

FROM RAGS TO MORE RAGS

By
© 2019
Eugene Sarmiento

Submitted to the graduate degree program in the Department of Visual Art, and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

Chairperson-Benjamin Rosenthal

Yoonmi Nam

Joey Orr

Date Defended: March 19, 2019

The thesis committee for Eugene Sarmiento certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

FROM RAGS TO MORE RAGS

Chairperson-Benjamin Rosenthal

Date Approved: May 3, 2019

ABSTRACT

FROM RAGS TO MORE RAGS is an exhibition consisting of large scale paintings and intimate, small scale drawings with the intent of establishing a visual narrative of the human soul in the moment of passing. The work explores the capturing of life's sincerity through ideas of my own existential melancholia, interpreting experiences of life lost and using the rapid cyclical nature of flora as a transcendental study of existence.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract:	iii
Table of Contents:	iv
Thesis Body:	1-10
I. A.	<i>INTRO from rags to more rags</i>
II.	EVERLASTING SCHADENFREUDE AND THE ESSENCE OF SINCERITY THROUGH WHICH THE GROWTH OF THE SOUL SLOWLY DEPLEATES INTO EVERLASTING SCHADENFREUDE AND THE ESSENCE OF SINCERITY THROUGH WHICH THE GROWTH OF THE SOUL SLOWLY DEPLEATES INTO EVERLASTING SCHADENFREUDE AND THE ESSENCE OF SINCERITY THROUGH WHICH THE GROWTH OF THE SOUL SLOWLY DEPLEATES INTO EVERLASTING SCHADENFREUDE AND THE ESSENCE OF SINCERITY THROUGH WHICH THE GROWTH OF THE SOUL SLOWLY DEPLEATES INTO ALL KNOWN KNOWNS.
III.	hardship's prosperity
IV.	strokes keep, lines keeping, marks keepst
V.	OUTRO
Images:	11-17
Works Cited:	18

I
A. INTRO
FROM RAGS TO MORE RAGS

The title for the exhibition, *FROM RAGS TO MORE RAGS*, is a variation on a ubiquitous saying, a phrase I have held in my back pocket and front pocket for a period of time. In looking for mottos/taglines to define my future and purpose in life, this play on the phrase “from rags to riches” replaces “riches” with a more realistic expectation. “More rags” is more than an expectation. It is a reminder of what I have experienced and established as a measure of success. It is an accumulation of all my past experiences, all of my past rags worn openly.

My work is invested in exploring a purpose in life while feeling disconnected, and grappling with a sense of mortality with the notion that my life (every life) becomes just a speck in an infinite line of time. I ask, what is the driving force to keep every tender heart sane, every action pure, and every interaction purposeful?

My life is currently at the stage where the oldest of family members are passing. Reflection on my memories are the only thing that endures, and the unsettling realization that my parents are in that line of passing, and relatively soon, I will be too. As a response to life’s experiences of grief and loss, I have been trying to achieve the impossible task of extracting the vitality and emotional content from my daily observations of objects, beings, and interpersonal interactions by translating them through drawing. Translating the daily observations of the swaying trees, the howling sun—I spend time finding more and more connections to the living objects with the shortest lifetimes. Working on my self-defined impossible task, I have become infatuated with the act of observing the life cycle of flowers and associating them to what life must feel like. The petals bloom, dry and then fall from the foundation of the stem to later

become a life source for the next generation. I use flora as a universal signifier for the fragility of life.

FROM RAGS TO MORE RAGS is composed of three large scale oil on canvas paintings and six mixed media drawings (Figure 1, Figure 2). The exhibition is accompanied by a gallery guide folio with the exhibited works listed in order of viewing, a map of the gallery, and scans of preliminary sketches of the oil paintings (Figure 3). An 11”x 8.5” blue risograph print of SOUL is inserted as a loose giveaway image in the folio. The list of works are as follows:

*In a pocket of good times
I know nothing, I'm just sitting here looking at pretty colors
Might as well have fun cuz your happiness is done
I know nothing, I'm just sitting here looking at pretty colors
How to grow a thought of substantial weight
An excellent choice for a poor factory in heaven
It's nothing profound
Shorter comins even shorter
To find the water works*

A recurring image of a malleable mound with orifices as sites for sight takes center stage in the body of work bouncing from painting to drawing, shifting in scale and color. I refer to this entity as SOUL. SOUL creates soul—having the power to shape the landscape of reality, bring purpose to existence and act as conductor of the energy called life. Soul is in contention with the human flesh as to who the role of the vessel belongs to. Soul shapes to any setting. SOUL’s fluidity fills every crevice, gap, wound, and opening needing mending.

