College of Art in the early 1980s, who was by far the most brilliant student in the class, became sick and started going to the doctor. For the longest time the doctors didn’t understand why his immune system was shutting down. By the time they identified it as AIDS, his classmate was gone. The funeral was one of the first times Sherer felt compelled to speak out. “I was bad,” Sherer recalls. “The preacher was talking about what a fine Christian boy he was… we were all sitting there pretending that he died of Leukemia, and I thought that religious people were not supposed to lie. I began to speak out loud during the funeral service, and question people: ‘Did you even know this person? He was a political person...’” (Sherer, 19 October, 2007). Only a handful of Sherer’s friends from those early years have survived, and many of them have assumed a conservative lifestyle, condemning the individual freedom and sexual liberation of their youth. “Gay men of my generation carry the weight of this guilt [for surviving],” he notes. “The self-hatred is so great that they have assumed the mask of the enemy... we become our oppressors!” (Sherer, 19 October, 2007) However, in Sherer’s case his outrage at the growing hypocrisy he witnessed, both in society at large and within his own community, overcame the guilt and compelled him to find more ways to speak out.
Sherer had begun to believe that subversion and guerilla activism had a greater potential to affect change than words. Referring to his activities during those years as cultural terrorism, the artist explains “I had the feeling that if you played by the rules you were going to lose. I felt that I could have a greater impact by being naughty… the ‘nice’ protesters followed the rules and had zero impact, but then my group would see some of our grand stunts making the national news.” Sherer joined a group of “gay naughty boys” in Atlanta who called themselves the “Billboard Correction Society” and targeted billboards that lined Peachtree Street. (Sherer, 5 October, 2007). They employed the strategy of détournement to re-contextualize the billboard text or image by altering it in ways that revealed encoded sexist, racist or otherwise discriminatory messages. For example, during the early 1980s the Reagan Administration began talk of re-instating the draft to support anti-Soviet policies such as U.S. intervention in Afghanistan. In one speech President Reagan remarked that he would even recruit gays to serve in this effort. So, Sherer and his co-conspirators spray-painted graffiti characters in pink over military recruiting posters with captions such as “but I would look awful in green…” (Sherer, 5 October, 2007) Their brand of activism always contained an element of humor, or postmodern irony, to keep the audience laughing while punching the message home.

During the ‘80s Sherer also worked with New York-based ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), and with San Francisco-based Gay Rights and AIDS activist Michael Petrelis on several projects. He utilized popular means of mass communication such as FAX machines and the U.S. mail to disseminate photocopied fliers with messages about corporate greed, repression of individual rights and suppression of information about AIDS. In one instance Sherer appropriated the design of a package of Marlboro cigarettes and substituted “BOYCOTT” for “filter cigarettes” above the brand name. Below he printed the following:

By far, the single largest contributor to the election campaigns of Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) is Philip Morris Inc., the makers of Marlboro Cigarettes. This immense financial support for Helms indicates agreement with his agenda that wishes to take away fundamental American freedoms. Mr. Helms, with his
desire to censor the arts, is the arch-enemy of freedom of expression. Together, we can stop him. If you have questions or would like additional information, contact Michael Petrelis... (Sherer, personal archive).

At the bottom, Sherer replaced the Surgeon General’s warning with “WARNING: Jesse Helms is hazardous to your freedom. This flyer is public domain, and should be photocopied and distributed as widely as possible.” (Sherer, personal archive). Sherer has described himself during this period as a “freelance cultural terrorist. I didn’t do it for the money. If I agreed with your cause I would make an artwork to promote it. Petrelis had the network connections to make it go national, but I could never go public.” (Sherer, 5 October, 2007).

Atlanta artist Larry Anderson, the only surviving founding member of the artists’ collaborative “Taboo,” remembers Sherer as “one of the most moral artists I know.” (Anderson, November 16, 2007) The brainchild of Anderson and three other gay Atlanta artists in the late 1980s, Taboo organized exhibitions that challenged homophobia, gender and racial discrimination. According to Anderson, “In our society white men feel empowered. If it hadn’t been for a bunch of educated white gay men who were infected, recognition of the reality of the crisis wouldn’t have happened for years. If you believe you have power then you have the power to change power relations.” (Anderson, 16 November, 2007) Despite their scandalous name, Anderson and his Taboo collaborators considered themselves the most moral of artists because they dealt with critical and controversial social issues. The Taboo artists positioned themselves at the end of a history of socially committed artists who shock their patrons and public alike in order to expose immoral conditions. Anderson notes that unlike Francisco di Goya, who never exhibited the chilling illustrations of atrocities committed by the Spanish government against its hapless citizens that comprise his Disasters of War series of etchings (begun in 1810), Taboo artists felt impelled to spread their message on T-shirts, in posters, and in exhibitions in legitimate art venues. Sherer was chosen to participate in the last Taboo exhibition in January of 1999: “Requiem: Living Artists Eulogize a Dying Century,” at the Nexus Contemporary Art Center in Atlanta, GA (now the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center). After a studio visit where
Sherer showed Anderson and Michael Venezia drawers and drawers of locust drawings and talked about computer viruses, biblical plagues and AIDS, Anderson recalls “we called him up and asked him if he wanted to infect the exhibit with locusts. In the age of computer viruses and AIDS we thought the idea of infecting the exhibit was fantastic.” Sherer’s installation included s swarm of thousands of acetate locusts in the corner of the gallery. “The thing with Robert is you throw him a bone and he’ll build you a cow… it was only a suggestion and a question and he just ran with it.” (Anderson, 16 November, 2007)

While Sherer has moved beyond the subversive interventions of his earlier years, the Blood Works series similarly employs irony and deconstruction to reveal misconceptions, oppressive politics and destructive societal attitudes. Pansy (1999) is a straightforward depiction of the popular winter flower painted in HIV negative blood, in a 12 x 9 inch oval mat and square frame. The small, oval format of his floral subject mimics the collectible paintings and decorations that adorned Victorian homes. Rounded petals with striated coloring that darkens toward the center create the face of the flower which opens almost quizzically towards the viewer. However, the center or “ovary” of the pansy is slightly altered to resemble a human anus. Anal sex is stereotypically associated with promiscuity and a homosexual lifestyle, and Sherer reminds us that “pansy” is also a derogatory term for an “effeminate homosexual man.” (Sherer, 16 March, 2008). Ironically, the name derives from the French word “pensée” which means “thought,” and the flower has long been associated with “free thought” in Western culture.

