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Honors Thesis Artist Statement

### Propaganda Posters of Irony and Design Elements

The four prints displayed in Gallery X of Bridgeman Hall on December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015 are all propaganda posters that inspire the audience to act in contrary of the call to action. Each poster emphasizes a different element of design and exemplifies the compositional and layout skills I've developed over the past four and a half years here at Bemidji State University. My overarching goal in crafting these pieces was to create humorous and ironic twists based in the city of Bemidji, MN. By inspiration from unique artists, steered by my own personal motivations, I was able to produce my own original works of art. My artistic journey would be fruitless without my Mass Communication journalistic skills, which enabled me to spot interesting, ironic situations that would best resonate with the general Bemidji public.

I was inspired by WWI propaganda painter William Orpen and his painting *Mines and the Bapaume Road, La Boisselle*. This painting like many of his others, portrays the most devastated locations by the aftermath of the war, and makes them beautiful with his use of color and other techniques. I was inspired by his paintings because not only did they have a posturized style, but also they portrayed something so awful beautifully which from my perspective, is ironic. William Orpen was a painter that was known for his self-portraiture and post WWI paintings. In his self-portraiture he was known for creating imagery that was obscured so that the viewer knew what the subject was with as little detail in the image as possible. Another element Orpen frequently brought into his paintings was the way sunlight refracted off of objects to determine his lights and darks and create texture in his imagery. Orpen was most famous for his painting 'The Signing of Peace in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles, 28th June 1919'. This piece granted Orpen the opportunity to become the first war painter and record history by

the British. During his creation of this piece, Orpen used his realism and lighting techniques to recreate his posturized theme that he carries throughout all of his pieces. Although he was at this event live painting the signing of this document, Orpen removed politicians and replaced them in the posture of a soldier for a better understanding of the subject matter. He started with his original draft and changed his work slightly with every draft until his final was exactly what he wanted. Like Orpen, I too used this technique in my pieces. I began with the original imagery. Different from Orpen, I took a photograph of my scenery, and then created the first draft by manipulating light similar to Orpen to create a posturized look in my posters and remove detail while also conserving the main theme. Similar to Orpen, I changed my final drafts and manipulated my composition to get the purpose of my creating across. While Orpen changed the posture of his subjects for strengthened imagery, I used color and design elements to enhance my subjects. While I replicated Orpen's use of light and texture, I did not use Orpen's sense of realism. In my time at Bemidji State University, I learned one main theme in design, if there is no purpose for it, there is no need for it. In essence, there was no need to display all of the photographic details of my compositions because they were not photographs, they were mimicked paintings inspired by William Orpen. Limited detail was needed to get my purpose across for these posters. All four have unity in that they are posturized and lighted similar to Orpen's pieces while each can also stand alone.

Another propaganda artist I was inspired by was Mjöltnir [Hans Schweitzer] of Germany. He was a World War II propaganda poster artist commissioned by the German Government. His work appealed to the German populous struggling through the great depression in Germany. As it is historically accurate, at that time Adolf Hitler was rising into power as Fuehrer of Germany. Propaganda artist Hans Schweitzer would create pieces that would inspire the German public to follow the Nazi values and to engage in an active role in the public to serve Germany and therefore serve themselves. Schweitzer's most famous piece "Our Last Hope—Hitler," 1932 was inspiring to me by his use of typography over a drawn or sketched like composition. To me I thought his use of a bold font against a chaotic background was a really great way to

create diversity in his piece and some layering elements as well. I mimicked these elements in my works so that the foreground of my pieces was the strong bold typography, followed up by a posturized stylistic imagery in the background to support the typography.. I feel his method for a loud message is really efficient and leaves little to no room for confusion in his pieces which is something I strived for in my own.