II

**EVERLASTING SCHADENFREUDE AND THE ESSENCE OF SINCERITY
THROUGH WHICH THE GROWTH OF THE SOUL SLOWLY DEPLEATES INTO
EVERLASTING SCHADENFREUDE AND THE ESSENCE OF SINCERITY
THROUGH WHICH THE GROWTH OF THE SOUL SLOWLY DEPLEATES INTO
EVERLASTING SCHADENFREUDE AND THE ESSENCE OF SINCERITY
THROUGH WHICH THE GROWTH OF THE SOUL SLOWLY DEPLEATES INTO
EVERLASTING SCHADENFREUDE AND THE ESSENCE OF SINCERITY
THROUGH WHICH THE GROWTH OF THE SOUL SLOWLY DEPLEATES INTO**

ALL KNOWN KNOWNS.

A few years ago, I came to the realization of the impact and relevance of observational drawing in my work. At that time I was working a laborious job with long hours, leaving me with a limited amount of energy and time to devote to my artistic practice. Every morning was spent drawing the array of flowers in my mother's garden before heading to work. This was the only time I felt the need to draw what I was observing and the first investigation I undertook in trying to capture the vitality of a living thing. The garden of flowers were so interesting to observe, in that they had such a rapid life cycle. I was able to see them sprout, transform, bloom and eventually wither away all before my eyes. It was magical, and a bit fucked up, that I had taken so much joy in watching something struggle so hard to live to later crumble into dust. The flowers decompose into the soil from which they were conceived. The amount of drawing and representation of their life cycle did not do them justice—Mother Nature was never there to tame and capture, especially with my miniscule sketches.

I continued this artistic practice into the years to come only to have notions of cynicism plague my initial intentions of visually capturing the movement of life. No longer having the resource of my mother's grown garden, I began to collect wildflowers to continue this investigation. I questioned the soul of the flower leaving upon time of plucking and drying. I would still continue to draw the subjects, but would eventually resort to just observing them for hours in my studio. I felt the need to exude life into a now lifeless object through drawing in vibrant colors, lines, and marks. With the emotional investment and physical labor put into the drawing, I hoped the final image revitalized the flowers' existence with the energy I had given back.

Around the same time in the spring of 2017, I witnessed the slow and painful death of my grandfather. He was suffering from Alzheimer's disease for the previous six years and his final stage of life was difficult to experience. I watched the decline of his health and I found it sobering to analyze this dualistic nature of witnessing my grandparents reach the end of their life while they witnessed the start of mine. A couple of days prior to his death, I was able to visit and catch him for a bit. This just meant being able to see him, make eye contact in search for something behind his murmuring and grunting incognitive state due to the illness. This mental image, of course, lingered.

I returned to the studio and my practice of capturing the essence of the flower at a state of passing—a frozen moment in time, depicting the beauty of life continuing on elsewhere pushing through the traumatizing image of death.

Through this grieving process, SOUL was created from a mold in the earth for the purpose of creating life and personifying mine simultaneously (Figure 4). SOUL easily transitioned from drawing to sculpture back to drawing as it was given a face, a purpose, and a narrative. In the triptych, *It's nothing profound, Shorter comins even shorter, To find the water works* (Figure 5), the motifs of life leaving the vessels of flowers and the image of SOUL were unified and encased as a three-piece combination. The image of SOUL is flanked by two vibrant still shots of the expulsion of energy, color, and using flora as the signifier of life. SOUL is confined in four dimensions—the frame itself is used as a cage of preservation, symbol of preciousness, and a signal of hierarchy over all other works on paper not in frames. Moreover, the drawing is split into three more windows—colored, energetic tear shaped droplets fill the border of the drawing. A border of graphite, color stripped droplets, is layered over. The last

window is completed with a portrait of SOUL in graphite. This image is all of the aforementioned stripped off life and is seen as the creator of energy. It is the vessel being mourned.