Encounters (2002), painted with both HIV positive and HIV negative blood, depicts “Kamikaze bees dive bombing” from one daisy to the next, similar to the “insane behavior” Sherer has witnessed among certain single adults in their desperation to secure a partner before their biological clock has stopped ticking and they can no longer reproduce. In their recklessness they will expose themselves and their potential child to all manner of deadly diseases, just like the bees who pound into the flowers with such force that they sometimes fall away in a daze. The daisies are disembodied heads, cut from their stems with no obvious connection to any ground. They float in an ambiguous space in the center of the paper, completely exposed
and vulnerable, available to satisfy the indiscriminate desires of the bees. The insects, in turn, are both forceful and faint, threatening and vanquished. Sherer considers contemporary society to be “hyper-reproductive,” with so much popular media geared towards romance, love, and ultimately procreation. (Sherer, 8 July 2010). But in the frenzy to secure these valued relationships, deadly diseases are carelessly spread, a truth that is underscored by Sherer’s use of HIV positive as well as HIV negative blood. People often want to know which of the bees is positive and which is negative. Such identification is meaningless, because the HIV virus died in its refrigerated solution long before it became Sherer’s medium brushed onto the archival paper. And, as noted above, just like HIV positive and HIV negative people, there are no visible distinctions between the different blood solutions. As a final touch, Sherer allowed the blood in this image to oxidize to a deep brown, imparting a dark and sinister quality to emphasize his contempt “for all of this mischief.” (Sherer, 8 July, 2010)

Sherer’s attraction to campy popular culture and Victoriana began long before the Blood Works series and his involvement with AIDS awareness. “I have always had an above average interest in the way Victorians handled death. Way before there was a ‘goth’ kid I was a ‘goth’ kid,” he explains. (Sherer, 19 October, 2007). Historians generally identify a marked shift in attitudes towards death and dying in British and American culture with medical advances, religious attitudes and demographic changes that occurred after the First World War. In a review of several studies related to death and bereavement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Julie Marie Strange confirms that extravagant rituals of death and burial that were sought in Victorian culture can be understood “as sites for the creation and expression of grief, loss and readjustment.”(499) As a youth Sherer read Poe, Kafka and Camus, and would prefer “hanging out” in a Victorian cemetery to partying with classmates, and he has remained fascinated with the elaborate symbolism of death and dying ingrained in Victorian popular culture. (Sherer, 19 October, 2007) Since popular culture today lacks an equivalent site for the collective expression of grief, loss and readjustment compelled by the AIDS crisis, the small “keepsake” character of his Blood Works images, with their carefully chosen, ornate frames, deliberately echoes Victorian sensibilities.
Sherer’s attraction to floral imagery similarly derives from his admiration for Victorian culture. According to the artist “Victorians also knew the folklore and symbolism of plants. It was a popular culture craze in Europe and the United States that didn’t really fade out until the twentieth century.” Sherer studied botany from 1975–1978 at Walker College in Alabama, and lived next door to his grandmother whose house was surrounded by a magnificent flower garden that he compares to Violet Venable’s creepy jungle of a garden in Tennessee Williams’ Suddenly Last Summer: “My grandmother had exotic plants. I would go study the science and then come home, and my grandmother would tell me the folklore while working in her garden. We would ponder the binomial nomenclature. I was able to go back to my botany professors and tell them, and they were deeply touched that my grandmother’s old wives tales made perfect sense.” (Sherer, 19 October, 2007)

Sherer’s Blood Works series has continued to deconstruct history to engage social and political issues that reach beyond AIDS awareness and gender discrimination. Antebellum Classicism (2007) presents a seemingly straightforward Corinthian capital, as might be found in any art historical or architectural textbook. Instead of the typical acanthus leaves, however, Sherer has substituted cotton, rice, corn and other crops that were staples of the southern antebellum economy that depended upon slave labor for production. Sherer explains that apologists frequently describe the Old South as the last neoclassical civilization, and that antebellum society emulated the aesthetics of classical Greece and Rome, which were both slave-owning societies, in part to assuage their own guilt. (Sherer, 19 October, 2007)

An African-American friend and colleague supplied the blood for Antebellum Classicism. Sherer’s own blood specifically informs The Facts of Life (2007), “a creepy old New England style tombstone (death) with the name SHERER on it.” (Sherer, 19 October, 2007) The artist’s own final resting place is shown, surrounded by the constant agitation of life and nature,

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layered with dense symbolism that can be read as an iconographic self-portrait. Innocent rabbits hop on the ground, symbolizing love and reproduction, while a snake (a cold-blooded murderer) preys on an innocent little bird. Birds and bees buzz in the air, with their now familiar references to courtship, sex, promiscuity and danger. The juxtaposition of innocent creatures and the eerie tombstone recalls the admonition “Et in Arcadia, ego” that was popularized in the seventeenth century by the French classical master Nicholas Poussin’s canonical painting of the same title. The Latin translates to “Even in Arcadia, I am,” where the speaker is Death. Finally, a cocoon clings to the side of the tombstone, holding on to the hope for potential rebirth. The artist explains that every artist he knows (himself included) is obsessed with mortality, and driven by fear that they will die before they finish the work that drives their passion. (Sherer, 19 October, 2007)

Still in progress, Nursery is an “educational piece” intended to arm viewers with the language to unlock the complex symbolism of his other Blood Works. The work will be a chilling and compelling image of an antique hooded baby cradle resting in a flowerbed as a planter for white lilies (symbolic of death). The artist recalls seeing Portuguese fishermen’s yards near Provincetown in Cape Cod decorated with kitschy shrines to the Madonna. (Sherer, 19 October, 2007) Using a photograph of an antique baby carriage from the Provincetown Pilgrim’s Museum, Sherer created a shrine dedicated to the death of a small child. Baby’s breath and Calla lilies, a stone lamb and cherubs contribute to the commemorative meaning, which the artist describes as “morbid in a Victorian manner.” (Sherer, 19 October, 2007) As a poignant touch, the artist used the blood of a woman who has lost a child.