I see my pieces as activist based, specifically the piece 'Nature Happens'. My pieces have a slight humor in them similar to previous WWI and WWII posters such as *Open Trap Make Happy Jap: Keep 'em Pulling For Victory*, which was released as government propaganda by the United States. Compared to the history of propaganda posters, I believe a successful propaganda poster has to do with a clear message. All four of my pieces achieve this with additional information displayed in the lower content. The difference between my works and previous propaganda posters is that my pieces leave little to no room for confusion which I believe makes them very successful. My goal in creating these prints was to generate a style that best represented my knowledge and skills gained through the BSU TAD department. This style was effective because it combined the edginess of my style with a structure that gave all four pieces balance and unity. Irony can be found in all aspects of life, and can often be a peculiar phenomenon. After establishing a solid concept for my pieces, I defined irony in my own words. I came up with "Irony: Affairs or an event that seems intentionally contrary to one's expectations and results in amusement." I focused on irony because I feel that it is a rarity, and often missed. Today people pay little attention to their surroundings which is why I focused on the Bemidji subjects to be more relatable and identifiable by my audience.

The first piece 'Nature Happens' is the strongest piece of the four because Bemidji State University identifies itself as one of the greenest campuses in the United States and the subject content is of littering. The original photo was taken after a brief twitter discussion with the mayor of Bemidji, Rita Albrecht. After a visit to Diamond Point Park I tweeted at the mayor asking who is responsible for the cleanliness of the beaches because they were covered in filth and I was concerned for the health of

the general public and their pets. She replied with "Nature Happens" and that she would pass my concerns on to the parks and recreation department in Bemidji. After a week of waiting with no results, I walked around Bemidji looking at all of the beaches and found garbage (which had the capability of being recycled) strewn around the beach. I took a picture of a cup in the sand and named the piece 'Nature Happens' with the call to action as 'Nature Happens, so litter anywhere'. I did this to purposely anger the students who would view my pieces. My goal was for students to see this piece and become just as outraged as I was with the lack of care our community has for our surrounding environment, and to encourage students to spearhead cleaning it up. At the bottom of the poster I inserted my definition of irony, so that when students analyze the poster they can understand my humorous twist on irony, aimed to raise awareness and bring positive change to our environment. This specific piece focuses on the design element of line. The composition between the lake and stick around the cup leads the eye in a direction that makes the typography the first item the audience looks at, as it highlights the ironic twist my piece is centered on.

My second piece is called 'Tobacco Free Campus?'. This piece originally came from a photo taken of a still-life display in my fall 2014 painting class. Although this piece is not first, it is equally as important as it relates to Bemidji State University students by targeting one of the biggest controversies on campus. The call to action 'Smoke up anywhere' is meant to again raise awareness to this important cause by stimulating outrage in students as it goes against BSU student policy and hopefully some personal values. After reading the statement, the students will gather that this is an example of irony, as the new policy calls for students to refrain from smoking on or around the campus. This piece emphasizes shape, as the cigarette pack is a-very geometric object placed in between vegetables consisting of organic shapes, which help to create a natural subject order to the composition.

I named my third piece 'Where is Paul & Babe'. The Paul & Babe statue(s) represent two characters but one subject, which is why I used the verb tense 'is' instead of 'are' in this statement. This

photo was taken over the previous summer while the city of Bemidji was renovating the Paul & Babe Park. During the renovation, Paul & Babe were inaccessible to the public, negatively impacting the tourist season and upsetting locals who were stuck viewing the unattractive construction area for far too long. Originally, the plan for the park was to completely renovate and rearrange the space, which would cause Paul & Babe to be hidden from certain views of the park. After discovering this flaw, the city continued renovation but changed their plans in order to preserve Paul and Babe. This poster's call to action is to 'Tear down Paul & Babe' again aiming to outrage students to take a stand to protect the most identifiable subject in all of Bemidji. The statement 'Where is Paul & Babe' depicts the same color as the construction vehicle blocking them, to emphasize the design element of color, and tie the piece together. This work is one of my personal favorites because it raises awareness to an important issue that students may not have realized; that the Paul & Babe monument is close to being chastened by our city officials. It is our duty as students and locals to protect our identifiers and what they stand for.

I have entitled my fourth piece 'Bike-Rack Bike Rack'. This piece is different from the other three in that it targets student culture, rather than specific subjects of action. This piece encourages students to be different and promotes a creative culture. The photo was taken outside of a shop in downtown Bemidji of a bike rack constructed of bikes. Ironically enough, this subject encourages students to recycle old items and create unique ways to use them. This subject is ironic because it is so unusual and ironic to recycle an object to support others of its kind, let alone notice this humorous reinvention. This piece's call to action is 'Don't be different, use a normal bike rack'. This humorous twist on the topic of individuality uses irony to encourage students of Bemidji State to give in to conformity. This work focuses on space, as the bikes are creating depth in the piece, making the subject matter a little easier to understand.