There are questions that I consider not worth asking or defining in the nature of contextualizing SOUL's existence in my world but became enthusiastic in implementing the stories of others that have shaped the narrative of the human soul. I found a resemblance between physical characteristics of my SOUL with that of many mythological beings in William Blake's poetry. SOUL shares the shape of Blake's man, lord, death, images of Job, many transformations of Urizen and Nebachadnezzar alongside similar facial expressions of agony, sadness and a purging of emotions (Figure 6). In William Blake's poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a dualistic age old tension of confronting the motives of good and evil delineating them back to the conflicting struggle for hierarchy between the human soul and body is further developed. I became interested in the excerpt "The Voice of the Devil" from Blake's poem which is spoken through the voice of Urizen:

1. That Man has two real existing principles Viz: a Body and a Soul.
2. That Energy, call'd Evil, is alone from the Body, and that Reason, call'd Good, is alone from the Soul.
3. That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies.
But the following Contraries to these are True.
 1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.
 2. Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
 3. Energy is Eternal Delight. (Blake 29)

In Blake's poem, human life is governed by two principles "reason" belonging to the soul and "energy" belonging to the body. Leaning towards one or the other will determine the outcome of ones afterlife. I used this interpretation of the poem as a basis in creating a narrative for my

SOUL and as a method to visualize the journey it undertakes at the moment of passing from life to death and continuing through death into inception.

The three paintings, *I know nothing, I'm just sitting here looking at pretty colors, I know nothing, I'm just sitting here looking at pretty colors*, and *An excellent choice for a poor factory in heaven* speak on this underlying theme of SOUL's journey in life. As the largest of all works, *An excellent choice for a poor factory in heaven*, treats SOUL as a factory of creation: A factory lost in a moment of existence (Figure 7). In the landscape, SOUL is creating life—energies—through the orifices it uses as sight. The energies are represented as a blue fluid matter. The energies sift and are swallowed back into SOUL only expelling the flowers it creates. This cycle is left on repeat. Flesh tries to penetrate its way through the chaos only showing parts of the human body in which orifices are present. A wandering sun is illuminating the landscape with all the colors of the inlets of the soul—a window pane of the outside world looking in. SOUL is enslaved in an infinite cycle of creation and is in contention with the human body. The painting is interrupted by a floating decree slapped center top right of the composition, creating a window within a window. The text is written in reverse challenging the role of the viewer as someone looking out from the painting rather than looking in to the painting (Figure 8). The decree reads as follows: “TO BE SHALLOW, EVEN BETTER THAN DEATH”. The decree is suspended in between a state of life and death, a reality and what is fantastical, manifesting as a self-descriptive statement.

III hardship's prosperity

“Oil paintings often depict things. Things which in reality are buyable. To have a thing painted and put on a canvas is not unlike buying it and putting it in your house. If you buy a painting you buy also the look of the thing it represents.” (Berger 83)

Berger is correct. Oil paintings do depict things. The history of painting is carried through every new painting made, and this “thing,” reality, becomes buyable. In the works, *I know nothing, I’m just sitting here looking at pretty colors* and *I know nothing, I’m just sitting here looking at pretty colors*, the sellable concept is the contention between soul and body (Figure 9). Both images are a mirror of each other. They complete one another. They connect at each other’s beginning and each other’s end. Each painting is an imposter of the other. The paintings depict the luster of the body expelling life in forms of flora—frozen in a time of passing and simultaneously blooming. Energies in blue are excreted from one body to the other never clarifying which one is at the receiving end. The energies connect outside of the compositional frames solidifying an infinite cycle of a conflicting power struggle of body and soul. Both images are derived from the notion that hardship is a universal experience. Or this is, at least, how I want to understand it. The titles of the work are plucked from the post-punk British band IDLES’s 2017 song titled “Mother”. The song is about the generational struggles of a working person. The growl and rapid pacings of the song create a melodic chaotic voice challenging the ear as to what is a soothing sound. The lyrics are statements describing a mother's life perpetuating a cycle of labor :

My mother worked fifteen hours five days a week
My mother worked sixteen hours six days a week
My mother worked seventeen hours seven days a week
The best way to scare a Tory is to read and get rich
The best way to scare a Tory is to read and get rich
The best way to scare a Tory is to read and get rich
I know nothing I’m just sitting here looking at pretty colours (IDLES)

Oppression keeps the mother working. Oppression keeps the mother blinded and the song continues with the lines “the best way to scare a Tory is to read and get rich.” Education is seen

as a liberator from the oppressor (a Tory is a conservative in support of the British Monarchy, in this case any other form of institutionalized oppression can take its place). The images depicted in the paintings reflect a point of view in which a body enslaved into a laborious life will only see that life.