Since its beginning, the Blood Works series has not only been a vehicle for Sherer’s public interrogation of societal malevolence and human foibles, but has also allowed the artist to investigate his personal history as an artist with family ties to the Old South. The Sherers were slave-owning planters who came to America in 1711 with Land Grants from King George II in the Carolinas, and the artist’s branch of the family brought their slaves with them to Jasper, Alabama, in 1857. Through genealogical research, Sherer discovered African-American
branches of the Sherer family tree. His provocative recent series titled Blood Money derives from actual imagery found on Confederate currency, screen-printed with blood from African-American descendants of slaves. Cargo Ship (2011) reproduces the image of a slave trading ship that carried human cargo from Africa to their “New World” in America. Rendered in the red blood of African-American friends, the image provides a subtle sequel to British romantic artist Joseph Mallord William Turner’s compelling painting The Slave Ship of 1840. Turner aroused abolitionist sentiments in Great Britain by depicting the hapless brown bodies of Africans that were tossed overboard from a distant slave ship being devoured by sharks and fish in a turbulent blood-red sea. Slavery was abolished in Great Britain in 1833, a full thirty years before the Emancipation Proclamation in the United States. Sherer’s ship sails proudly atop the Confederate $20.00 bill, a substantial sum of money in 1863. Whereas Turner’s Slave Ship dramatizes outrage at the horrific cruelty of the slave trade, the majestic blood-drawn ship declares the pride and achievement of the Confederate economy, sailing right over “AMERICA” in bold, capital letters as if confirming the confederate motto “Deo vindice” (“God will Prove us right”). Ignoring Egypt (2012) shows a portrait of Judah P. Benjamin, a Jewish statesman who became the Confederate Secretary of State pictured on the Confederate $2.00 bill, and who fled south with Jefferson Davis and the rest of the cabinet after the Confederate States surrendered. Under Jewish law slavery is strictly forbidden, therefore Benjamin’s active support of the confederacy was patently hypocritical. (Sherer, 8 February 2012) In The South Striking Down Liberty (2012) a sword-wielding female personification of the Confederacy holds a dying American eagle and threatens a cowering Lady Liberty. This vignette was also pictured on the Confederate $2.00 bill. By using the blood of descendants of slaves, the screen-printing technique questions the value of confederate currency.

Growing up in the center of civil rights activism and violence during the 1960s and 1970s, the artist constantly questioned his own place in his family and his community. One of his most ambitious current projects, Family Tree (2012), will feature an ancient, weathered and contorted tree rendered in the blood of Sherer’s own consanguineal kin, black and white. Tree limbs include “Strange Fruit,” a reference to Billie Holiday’s 1939 song: “Southern trees bear a
strange fruit, Blood on the leaves and blood at the root, black bodies swinging in the southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees….” Bloody fingerprints on the leaves are weighed down with large swags of Spanish hanging like bodies, “swinging in the breeze.” A quip by the artist belies an inherited guilt that informs his use of irony in reference to his actual family history: “Believe me, it isn’t easy to contact someone and say, ‘My family used to own your family and now I want to bleed you for the sake of my art.’” (Sherer, Exhibition Proposal). One branch includes King Protea flowers, symbol of resistance to white rule among black Africans. Among the flowers is a stirred-up beehive whose agitated swarm represents the Civil Rights Movement and revolution. Sherer explains “All of my life I have heard racist relatives use the bee’s nest as a symbol for the struggle of the black community. ‘They got stirred-up again down in Selma and a swarm of them took to the streets.’” (Sherer, exhibition proposal) A broken stone laurel wreath beneath the heavy roots of the tree, and a crumbling Corinthian capitol, suggest that this family tree is growing out of antebellum decay, “resting on their laurels” or relying on the memory of their glorious past for recognition in the present. After receiving threatening emails condemning him for embarking on the Blood Money project, including three from family members and one from a representative of the Sons of the Confederacy, Sherer decided to include the following disclaimer: “Any resemblance to family members either living or dead is purely deliberate.”

Blood Works mixes high art and kitsch, art history, and popular culture, personal history, subversive sensibilities and affirmative engagement with the belief that art can effect change. Sherer explains “I reserve the right to lovingly embrace my subjects with critique. I love some elements of Victoriana, but the sophisticated part of me realizes how embarrassing that is. I live comfortably with my contradictions.” (Sherer, 8 July, 2010) He embraces kitsch and nostalgia, acknowledging their undesirable identification with the postmodern notion of pastiche. Before the ironic nuances and layers of meaning are teased out of his pictures, Sherer’s Blood Works begin with an understanding of the significance of his medium to representational painting. By using human blood, the artist deliberately shifts the locus of meaning from the image that is represented to the medium itself—ironically referencing the
notion of “pure,” self-critical painting (painting about painting) that was central to Clement Greenberg’s canonical definition of “Modernist Painting” first published in 1960. Blood viscerally ties each image to a personal history, a family history and a social history. Even though the dried blood medium is completely harmless, spectators’ fearful reactions to Blood Works reveal the continuing ignorance that allows misperceptions and false assumptions to persist in contemporary society more than twenty years after the AIDS epidemic was first identified. In today’s digital age where everything imaginable can be fantastically represented and every spectacular representation is just a mouse-click away, the ultimate irony might be that naturalistically painted Vanitas still lifes in ornate, antique frames could possibly be as sensational and as provocative as Sherer’s Blood Works have proven themselves to be.
Melancholia, Subversion and Guerilla Art History

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Blood, Sex and the Language of Flowers:
A Conversation with Robert Sherer

How did you become an artist?

