



# Max Skeans

25 Light Years From Home (Picking Up The Pieces)

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an excerpt.



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## **Forward:**

Setting off the soft explosion...

by Lance Oditt

- 1. First Person Singular**
- 2. Bill**
- 3. Katrina's Eyes**
- 4. Paxil**
- 5. Aftershock**
- 6. Half of Eight**
- 7. Dear Ann**

## Setting off the soft explosion..

by Lance Oditt

Eyes raised above you, obscured by constellations of those who have come before, Max Skeans' work strikes immediately. "I have seen that before." Not the mall porn surrealist photo manifestos enabled by transgressed graphical usership. "That one guy who makes those calendars..." with ".95" in the price. Grabbed from the impulse purchase rack, the calendars. *But before*. Somewhere at the moment cortical paradigms unravel. Where weaponry, religion and sex align horizontal. Where the grotesque curiosity of an OB/GYN stirrup table unfolds. The moment the manifest folk stroke of graffiti art projects through the tinted windows of your car, ten miles per second per second. Until. The gravity of Skeans' imagery snaps you back. No discernable descent, no landing. Until. He casts constellations, and assures, that time steals the light. That the event horizon is merely, the tidy edge of our own visual cuneiforms. Until, he exposes purpose in *our* vernacular. Purpose in *our* visual refuse. Reminds, that at some point, the stars, simply. Will quit.

Max Skeans is from another time. The closest thing I can even mark to where his trek aligns with mine, would be the 1970's, his taste for punk music. Fully, two decades ahead of me, his lens has churned through the atrocity exhibits of Vietnam and Cambodia. Freelance agency for The Associated Press. The squiggly halls of Museum of Modern Art. Hands on the wheel for Hunter S. Thompson in Florida where he taught, and the very large chip on his shoulder, queen blue, Robert Mapplethorpe, his friend. Cincinnati village damned in his resume, though he is wise in his work and in his life, to remain close.

Max was fully ground through the machinery of 1960's idealism, and I know few people my age, that find him as anything more than a surrealist who keeps doing it because, as his generation also demands, he *must feel*, or quite actually owe, a debt to some other time. Twenty five years of working is a long time to have not mastered anything of yourself. Twenty five years is a long time to keep doing the same thing over and again. No one my age has ever worked at a factory for twenty five years, and never will. What's more, critical exploration of Skeans' work exacerbates the arrival of any proven approach. The contemporary criticism transcribed from anachronistic "surreal" to say---that he "deconstructs". I have found, and stand by, otherwise. That it is this simple; you can't have Skeans unless you thrive where very visceral everyday visual language presents itself and persists. You can't have Skeans, an anachronism, because of the presumed convenience of the visual language he draws from. Max Skeans shoots, and has always, in our time.

If you were unfamiliar with Skeans' work, receiving this work alone, without the compliment of his website, his feature on our site ([semantikon.com/medium.htm](http://semantikon.com/medium.htm)) in early 2004, then much is in store. If you browsed his feature on our site, are informed, then some of the enigma of Max has built up, will be relieved. As in this excerpt, we find Skeans, looking back and forwards, parting words. Changing mass, into energy.

As above, so below.

1.10.06

Lance Oditt

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## First Person Singular (1999)

When I told a psychiatrist friend of mine I was hearing voices, he gave me one of those 'have you considered evaluation?' looks followed by a slight adjustment of his Windsor noose.

"Well, Max, how often do you hear the voices?"

"Almost every time I hear someone speak," I replied in a vanilla voice to compliment the hazelnut coffee we were served.

He chuckled with the kind of visible relief a guy shows when his sexual correspondent is visited by a tardy menstrual cycle and asked, "Do you find that unusual or unexpected?"

"Yes and no," I said while wondering which of us was practicing on the other.

What began as a simple sharing of professional information which neither of us expected to advance beyond over-priced coffee and uncomfortable seats continued as both of us cancelled appointments, rendezvous de jour, and re-runs of Springer. He used his cell phone and I used the pay phone.

Normally, it is a generally accepted that one is especially guarded when communicating with a cop, mistresses past and present, mothers, lawyers, clerics, reporters, Seventh Day Adventists, the IRS, and psychiatrists. Having a friend who happens to be a psychiatrist is, in my mind, the same as having a pet which happens to be a cat. They'll always be what they are regardless of what I project them to be to me.

As it was clear our conversation was going to places beyond the café environment, we moved into the bar area so my friend could take his bearded power position and enjoy his Havana knock-off stogie. I went there for the SoCo shots and to sneak a half-burnt doobie in the can.