In the exhibition, the framed drawing *Might as well have fun cuz your happiness is done* is exhibited between the paintings *I know nothing, I'm just sitting here looking at pretty colors* and *I know nothing, I'm just sitting here looking at pretty colors*. *Might as well have fun cuz your happiness is done* shows life—energies—taken out of the infinite cycle of labor and is allowed to pass over. The blue fluid matter is only given two emotions, that of happy and unhappy: Happy to be liberated. Happy to no longer hide its identity, but feeling unfortunate to knowingly realize its life cycle becomes shorter and shorter with time passing. Flowers are expelled from the form in all directions and in all the colors of life. Text is written in interchangeable color combinations as a border creating a restraint, a barrier trying to catch all leaving energies and life forms (Figure 10). “MIGHT AS WELL HAVE FUUUN CUZ YOUR HAPPINESS IS DONE” reads across and around the drawing. The text refers to a hook in the song “Unhappy” by the Atlanta rap duo Outkast—a sound interpreted as the pursuit of happiness coming from not only looking forward, looking to life ahead, but knowing the past dictates the perception of the present, whatever that may be. Music plays an integral part of my practice as it reaches areas not in the scope of visual art, not relying in the sight and interpretation, but placing a foreign voice in the realm of my own thoughts.

IV strokes keep, lines keeping, marks keepst

Drawing is of highest importance in this body of work. The action of touch and

sensitivity of materials against the flesh resonate with the idea of transferring energies and stressing the extension of the human body to paper. The foundation of the exhibition is built on two mediums, oil painting and watercolor made to its respective scale. Each drawing was given the same amount of patience, will, embodiment of soul and energy. Each painting is created to mimic this love and compassion but at the cost of the second hand—my intention of treating painting not as painting but as an overemphasized method of scaling up drawings. I lost interest in the properties of painting trying to unlearn traditional ideologies of painting—letting the paint speak as its own material, the physicality of painting in action and time, and building terrains of paint on the surface. The largest of the works are created in oil as a test of permanence. They are larger than life, they are flatter than life, and they are shallower than life. The watercolors are the opposite of this. They are not protected from time's grip. They will lose their quality of vibrancy, fullness and are not meant to live longer than the lifespan of the aforementioned paintings. The drawings are meant to be cherished, with its importance and weight of each piece held to the an equal bar as the paintings.

The works are split into three sections. *In a pocket of good times* is exhibited on its own wall. The assigned wall is small and the 15" x 11" drawing is even smaller. The image is of SOUL, spilling its tears over a flattened shadow of words in reverse (Figure 11). The title and the shadow are one and the same. I find titles follow in suit to the artworks they are assigned. They complete the task of offering another chance at conversation. They are the companion an artist creates in order to watch over the work. Adjacent to *In a pocket of good times*, the grouping *I know nothing, I'm just sitting here looking at pretty colors, Might as well have fun cuz your happiness is done*, and *I know nothing, I'm just sitting here looking at pretty colors* becomes an

unintentional triptych (Figure 2). The final wall exhibits the majority of the works with the largest of works flanked by the small scale drawings. The viewer is directed to look closely at an intimate distance when viewing the drawings and break away to view the paintings as a whole.

V OUTRO

“Under a table you have the possibility to test your own absence. The realization that life is taking its course, even without you, is an intense human experience; it shows the finiteness of personality” (Manders, 9)

Something has been said well before I thought of saying it. A quote from artist Mark Manders’s has lingered in the back of my head since reading a couple of his reflections on creating work. The act of somehow speaking directly to an audience, but not really knowing the intentions of what is meant to be communicated, is a hyperbole of the purpose art serves. Just to clarify, it is the purpose my art serves. In Mark Manders’s quote, my work has become the “under the table.” I am here and there. The greater chance of being overlooked and not viewed by anyone is knowing just that—life is continuing and my values and precedents are set on the act of creation.