My father worked in the aerospace/aircraft industry and was something of a frustrated artist, always drawing. He had no formal training but kept a flat file of paintings and drawings—Rousseau—like jungles with creatures hiding in the foliage—that enthralled me. I remember sitting on his lap while he drew pictures for me. So the idea of being an artist was in the air. During high school I flirted with science—I always loved botany and botanical illustrations—but in the end training as an artist seemed inevitable.

You grew up in Jasper, Alabama, a small town some 40 miles north of Birmingham. As a nascent artist, how did you fit in?

My family readily accepted my artistic inclinations, but my male buddies ribbed me a lot—partly for being an artist but also because I drew flowers, sissy things that they considered feminine. When I was in the seventh grade my family moved to a farm, which didn’t work for me. I was too citified, too cultured, and, unlike my siblings, didn’t excel at sports or enjoy country pursuits. So I attended the little schoolhouse on the hill for the first year, and then my parents let me take the bus to high school back in Jasper. As a teenager I became what you might call a hippy. I had long hair and was angry with the Vietnam War.

Did that provoke problems with your family?

Yes, very much. The military employed my father, but my mother, sister and I objected to the war. So arguments frequently erupted at dinner. But actually my parents were highly non-conformist and great believers in the freedom of the individual. They didn’t match the stereotype of the conservative small town Southern family. My father was and remains
a socialist and an atheist. He was named for FDR (his name is Franklin Delano Roosevelt Sherer) and he organized unions in his youth, spent time in jail, drove a motorcycle, and was very edgy, rebellious. My mother was a women's libber in the 1960s. She refused to subject my sister to gender programming and raised her the same way as my brothers and me (my sister was a total tomboy and bad ass).

How did they respond to your homosexuality?

My family’s attitude was and still is: we don’t care what you are or what you do, we’ll always be proud of you. The Sherers are one of the prominent families in Jasper. Historically, they have occupied every role in town from mayor to doctors and lawyers (although never preachers: we are far too iconoclastic for that). So homosexuality was never a problem. If I came home with a friend, my parents didn’t care if that friend was female or male. Plus, I think, they were always aware of the gay strain running through the family.

Your grandmothers also played a central role in your childhood.

They did. My grandmothers were indomitable. One was a flapper in the twenties. My grandmother on my mother’s side raised nine children on her own in the ‘forties—her husband left her when the ninth one was born. So my mother and her sisters were extremely independent. My father’s side of the family actually frowns upon young women who marry before they have established their careers and lives. My grandmother Sherer, who possessed a fierce Germanic character, had an illegitimate child in the 1920s in north Alabama. She reputedly refused to check herself into hospital in advance and went into labour while working in the fields. The next day she was back out there, toiling away.

An appreciation for the women’s realm is a hallmark of your art.

By helping my grandmothers in their yards and gardens I gained an early love of flowers and botanical illustrations. Both grandmothers collected pictures in oval frames, usually florals, and were avid gardeners who knew about floriography or flower symbolism. In the
Victorian and Edwardian eras, everyone understood this ‘language of flowers’. Even young men knew the subtle difference between giving someone a white rose or a cream rose. In the South this knowledge probably came through the maternal line and harkened back to Britain. That language was ingrained in me at any early age but I knew that I should not speak it in front of the boys in the hood. They would think that I was the most insane, goofy, silly, mushy romantic ever.

**You have spent an inordinate amount of your life in higher education.**

I was in university or art school for almost two decades, from 1975–1992. During that time I experienced the full range of modernism and postmodernism—ab ex, pop, op, conceptual, the lot. My first professors were abstract expressionists who spoke in the language of formalism. They also spoke used classic phallocentric language about how painting should be an act of aggression and about the monumental scale of American art and paintings by artists like Jackson Pollock. It always bugged me because I found small pictures just as effective as large ones. I love intimacy and have never been a size queen. *Blood Works* is partly a rejection of that schooling.

**You attended a number of academic institutions—Walker College, Atlanta College of Art, Georgia State University, Rhode Island School of Design, and Edinboro University—and left most of them before completing your studies. What prompted this restlessness?**

My family’s iconoclastic spirit gave me an above average dose of the angry young man complex. I have always viewed academia as my personal shopping spree where I would look at the menu and decide which delicacies to sample, with no intention of ever earning a diploma. I’m a great advocate of having a broad education, which is what I received. But I only took classes that I was interested in, and planned to stay until they kicked me out or I became dissatisfied. Although no school ever actually kicked me out, I made trouble at all of them. I was very politically active. Long before making Act Up posters at RISD, I was designing banners for revolutionary political groups.
You received your MFA from Edinboro University in Pennsylvania, a school with a reputation for figurative painting. You tell a story of walking into class on your first day and your professor was wearing a button on his lapel that said ‘We don't give a damn how they do it in New York’.

I attended RISD because I wanted a real Northeastern higher education. At ACA in the late 1970s they were into all this kooky conceptual stuff. No one seemed to care if you possessed any art skills, provided that you had blue hair and could dance. And, at GSU the program was stacked with minimalists, so representational work was dismissed. RISD was no better. It might have been outer space. I realized that after four higher education programs, I still couldn't render. One incident, however, changed the course of my academic destiny. While at RISD, Eric Fischl came as a visiting lecturer. At the time he was the hottest thing in New York and I worshipped him because he was considered the primary artist among the group who were responsible for reintroducing the human figure into contemporary art. One evening he saw one of my paintings and said to me, ‘You must be incredibly unhappy here.’ Obviously this academic climate didn’t suit a painter interested in the human figure. Fischl quickly gave me a list of schools that emphasized figuration and encouraged me to apply immediately. At the top of the list was Rutgers to study with Leon Golub. But that year Golub announced his retirement, so I chose Edinboro because it seemed obvious that when I finished that elusive MFA I would at least know how to draw and paint moderately well.

