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Cedarville Review Artist Spotlight: Calvin Hitchcock

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Please see the Editors' Foreword - A Christian Response to Art and Literature: A Very Short Guide to Images and Texts

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Artist Interview by Brandon Best

CALVIN HITCHCOCK
HOW DID YOU GET THE IDEA FOR YOUR RECENT PROJECT 819?

I had been searching for a longform concept for my senior recital when it struck me how relevant the current presidential election was. It was aggravating how dehumanizing both political sides were towards each other. Both politically and interpersonally, it was the death of dialogue. People on the right condemned those on the left, and the people on the left patronized people on the right in a never-ending cycle. This back and forth was entirely unproductive and emotionally explosive. To me, it resonated strongly with concepts in the Stanford Prison Experiment, something I was already familiar with at that point. The SPE is a fascinating exploration of how we treat one another as humans, how we dehumanize each other. To treat each other in a certain way—badly, I mean—you have to view them as somehow less than yourself. That seems to be a foundational operating principle for why anyone mistreats anyone else. In my mind, there are strong parallels between the assigned roles in the SPE [prisoner and guard] and political ideologies, or rather ideologies in general. Specifically, how we react to other people who do not share our role/ideology.

TELL US MORE ABOUT THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT AND HOW IT RELATES TO 819.

In August 1971, Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo conducted this experiment with volunteer male college students who were local over the summer. He intended to disprove common prison research at the time known as the “dispositional hypothesis,” which suggested that “you are what you are and you can’t change.” He wanted to show the impact that roles have on human social behavior and interaction. All subjects chosen were statistically average and essentially the same at the outset. Zimbardo randomly assigned the roles of prisoner and guard to these students and put them in a simulated prison environment (cont.)
for what was supposed to be a two week study. It was canceled after only 6 days. The prisoners became withdrawn, began developing borderline pathologies, whereas the guards became increasingly power-hungry and sadistic. Years later, Zimbardo wrote a book called *The Lucifer Effect* which examines how roles can significantly influence complicit mass atrocities such as Nazi Germany and the Abu Ghraib human rights violations. Why do people treat others the way they do? Do we find our identity in our roles, or elsewhere? Aren’t we all fundamentally the same? Those are some of the questions explored in *819*.

**WHAT ATTRACTS YOU TO OPERA AS AN ART FORM?**

Opera is kind of funny in that I think it’s largely misunderstood today. It’s common for people to imagine opera as a melodramatic fat woman on a huge stage with an ear-shattering vibrato. In reality, the word “opera” in Italian just means “work.” Historically, opera had specific stylistic connotations, but not so much anymore. It has sort of evolved into a free-for-all musical form. You can’t fully ignore the history though. Opera has a rich tradition as a combination of mediums—music, theater, visual art. That’s what attracts me. Wagner called opera the ultimate art form. The term he used was *gesamtkunstwerk*, meaning “total art synthesis.” His Tristan und Isolde is an excellent example of this. The way he embodies a philosophical idea or concept through music has been pretty influential for me. *819* walks this line of whether it is an opera or not. It fits the historical convention of an opera as storytelling exclusively through music but is definitely a little more experimental when it comes to narrative. I’m interested in pushing that line further in my future work for sure. Music is inherently emotional. Opera demands an emotional response. I think the power of opera is how it can catch you up in the story musically and thematically in ways that reach parts of you before you’re able to fully make sense of them.
WHAT INFLUENCES YOUR WORK, AND WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO DO IN THE FUTURE?

When it comes to any kind of art form, I try to be an active viewer. I think my interests definitely reflect that. Filmmakers like Lars von Trier, David Lynch, and Alejandro Jodorowky challenge viewers, they push the limitations of artistic mediums. I don’t have to aesthetically like every bit of art that impacts me—it’s the work that challenges me the most that stays with me. That’s what I want to do for my audiences. Flannery O’Connor is a significant inspiration for me as well. Her work walks this line of compassion and satire that is simultaneously beatiful and ugly. I don’t think she ever sets out to aggressively critique anyone but is really trying to critique herself. By taking out the plank in her own eye, she shows us all our own. That’s admirable. Perhaps the pursuit of honesty and truth is the only way to accomplish that. As a viewer, I want to be challenged, to have something demanded of me. I like to be made uncomfortable. You don’t want to alienate your audience, but sometimes you have to risk alienating them to say something special or true.