Many other actions are to fill in the gaps that need to be filled and the need to fill the gaps that are overfilled to the point that they have more gaps to refill. Invigorating the imagination becomes the ultimate practice as to what I believe is the most difficult act in drawing and painting. I am being biased here. I am trying to imagine the unimaginable through the work. It is not a new practice or a new conversation—a set of discrete actions that have continued and will continue in perpetuity in the history of what we call art.

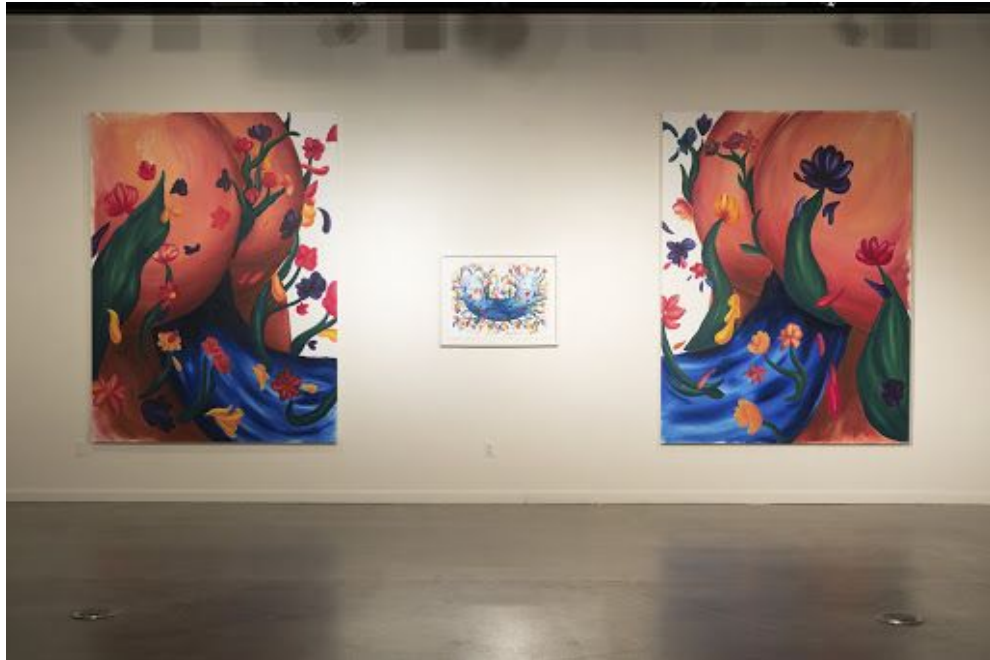
IMAGES

Figure 1.



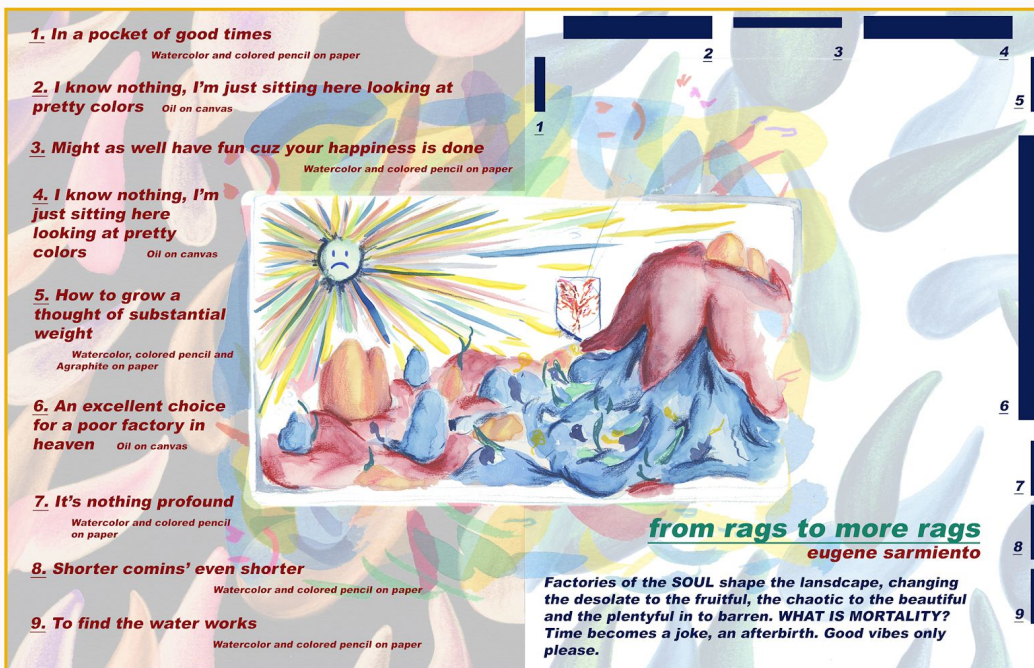
Installation view *FROM RAGS TO MORE RAGS*, KU Chalmers Art and Design Gallery, 2019.