Of course I caused havoc at Edinboro, too. I have always enjoyed poking fun at institutional sacred cows, so I remade Edinboro’s symbol of the highlander figure with his tartan, big fur cap, and bagpipes into a drunk frat boy sucking on a keg and produced it on a popular line of tee-shirts. The university threatened to sue but I’d been censored before and was friends with one of the ACLU attorneys who’d defended me. He warned the university that they’d be sorry if they took me on. Apparently, if you are a public entity you are available to parody, which is covered under the First Amendment.
The university had tried to censor the invitation cards for your MFA show, ‘Re-Presentations’, portraits of male nudes in typically female art historical poses.

The whole affair seems so absurd and ironic because I wasn’t really trying to upset the applecart with these works. They were some of the most traditional things I had done. I just wanted to create a dialogue around my work. I’d researched the history of portraiture, monuments and statues and concluded that Western art can only depict male figures in a prone position if they are dead or dying. Believe me, I am sufficiently creative to where if I wanted controversy I could make such blasphemously outrageous works that people would be rushing out of the room.

But you can’t deny that your work has a provocative streak.

Guilty as charged. I don’t know why but even as a teenager I made surrealist drawings with subtle but highly sexual content. I guess I wanted to provoke without being outright offensive. I’ve always been obsessed with making images that can be viewed as innocent, but which have layers of sexual or political content if you care to notice. Perhaps some of that comes from being raised in the Bible Belt. I can create punchy pictures but if anyone confronts me I can say, ‘You’re the one with a dirty mind.’

You returned to the South once you received your MFA and were hired as Director of the Lowe Gallery in Atlanta. How did that experience inform your work as an artist?

Directing a commercial gallery didn’t go well with having my own art career. I eventually left because I found it spiritually damaging. But it also taught me the need for an appropriate relationship with one’s dealer: to see it as a professional business arrangement, to respect its boundaries, and not to treat my dealer as my daddy or my therapist. I stress these points to my students at Kennesaw State University: professional development is a big part of our arts program. I bring examples from my career into the classroom and ask the students how I should deal with this tough situation that has arisen with a dealer or a curator, and they grapple with the issue and ultimately learn from this dose of real life. I also take them to shows and introduce them
to gallery owners. Subsequently I have several students who have secured gallery representation while still undergraduates. Many are on their way to developing solid art careers.

**When you returned to Atlanta in 1992 you became friends with the gay men’s art collective Taboo, of which Larry Anderson is now the only remaining member.**

A lot of my old friends were gone when I moved back to Atlanta (many had died of AIDS) so I needed to connect with people and especially artists who understood my subversive nature and personal politics. Larry became a mentor—not academically, but in a real world sense—and the Taboo guys took me under their wing. With other curators I might have been tempted to hide my history of naughtiness and censorship, but the Taboo guys actually valued my troublemaking and saw it as a badge of honour.

They took devilish delight in pitching me their latest outlandish exhibition concepts. At times it felt as if they had torn off the top of my head, poured in some interesting concoction, slammed the lid and simply waited for it to ferment. All four of the guys had really different temperaments, interpretive systems and styles of communication. But they all had these really intense, beautiful eyes that flicked with a naughty intelligence.

When it was finally time for me to show them the results of my labour my studio would be strewn with stuff, tons of ideas and I would be worked up into a lather seeking their approval. And they’d say things like: you’re on target with this idea, but here you’re communicating too easily. It helped me balance opacity with transparency, danger with innocence.

**What projects did they encourage**

Of all the things I created through the years I think they liked the pyrographic drawings the most. By the mid-nineties I had become displeased with my oil painting and had started to make retro-kitsch wood burnings that depicted seemingly innocent 1950s scenes of boyhood antics, but
with a homoerotic subtext. Taboo loved the idea of using leather punch, wood burning, basket weaving—what we call Camp Crafts—to tap into suppressed erotic memories and fantasies.

**The name Camp Crafts is almost too tempting to resist.**
Isn’t it? And I’ve enjoyed the marriage of form and content in the pyrographic works.

**Did the series’ depiction of adolescent gay sexuality cause problems?**
Actually this series has been one of my best received so far. At first I was convinced that someone would try to make a scene, given how often gay men are stigmatized as paedophiles. But I think viewers identify with this tender, awkward period in our lives.

**Gay men have been demonized in the US scout movement.**
It’s so sad. In all my years of scouting and adolescent sports, not once did an older person try to take advantage of me. If anything I craved carnal knowledge and was dying for older boys to divulge the secrets of adulthood. So I pursued friendships with other boys and had huge crushes on teachers.

**So the wood burnings are a lot about puppy love.**
Absolutely. That is one of my favourite themes.

**They seem quite autobiographical.**
Most are. Even those not based on memory have a basis in fantastical imaginings. I am retelling stories through the filter of adulthood even if the event never happened.

**There’s a ritualistic aspect to the process of wood burning that connects to Blood Works.**
Ceremony is important to my art. Perhaps because my family wasn’t religious, but I absorbed the pervasive influence of Christianity in the South, I always have sought rituals in my work. The studio environment is important, down to the music I play and the tea I drink. Salvador
Dali believed that a delicate balance of psychic crutches is needed for creativity to be possible. I don’t like to speak of the muse—the idea of the male artist seducing the female muse is too sexist and heterosexist—but I do have my own distinct methods and rituals for evoking the magic of creativity. Watching myself bleed to produce the blood for the Blood Works drawings is very intense, bordering on self-sacrifice. I don’t like anyone else to be in the studio when I do that. I can get pretty strange in the head.