My goal with the four ironic propaganda posters was to draw focus to important subjects, promoting a call to action that stimulates both an amused response and a contrary action by the

audience due to the obvious irony. I feel that I have achieved that goal as well as opened a door to continue this work in other directions. With my ample knowledge of design elements and firm grasp of artistic subject matters such as irony, future expansion into pieces that revolve around larger political issues that spread outside of Bemidji's domain would be both attainable and beneficial by using art as a vessel to draw attention to important matters.

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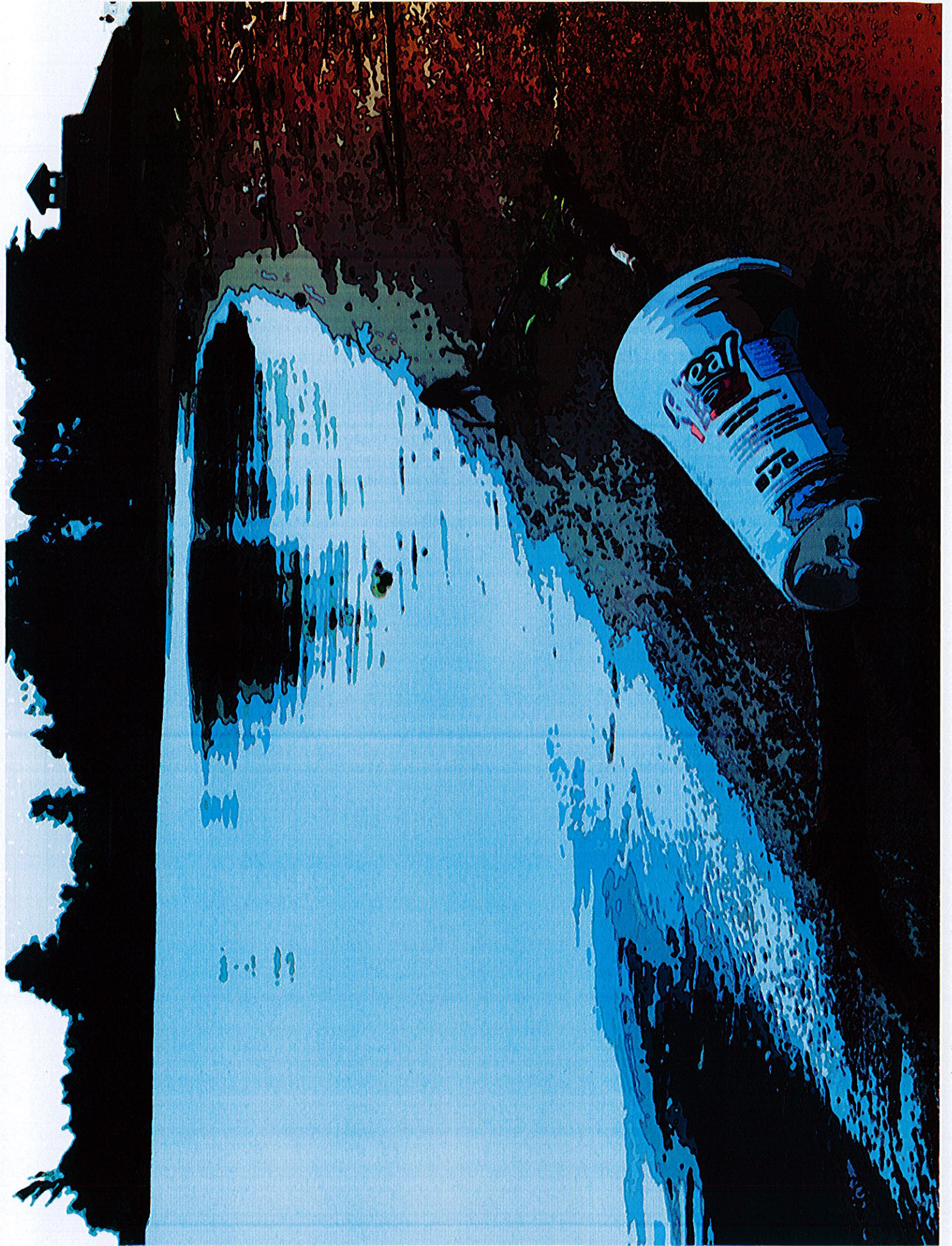
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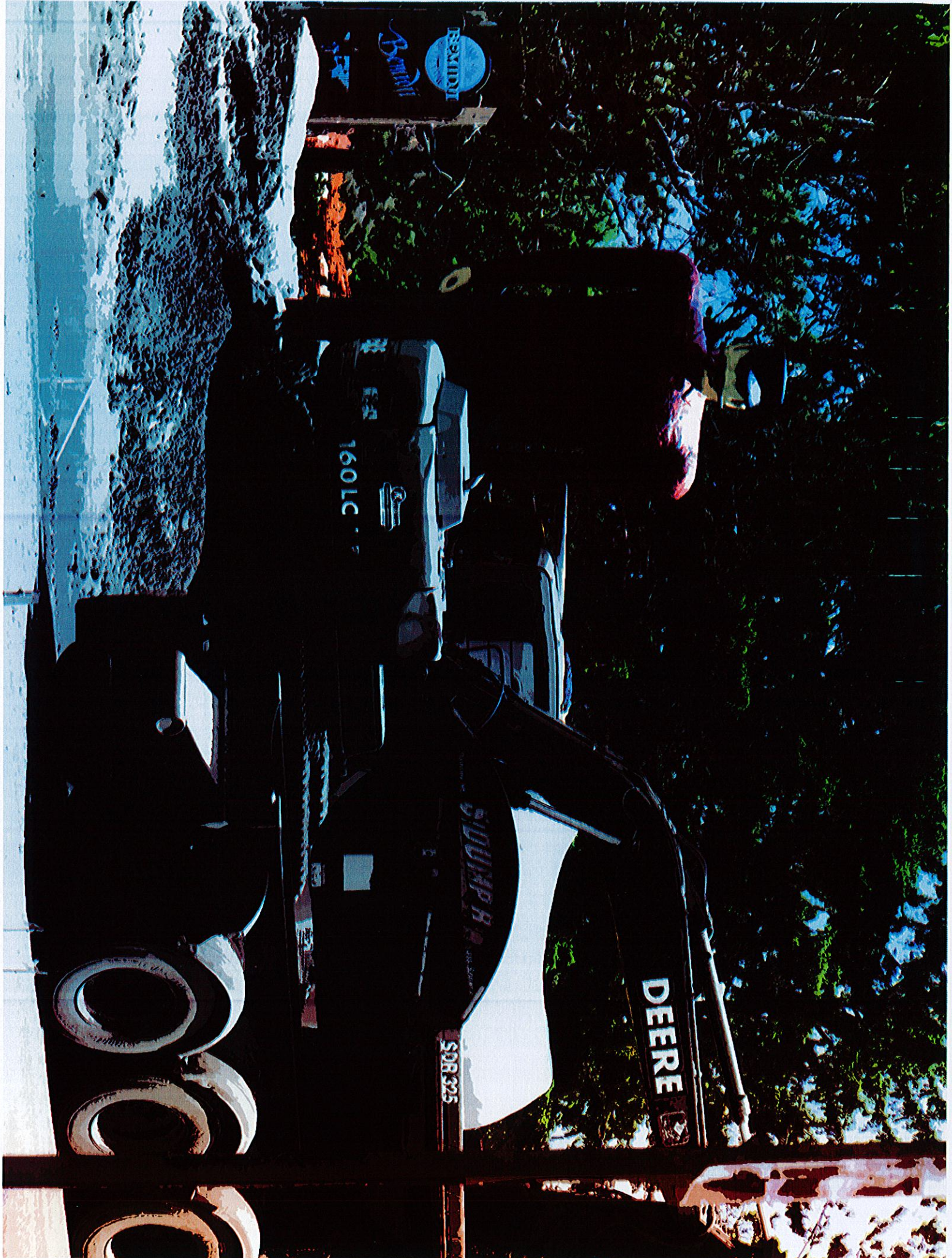
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