After a few customers said hello to both of us we returned to the voices. He paid for my shots and his cognac's and I did most of the talking after laying out the simple ground rules of informal conversation as opposed to abstract/thesis format, informal argumentation, and all the other shit men do to posture themselves apart from other, lowly, people who think a footnote is something sold by Dr. Scholls.

As I shared with my now mellow friend, I first noticed the voices around 1995. I was hanging out with a bright, young teacher and in the course of a conversation I stated that it is not a tougher, but different, challenge in raising kids today. This evolved from the fact that I was in process of raising a second generation of my progeny which, when all is said and done, is my ultimate, eight kid, and contribution to the demise of civilization as we think we know it.

She responded as if a doctor had just tapped her knee with a rubber mallet by saying, "Max, please understand it does take a village to raise a child."

Bullshit. Hillaryisms aside, it was a mindless recitation, unattributed to source and context I might add, which sounded good, felt good, but was not my consort's voice. It was Hillary's. To repeat the quote as a personal position, as I explained, is far different than practicing it with the consequences of the village idiots raising children instead of parents who also tend to share the dunce's cap in they eyes of their offspring.

Since 1995 I have heard little which indicates people are capable, willing, or daring enough to speak in the first person which is the conduit for their feelings and intellect. From my experience in communication and, yes, overhearing the conversations of others, the United States has a populace who speaks in bumper sticker snippets; clever and media-fed awareness makes substance in conversation a slave to familiarity.

"If it doesn't fit, you must acquit," might apply to a parking space at the mall, but to actually say that as a response to anything other than a legal argument in a specific criminal case is, ok, being news media savvy at the most.

The supply for stand-in's to personal expression is limitless; there's 'make my day,' 'Huston, we have a problem here,' 'can you hear me now?', 'traditional family values,' 'gay rights,' 'new world order,' and so forth. Women, as the experts claim hold the

verbal high ground in terms of communication, are the worst offenders of programmed responses in any communication, personal or professional. Of course they have been taught that all men, and some women, want nothing more than to get them into the sack when, actually, some guys just might be making gender advances in simply asking for directions.

My theory, fear of revealing oneself in conversation of all degrees, is the reason for many people resorting to clipped quotes instead of speaking in the first person singular. It is as if communication must be enshrouded in a Trojan to be acceptable to two or more parties. By all means, let's not dare open up uninhibited conversation because we might just catch something like another person's ideas, knowledge, or worst of all, have our thinking actually challenged.

It is fair to hold Jacques Derrida, and his failed/in progress thing called 'deconstruction of language,' accountable for his fair share of criticism. In Derrida's analytical model, the first person, personal voice sits atop the communication food chain. Stating the obvious, Derrida continues by alleging the intended 'meaning' of such communication doesn't matter since that is the responsibility, and utility, of the listener. Hence, we have a sitting President Clinton asking the grand inquisitors, "It depends on what the meaning of 'is' is."

Derrida doesn't write much.

It is also fair to mention the first person singular has taken a strange, fictive 'persona' on the internet; specifically to that phenomena call 'message boards.' When I first started using the internet in 1995 the environment was being called 'virtual space' or 'virtual reality.' The connotations of virtuality as differentiated from reality posed problems for those who get erections doing Venn diagrams.

All one needed was a computer, an ISP, and a modicum of technical savvy, and they could re-invent themselves and write anything they wanted with a misinformed presumption of anonymity. After all, they could be whomever they chose to be and, so what, they'll never actually have to meet other 'virtual' re-inventions.

The pendulum of first person singular speech moved from the self-preservation from fear in a vis-à-vis communication to saying all from the depths of ego and alter ego with anonymity as a barrier, again, based upon fear.

The consequences of this were twofold. The first was a simple holding accountable of those who thought virtual space, the internet, was a haven to do anything they wanted. Civil and criminal courts held 'virtual sex' constituted adultery and soliciting minors for sexual purposes was a crime. There are no virtual divorces or virtual prison time. Those are first person experiences.

The second consequence dealt with the perceived anonymity. German software companies developed programs which could defeat all security and encryption protection Microsoft, and other companies, claimed as being 'secure' at different levels. For a few

hundred dollars a internet user could have, within a few minutes, not only the entire contents of e-mail of anyone online in a chat room or message board, but social security numbers, credit reports, local phone numbers, and complete income tax filings if done online.

'So much for anonymity and Venn diagrams.

The first person singular speech is a First Amendment guarantee and is such while under, ideally, glass. The glass gets dirty and needs periodical cleaning. The glass also needs maintenance and, at times, replaced with something new. What people choose in their communicative glass style – frosted, brick, thick, thin, UV shaded, tempered, etc. – has implications about what is being revealed and what is being hidden.