Speaking of Blood Works, you said earlier that you learned not to speak of your love of flowers or floral imagery in public.

I repressed that part of myself for a long time. I probably had more trouble coming to terms with my love of plants and botanical drawings than with my sexuality. Then one day I thought, to hell with it. I had struggled to dismiss those oval frames as kitschy and to reject Victoriana and flower imagery as sentimental gush. But finally I had to claim it as part of my heritage and to recontextualize it into the contemporary.

Back in the early 1980s, I had a conversation with Michael Stipe of REM about emotion and sentiment in art. At the time he was not yet a famous rock star but he was one of my favourite visual artists in Athens because he could paint the human figure and charge it with pathos. Don’t get me wrong, I love REM but I was initially a bit saddened that he had stopped painting when he became known as a singer and songwriter. He told me that he had stopped painting because he wanted his art to touch people on a heartfelt level. I agreed with him and promised myself that I would never make art that was cold, purely intellectual and condescending. We even had an expression to describe the brainy art of the time. Similar to the phrase: “She’s drunk, she’s had too much to drink”; we would say, “she’s thunk, she’s had too much to think”.

I remember that a great deal of early 80s contemporary art was accompanied by a user’s manual. There was a general disregard and, in some cases, a palpable disdain for the viewer. Strangely, almost twenty years would pass before I would be sufficiently comfortable to use floral imagery to make work about the poetic language of blood with traditional quill pens.
and brushes. The desire to unite the medium with the message that I had first explored with the wood burnings became even more important with *Blood Works*.

**Where did you first show *Blood Works*?**

I premiered the series in 1999 in a thematic exhibition called “The Body as Commodity” at The Atlanta Contemporary Art Center (then known as Nexus). We installed the drawings on a vivid red velvet-covered wall that confronted you immediately as you entered the space. There was a jolt to the viewer: what's the contemporary art center doing showing florals? And then the viewer would read the wall label and things got more complicated.

There's a fetishistic aspect to working with blood, especially ‘tainted’ HIV positive blood. Having studied anthropology and African art I know the long history of rituals involving body fluids and the taboos attached to pollutants, how the mystical class of shamans or ‘witch doctors’ is authorized to enter forbidden realms and break the rules. Menstrual blood is used for certain rituals concerning women. Semen is used to heal problems of fertility. And bodily fluids often are combined in African nail fetishes, for instance.

Discussing pollution taboos in her fascinating book *Purity and Danger*, the anthropologist Mary Douglas notes: “The danger which is risked by boundary transgression is power. Those vulnerable margins and those attacking forces, which threaten to destroy good order, represent the powers inhering in the cosmos. Ritual which can harness these for good is harnessing power indeed.”

The law of sympathetic magic enters into this. If you want to make something manifest, then you have to construct the ritual from materials that resemble the desired outcome. If I want to kill a buffalo, I enact a ritual while covered with buffalo hide. It increases my chances of success by making me sympathetic with the animal.
There’s something almost homeopathic about sampling something dangerous or forbidden in order to provide immunity in your use of HIV positive blood.

I was aware of this when I made a drawing of a cotton boll with the blood of an African-American friend. Reanimating some of the intensity around the history of race and cotton felt powerful. Since I grew up in the South, race was, and remains, a central issue. Because all of the men and some of the women on both sides of my family were in the military, we were raised to judge people not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character, to paraphrase Dr. King.

My family has always maintained that if you marry into us then you are one of us and you will receive the full support of all of us. Through the years, relatives on both sides of my family have married into black families. Having African-American cousins as blood kin greatly sharpens the racial issues for me. Blood is the perfect medium for addressing issues relevant to both family and race.

Returning to your earlier comments about gardening reminds me of another comment by Douglas. She talks about how “a garden is not a tapestry; if all the weeds are removed, the soil is impoverished. Somehow the gardener must preserve fertility by returning what he has taken out. The special kind of treatment which some religions accord to anomalies and abominations to make them powerful for good is like turning weeds and lawn cuttings into compost.” She concludes that “Whenever a strict pattern of purity is imposed on our lives it is either highly uncomfortable or it leads into contradiction if closely followed leads to hypocrisy.”

Yes, there is a sense of recycling with the Blood Works, a sense of making something good from the bad. I love the fact that I am using HIV+ blood to increase AIDS awareness, thus contributing to its eventual eradication. It’s as if I am using HIV to destroy it. There is also the added thrill of knowing that I am educating people about personal responsibility while simultaneously breaking a biological taboo.
All of the pictures in the series have a didactic quality and I’ve noticed that many of them also manage to squeeze in a little humour as well. How does humour play into the conceptual aspects of this *Blood Works*?

For many years I was so devastated by the AIDS crisis that I couldn’t express myself artistically. My heroes in the arts and my friends were getting sick and dying at an incredible rate, and nothing could be done to save them. I felt impotent to process my pain at the loss and my rage at a society largely unconcerned about the growing epidemic. The general public didn’t really care about the disease as long as they perceived that it was only killing gay men. The few examples of art I did manage to create were nothing more than agitational propaganda fuelled by anger. Ultimately, the sense of futility and impotence consumed me. I stopped making socially relevant art and promised myself that if I ever did make any in the future it would have to be punctuated with levity. When I began the *Blood Works* series I remembered that promise to myself.

You often combine explosive polarities in your work. Before we started this interview, you said in passing that you have a strong love/hate relationship with just about everything.

Since childhood I have achieved psychological equilibrium by playing oppositional mind games with myself. Almost as soon as I’m convinced of something, my mind begins to deconstruct it. Immediately upon liking something my mind will begin to find ways to hate it. Part of me is humanitarian but another part of me is utterly misanthropic. And I am perfectly comfortable with my contradictions. My friends have noted this proclivity and joke that it is perhaps due to my birth sign of Pisces: two fish swimming simultaneously in opposite directions.