Figure 2.



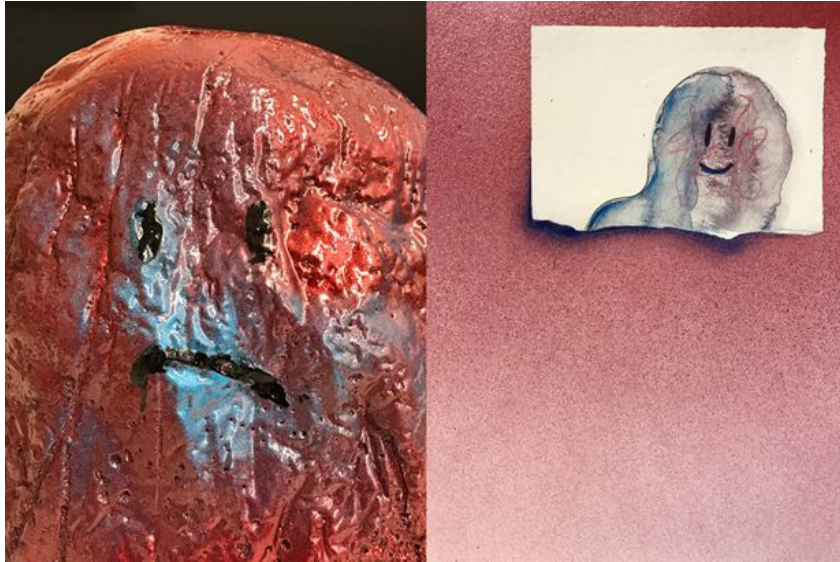
Installation view *FROM RAGS TO MORE RAGS*, KU Chalmers Art and Design Gallery, 2019.

Figure 3.



FROM RAGS TO MORE RAGS Exhibition gallery guide, Color copy on paper, 11"x17", 2019.

Figure 4.



SOUL (early renditions), concrete sculpture, enamel and watercolor on paper, 2017.

Figure 5.



(from left to right) *It is nothing profound*, *Shorter comins even shorter*, *To find the water works*
Watercolor, colored pencil and graphite on paper, each 15”x 11”, 2019.

Figure 6.



Top

House of Death

William Blake

Color print finished in ink and watercolor

1795-c. 1805

Bottom

Nebuchadnezzar

William Blake

Color print finished in ink and watercolor

1795-c. 1805

Figure 7.



An excellent choice for a poor factory in heaven, Oil on canvas, 84”x 144”, 2019.

Figure 8.



Detail for *An excellent choice for a poor factory in heaven*, 2019.

Figure 9.



(Left) *I know nothing, I'm just sitting here looking at pretty colors,* (Right) *I know nothing, I'm just sitting here looking at pretty colors,* Oil on canvas, each 96"x 72" 2019.

Figure 10.



Might as well have fun cuz your happiness is done, Watercolor, colored pencil on paper, 22"x 30", 2019

Figure 11.



A pocket of good times, Watercolor, colored pencil on paper, 15"x 11", 2019

WORKS CITED

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Great Britain:British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972.

Blake, William. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. New York:Dover Publications, 1994. Print

IDLES. "Mother." *Brutalism*, Space, 2017.

Manders, Mark, and Peter Eleey. *Mark Manders: Parallel Occurrences/Documented Assignments*. Aspen Art Press, 2011.