My patient friend put out his cigar as he said, "Max, speaking of glass ours are empty and you've made your point. Now, what about those voices you hear?"



## Bill ( 1987)

This is Bill. He is one of few people I can give his full name; Bill Perry.

Bill, at the time I photographed him, was still a perpetual art student at the University of Florida. He managed a used vinyl store on University Avenue and was a personality known to students and locals. He was short, dumpy, and as intellectually bright as it gets.

Bill was banned from call-in trivia contests by all radio stations within range of Gainesville. He knew too much shit.

I did a portrait of Bill as I was leaving Gainesville. It was so spontaneous I did it with a hand-held Graphlex.

If there is a single portrait I've ever done that brings me personal pleasure, it is the one I did of Bill Perry.

I don't know what ever became of Bill. He probably has his own shop, a few kids, and still working on that art degree.

I wish I was Bill.



## Katrina's Eyes (2005)

I love nature and the feeling is not mutual; nature has no feelings and is certainly immune to the flippant anthropomorphisms - such as 'mother nature' – which are a throwback to the cave dwellers' era when anything not edible was deemed a deity's magic.

Hurricanes are a peculiar example of mankind's obsession with personifying that which defies control and, after all, science has a propensity for 'controlling' through categorization as well as tagging them with names. Science, as a system, prides itself in utilizing only the most rational of methodologies, mainly math, in its pursuit for understanding nature which, of course, really doesn't affect nature at all beyond mankind's brief little existence which has used Earth as its own outdoor potty. For that, we have a good toilet flushing in the way of hurricanes. The last big one in the Gulf of Mexico was named Katrina.

As a good toilet flushing goes, Katrina didn't discriminate between sizes, textures, colors, consistency, and it really didn't matter if the toilet paper was single ply, double ply, or fifty dollar bills. Discrimination is a human thing.

Through Katrina's 'eyes,' the devastation was what hurricanes do. Katrina isn't held legally, morally, financially, socially, or politically accountable for the aftermath. There's a lawyer somewhere trying to find a loophole there.

Katrina doesn't watch television and probably missed the really stupid reporters hanging out where they could, and succeeded, in looking really stupid providing their vicarious audience with what is most obvious; wind, rain, and so forth. So, Katrina missed the really stupid political decisions made by the governor of Louisiana, the mayor of New Orleans, and the New Orleans chief of police, when, living up to the tourist pamphlet attitude of 'the big easy,' they failed to surrender their local authority to federal authority in order to prevent the loss of life.

Now, when a city is built below sea level on the gulf coast and is virtually surrounded by large bodies of water with a large hurricane approaching, local authority, it would seem, would take a backseat to saving lives. However, it didn't, and the loss of most lives were preventable.

As the cable news media showed aerial video of the destruction, the looting and crimes against people, there was an aura of censorship towards showing the floating, bloated bodies of the victims. Even so, one morning Black American anchor began a tirade against the federal government's alleged failures because 'if the city of New Orleans had a mostly white population the response would have come sooner.' His microphone was killed and an Allstate commercial ran.

Katrina is long gone and so are some people. Science gave the gulf coast ample warning and few responded even when the hurricane was given a person's name for purposes of identification. Scientists know human beings are one DNA click from being goats or something.

Who the goats are will remain a discussion for some time. That's what people do very well; discuss things.

Hurricanes don't talk.



## Paxil (2004)

She's pissed at me again.

I want to fuck and she isn't in the mood and hasn't been for a couple of years. She says, "Max, why don't you just go masturbate?"

I say, "I haven't done that since I was 14 and before the war. Do you want to really go there?"

We lived together 24-7 (her description) for pennies more than four years. The first two years we fucked at least twice a day not counting the hard hours of night. I had been in various states of monkdom before her while raising my kids, work, and flaunting myself with the evil joy of telling the ladies, "look, but don't fucking touch."

After the first two years she had the onset of menopause. HRT and the, understandably, discomfort of night sweats, a few surgeries, and, last, but not least, living with me were not situations which makes the vagina float on a sea of wetness and desire.

To my credit, I never slept on the couch during her most uncomfortable times. That's when I knew I really, really loved her. To my discredit according to feminists who want equality like a Baskin Robbins cone without the calories but want all the perks and exclusions when it benefits them, I have a morning woody which doesn't need saluting but just acknowledged as a part of me being a loving, caring male.

She was genuinely concerned about her loss of sexual desire and had severe anxiety about it. Her doctor prescribed Paxil for the anxiety and the first night she took it we were in bed watching television as every other commercial was about Viagra or a non-scrip sound alike.