It would not be potent for me to make a drawing about HIV only with HIV negative blood. I love combining negative and positive blood in one drawing. Viewers often ask which part of the drawing was made with which blood, but I won’t tell them. It’s one of the wonderful secrets that I get to keep.

*Interview Conducted by Helena Reckitt, 10/08/07–01/20/08*
If a virus tries to infect the computer, the vaccine program will ask you if you want to allow this to happen.

Always deny access.

To grant writing privileges most certainly allow the virus to infect and spread.

Do not insert disks that contain software programs into this computer. The virus spreads using a host program.

Don't take the chance.
The Blood Works Series
Artist’s Statement by Robert Sherer

My work is about the politics of blood: the sanguine identity of people; the juxtapositions and blending of peoples; and ultimately the consanguinity of all people. I learn things when I combine the blood of differing religions, races, genders, political stances, HIV statuses.

Through the years, the Blood Works series has traversed a wide range of subjects: botanical illustration; the genitalia of plants; Gothicism; vampirism; predator and prey; dominance and submission; sexual expression; chastity; virginity; sexual awakening; abstinence and sublimation; masturbation; narcissism; sexual promiscuity; religious/sexual/chemical ecstasy; maturation and aging; gender identity/expression/privilege; effeminacy and masculinity; male and female homosexuality; socio-religious criticism; southern identity; southern classicism; Greco-Roman classicism; slavery; slave ownership; race; racism; racial metaphors; nature's imperatives; sexual/romantic relations; friendship; compatibility; dating/mating rituals: flirting pick-up lines; marriage; suffocating passion; sexual infidelity; reproduction, over-population, safe sex practices; sero-discordant relationships, the stigmatization of HIV; HIV status in relationships; AIDS in India; AIDS rage; political dissent; the plague; and death.

Technique:
One evening, while trying to remove the blade from an X-Acto razor, it slipped from my hand and stuck straight up in my thigh. When I removed the blade from my leg, a red geyser shot into the air. I must have hit an artery. I quickly collected the squirting liquid in a hermetic container and placed it in the refrigerator. The next day, when I attempted to use it as a drawing medium, I was discouraged to find that the pigment instantly coagulated in my quill pen. After some experimentation and consultation with a medical technician, I suspended the liquid in a thinning solution which helps it to smoothly flow. Soon after creating my first drawing in the series I discovered another setback to my medium: when it dries it darkens to brown within a day. It took several weeks of experimentation with sealers and varnishes before I found the best combination to preserve the sanguine freshness of my pigment. I now draw the HIV− blood from my arm with new clean syringes. A friend who wishes to remain anonymous supplies the HIV+ blood used in some of the artworks.
Plate 1
*Circle of Friends, 1999*
HIV− Blood on Paper
H" x W": 23" x 21"
Plate 2
Disarmament, 1999
HIV– Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 26” x 22”
Plate 3
*Marital Infidel*, 1999
HIV+ Blood on Paper
H" x W": 12" x 10" oval
Plate 4
*The Beloved*, 2000
HIV+ Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 4” x 5” oval
Plate 5
*Patient Zero*, 2000
HIV+ Blood on Paper
H" x W": 12" x 7” oval
Plate 6

Queen Bee, 2008
HIV− Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 12” x 12”
Plate 7

_Pansy_, 1999
HIV− Blood on Paper
H" x W": 12" x 9" oval
Plate 8
A Litter of Legumes, 2007
HIV− Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 10” x 8” oval
Plate 9

*Peas in a Pod*, 2007

HIV− and HIV+ Blood on Paper

H" x W": 12" x 16" oval
Plate 10
*Arrangement*, 2005
HIV− Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 8” x 11”
Plate 11
_Passiflora Incarnata_, 2004
HIV− Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 26” x 20”
Plate 12

*Encounters*, 2002

HIV+ and HIV− Blood on Paper

H” x W”: 28” x 23”
Plate 13
*Ain’t Love Grand?, 2005*
HIV− Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 12” x 15” oval
Plate 14

The Birds and the Bees, 2006

HIV+ and HIV− Blood on Paper

H” x W”: 18” x 15” oval
Plate 15

*Love Nest*, 2005

HIV+ and HIV− Blood on Paper

H" x W": 13" x 16" oval
Plate 16
*Stigmata* #2, 2000
HIV+ Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 18” x 19” oval
Plate 17

*Protect Yourself from Pricks*, 2001
HIV+ Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 12” x 10” oval
Plate 18
Mehndi Stigmata #1, 2001
HIV− and HIV+ Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 12” x 9” oval
Plate 19
*Chastising Beauty*, 2004
HIV− Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 17” x 21”
Plate 20
Daddy’s Little Girl, 2001
HIV− Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 32” x 25”
Plate 21
One-liners, 2003
HIV− Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 18” x 15”
Plate 22

Compatibles, 2002
HIV– Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 25” x 19”
Plate 23
*Confirmed Bachelor, 2001*
HIV− Blood on Paper
H" x W": 33" x 21"
Plate 24

Barrier, 2000

HIV− Blood on Paper

H" x W": 11" x 8" oval
Plate 25
*Nuptial Knot*, 2003
Red wine on Paper
H" x W": 7 ¼" x 5 ¼"
Plate 26

_Nuptial Not_, 2002
HIV– Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 33” x 25”
Plate 27
_Sweet William_, 2004
HIV+ and HIV– Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 25” x 19”
Plate 28

*Ex Stasis*, 2006

HIV– Blood on Paper

H” x W”: 27” x 18”
Plate 29

Whore, 2009

HIV+ Blood on Paper

H" x W": 8" x 11" oval
Plate 30
The Usual Suspects, 2002
HIV+ and HIV− Blood on Paper
H” x W”: 34” x 28”
Plate 31

