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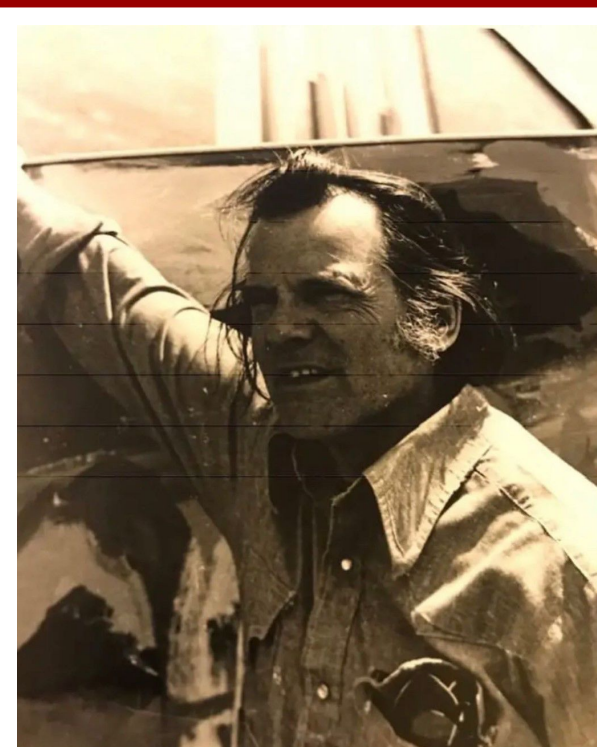
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Cataloging Abstraction

Reflections on Looking, Metadata and Grief

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Burton Dickerson (1925-2022) was an abstract expressionist painter, and my grandfather. Born in Detroit, Dickerson spent most of his career in the state of Michigan, earning his MFA from the Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1963. He was a professor of art at Central Michigan University for over 20 years. Dickerson was a prolific artist, creating hundreds of large-scale paintings in oil and acrylic. He was represented by regional galleries including the Gertrude Kasle Gallery and the Lee Hoffman Gallery, and his works were collected by wealthy corporate collectors such as Nathan Cummings.

Dickerson was intellectually engaged in making art but not as interested (nor very good) at the business side of the art world. He declined offers to teach at the University of California and New York University in order to stay near his wife's beloved cottage in northern Michigan, though he regularly visited his children in California and worked there for short periods. He retired from teaching as early as he could to focus on painting. His abstract paintings are vigorous, energetic, and seemingly at odds with the relatively quiet, rural context in which they were created.

As a librarian with an academic background in art history, I have found myself a steward of my grandfather's legacy and his physical works: paintings, drawings, cardboard cutouts, stop-action films, and digital media. I created burtondickerson.org, using Wordpress as the public-facing online presence for information. I decided to use a self-hosted instance of Omeka-S to organize and catalog Dickerson's works as a closed "back-end" system because it was financially sustainable (no subscription costs), and because I was relatively familiar with Omeka-S from my daily work as a digital humanities librarian.

I use the Omeka-S catalog to distinguish and track individual physical works, collecting metadata such as title, size, medium, condition, creation date, current location, and visual characteristics. I also catalog and collect digitized research materials related to Dickerson's life and career, such as newspaper articles, photographs and personal materials. The catalog needed to be private (not openly accessible online), but accessible to collaborators, especially my uncle, Travis Dickerson, and other family members who might want to contribute images and metadata about works in their possession.

When I started this project almost two years ago, my grandfather was still alive and my most pressing goal was to establish a definitive list of paintings. I hoped to create a resource that could function as the basis for future exhibitions, book projects (including a planned catalogue raisonné), or to potentially support future sales of artwork. Alongside these rather pragmatic goals, the Omeka-S database has become a storehouse of family stories, lost paintings, and *memento mori*.

The Dickerson family doesn't do funerals. No wakes, memorials, or celebrations of life aside from a quiet day delivering ashes into Lake Michigan. We love each other very much, but maybe don't say it out loud too often. Especially now that he is gone, cataloging my grandfather's art provides catharsis. I am processing in more ways than one.

I have seen many of these paintings, some on a near daily basis, in the intimate spaces of family homes. But in these familiar contexts, a painting is an heirloom. Cataloging Burton Dickerson's art with professional software lends legitimacy to the work, enables me to share it more easily with strangers, and (hopefully) makes it possible to launch future creative and curatorial projects.

Tracking Physical Objects



Photographing paintings stored in a garage in northern Michigan

The Omeka-S catalog collects information related to physical status of objects as well as provenance. I want to know where specific paintings are located and in what condition, such as whether or not a work is framed, signed, or dated. Paintings may be framed and hanging, or stored in unideal conditions (such as garages). Many were sold, are lost, or were purposely destroyed by Dickerson, leaving only photographic surrogates.

Why Use Omeka-S?