The Paxil took care of her anxiety but aggravated her lack of sexual desire.

How much this all contributed to the dissolving of our relationship remains discussable amongst those who undergo this or who really give a shit.

I don't.

Long before our relationship's end, I was diagnosed with the non-Hodgkin's thing due to Agent Orange exposure. I didn't tell her about it and went through the civil thing. Doing the P.O. chemo shit really sucked. Between bathroom trips, however, I still got a huge erection thinking about her even while being attended by sweet, little 20-somethings after surgery and biopsies.

I survived and the relationship didn't.

Having sexual desires is much easier when alone.



## Aftershock (2000)

Many years ago I dated a gynecologist which presented, initially, my personal, myopic inadequacies in terms of intimate performance. Why? I'm still not sure but I promise to deal with it at an appropriate time politics notwithstanding.

I showed up at her shop for the evening we had planned. She had paperwork to do and I fooled around in the examination room. I messed around the table and stirrups with curiosity usually reserved for cats and children. Given time on my own, before boredom sets in I generally do something.

The doctor finally came into the examination room only to find me naked, on the table, with my legs fully spread ready for an exam. Well, wasn't Pap a male?

The date was cancelled and we didn't see each other again.

Since then, I've had a future wife and, later, a teenage daughter undergo abortions. I was there for both. It wasn't easy.

It was a little bit easier after that time when I was naked on the table.

I was changed through all the experiences as were the ladies.

However, there is always the after shock of what we've chosen to do and what might have been.



## Half Of Eight (1998)

My son, Jack, is in third grade and his teacher, a new, first year type, called me for a personal conference.

I was working on an art project and had a nude model, an empty bottle of cabernet, and a few recently deceased cannabis souls to mourn as I conjured the innate forces of parenthood to meet with the teacher.

I arrived at the school, remarkably, and met the teacher who was a cute little blonde married to a local police officer. I minded my P's and Q's or so I thought at the time.

So, the teacher showed me Jack's work and said, 'Jack is not following directions in math and I just don't understand why.'

She showed me a blank piece of notebook paper Jack turned in for an assignment which required the paper be measured and a line showing its symmetrical 'halves.' The paper had been folded but no line actually drawn.

I asked the teacher, "What is the problem? He folded the paper in half and turned it in."

She replied, "But, he didn't do it the way others did it."

After a brief discussion about the poisonous influence I have had on all my children regarding free thinking and creative problem solving she pulled out another paper.

"Here," she said, "is a simple division problem asking Jack what is one-half of 8 and he answered, '0'. What do you think of that?"

I took a pencil, drew an 8 and sliced it horizontally in half which was a zero.

I asked her, "Is that a true answer?"

She said, "Yes, but it isn't the one I wanted."

"So," I answered, "it is a true answer and correct from Jack's point of view, who are you to stifle the creativity I instill in my children?"

Teachers are proliferating biases and constrictions in the name of state sponsored education. No child left behind?

The kids will come back to correct this thing we call education based on a 19<sup>th</sup> Century model.

I hope Jack's teacher is around to see it.



## Dear Ann;...(2006)

Dear Ann;

I also enjoyed our face-to-face meeting in Middletown last Saturday; the 'shop talk' was a great change. The art school environment seemed to always make painters and photographers adversaries to satisfy some imagined academic mandate. It is so nice to compare notes in the real world.

Had I known Middletown was a fast food Mecca I would not have suggested that area. However, the red-neck ambience didn't detract from the conversation too much.

Thank you so much for your input to my loose ideas about new work this year. I feel I need a break from the figural things and explore the cityscape/landscape subjects as an end unto themselves. With the art market so flat at the moment this may be the right time to flirt with some changes. I do like your idea about the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and, perhaps, introduce some limited color into things.

When I told you which of your paintings was my favorite I had no idea it was only 8 by 10 inches! My thoughts were 'how much is it?' and how nice it would be to see one of my landscapes next to it. You painters have too much freedom with scale; I'm envious.

On the personal side I agree we are so incompatible in a guy/gal situation it is as if Cupid, on a dull, gray day, would string up his bow and fire his arrows at our masonry hearts just to rub it in. You're so beautiful and I'm not. I have kids and you don't. You don't like long hair and I have plenty of it. I skinny dip and you don't. I'm a photographer and you are a painter. You fall in love easily and I don't (well, not any more). I'm an Aries and you are a Taurus. Yes, I agree that would be a serious mistake to even contemplate a romantic relationship.

So, if my sales pick up, would you like to go to Jamaica with me this year?

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