*Bride Stripped Bare*, 2006

HIV− Blood on Paper

H" x W": 26" x 20"
Plate 32
*Sapphic Couplet*, 2006
HIV− Blood on Paper
H" x W": 26" x 20"
Plate 33
*Trojan Bouquet*, 2006
HIV− Blood on Paper
H" x W": 27" x 20"
Plate 34

Narcissus (Self-portrait), 2007
HIV− Blood on Paper
H x W: 18 x 8
Plate 35

*Chastity*, 2007
HIV− Blood Solution on Paper
H” x W”: 28 1/4” x 22 3/4”
Plate 36

*Late Bloomer*, 2007

HIV- Blood Solution on Paper

H” x W” : 24 1/2” x 24 1/2”
ANTEBELLUM CLASSICISM

Sugarcane
Cotton
Indigo
Hemp
Tobacco
The Blood Money Series
Artist’s Statement by Robert Sherer

The Blood Works series attempts to reconnect with the primordial use of blood as an expressive medium and to study blood’s ability to amplify meaning. I imagine that the first primates killed one another and presented the blood as an ostentatious sign of success. Even now, everything seems to become more important when rendered in blood.

In the subseries called Blood Money I study the iconography of Confederate currency in search of the axiomatic “devil in the details.” When I locate a scene or subject that suggests a fundamental moral contradiction, I isolate it and enhance its emotional impact by rendering it in blood of the descendants of slaves. This recontextualization not only subverts the original intent, but also reveals the seeds of self-destruction sewn into the original “designs” of the Old South.

This deconstructive procedure is essentially a détournement because it turns the iconographic expressions of the capitalist system of the Confederate States of America against itself. As a “Son of the South” (a white southern male descended from an antebellum slave-owning family) it is particularly important that I personally make these expressions because they represent both a betrayal and a rejection of those values.

I am acutely aware of the controversial nature of this subject matter. I know that some white radicals and Confederate apologists may condemn the work because it satirizes the sacred symbols and hallowed mythos of the Old South. I am also aware that racial politics may result in another critique, one that rejects the notion of a white southern artist “bleeding” descendants of slaves, perhaps for personal gain. I, however, do not receive any profit from the sales of these works—the funds help to endow a college scholarship, thus perhaps further thwarting dominant ideologies.
Plate 38
*Dramatis Personae*, 2010
Media: 50% Descendant of Slaves and 50% Descendant of Slave Owners Blood on Paper
H" x W": 32" x 36"
Plate 39
_Civil Unrest_, 2012
Media: African-American Blood Silkscreen on Paper
_H" x W": 20" x 28""
Plate 40
Two Slaveries, 2012
Media: African-American Blood Silkscreen on Paper
H" x W": 20" x 28"
Plate 41
Cargo Ship, 2012
Media: African-American Blood Silkscreen on Paper
H” x W”: 20” x 28”
Plate 42
*Slave Picking Cotton*, 2012
Media: African-American Blood Silkscreen on Paper
H” x W”: 20” x 28”
Plate 43

*South Striking Down the Union*, 2012

Media: African-American Blood Silkscreen on Paper

H” x W”: 20” x 28”
Plate 44

*Tyranny of Ornament*, 2012

Media: African-American Blood Silkscreen on Paper

H" x W": 20" x 28"
Plate 45

*I Saw the Dollar Five in Red*, 2012

Media: African-American Blood Silkscreen on Paper

H” x W”: 28” x 20”
Plate 46
*Ignoring Egypt*, 2012
Media: African-American Blood Silkscreen on Paper
H" x W": 28" x 20"
George the Third by the Grace of God, of Great-Britain, France, and Ireland, King, Defender of the Faith, and so forth, To all to whom these Presents shall come Greeting: Know ye, that we of our special Grace, certain Knowledge and mere Motion, have given and granted, and by these Presents, for ourHeirs and Successors, do Give and Grant unto Matthew Shearer his
heirs and assigns, a plantation or tract of land containing Two hundred and fifty acres Situate on the Parish of St. Marks, Craven County and Bounds on all sides by Vacant Land.
And hath such shape, form and marks, as appear by a plat thereof, hereunto annexed: Together with woods, under-woods, timber and timber-trees, lakes, ponds, fisheries, waters, water-courses, products, commodities, appurtenances and hereditaments whatsoever, thereunto belonging or in any wise appertaining: Together with privilege of hunting, hawking and fowling in and upon the same, and all minerals whatsoever; saving and reserving, nevertheless, to us, our heirs and successors, all with pine-trees, if any there should be found growing thereon; and also saving and reserving, nevertheless, to our heirs and successors, one tenth-part of mines of gold and silver only: To Have and to Hold the said tract of Two hundred and fifty acres of land and all and singular other
premises hereby granted unto the said Matthew Shearer his
heirs and assigns for ever, in free and common socage, the first Matthew Shearer his
heirs and assigns yielding and paying therefore unto us, our heirs and successors, or to our Receiver-General for the time being, or to his Deputy Deputies for the time being, yearly, that is to say, on every twenty-fifth day of March, in every year at the rate of three shillings sterling, or four shillings proclamation money, for every hundred acres, and so proportion, according to the number of acres, contained herein; the same to commence at the expiration of two years from the date hereof. Provided always, and this present Grant is upon condition, nevertheless, that the said Matthew Shearer his
heirs or assigns, shall and do, yearly, and every year, after the date of these presents, clear and cultivate at the rate of three acres for every hundred acres of land, and so in proportion according to the number of acres herein contained; and also shall and do enter a minute or docket of these letters patent in the office of our Auditor-General for the time being, in our said Province, within six months from the date hereof; And upon condition, that if the said rent, hereby reserved shall happen to be in arrear and unpaid for the space of three years from the time it shall become due, and distress can be found on the said lands, tenements and hereditaments hereby granted; or if the said Matthew Shearer his
Given under the Great Seal of our said Province.
Witness His Excellency The Boone Capt. Gent.