There are many tools and platforms available for managing art collections, including subscription services and proprietary software. There are also multiple options for Omeka. I chose to self-install and self-host Omeka-S through Reclaim Hosting.

Pros

- My existing, basic, familiarity with Omeka
- Easy one-click installation with Installatron, available through Reclaim Hosting
- No subscription costs, only web hosting fees
- Ability to restrict/mediate access
- Ability to create user accounts for collaborators
- Ability to customize metadata fields
- Ability to organize types of materials in different "item sets," each with a different metadata template
- Ability to add multiple images to each record
- Custom display options for visual browsing
 - Tagging feature allows for identification and grouping by visual motif or other categories, such as date range or location

Cons

- Omeka is not intended to be used as an inventory management system
- Not easy to edit metadata fields that need to be changed often
- Installation of application and necessary modules requires intermediate technical skills
- Not necessarily intuitive for non-professionals

Sample Record (Painting)

Untitled 2021240

Inventory Number 2021240

Artist Burton Dickerson

Title Untitled 2021240

Date 1980s

Condition Notes framed

Current Location Travis Dickerson's House

Other Notes BDREF2021240a shows the painting hanging in Travis' home studio in Chatsworth in 2020 or 2021

Rights Holder Burton Dickerson Estate

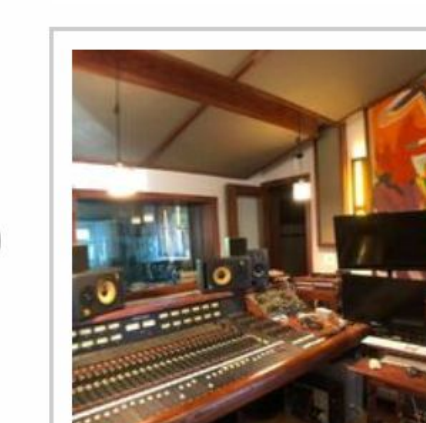
Physical Status Hanging

Item sets Paintings

Tags 1980s California

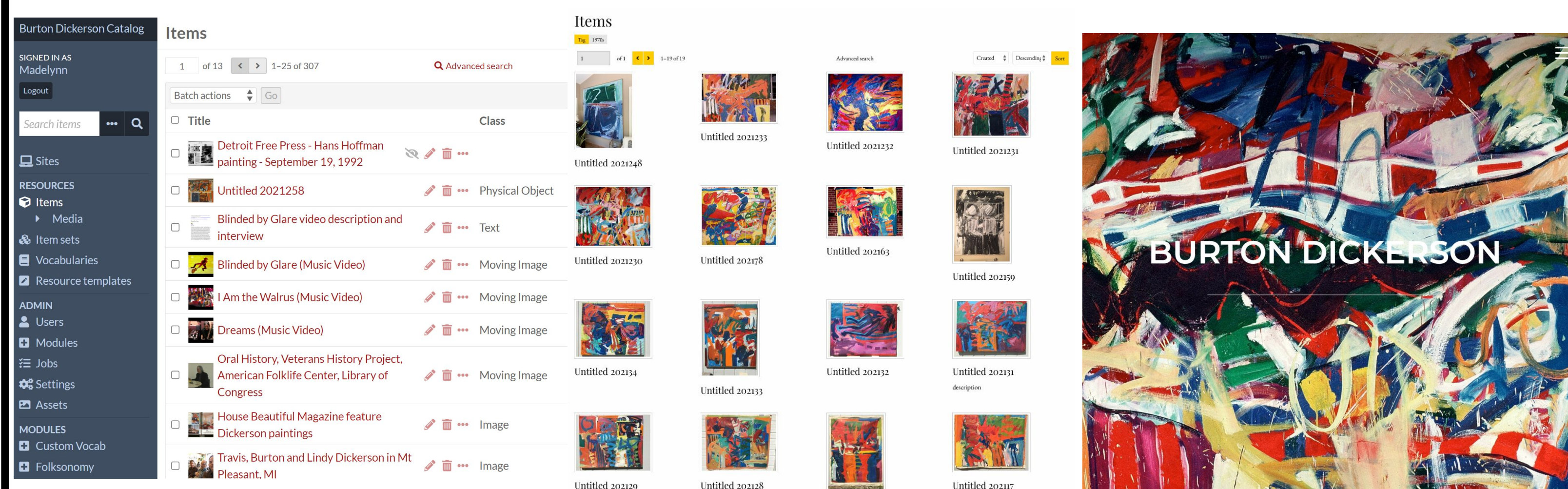


BDREF2021240



BDREF2021240a

Anatomy of the Project Site



Bottom: Omeka-S is installed on the domain burtondickerson.org. The back-end catalog is used to create item records, create metadata templates, add and edit metadata, and add media files. Restricted access only.

Middle: Omeka-S has web content editor features. Cataloged resources can be published to a "site," which is useful for browsing and tagging. Items can be tagged in the resource view or in the site view. The site is currently set to restricted access only.

Top: Promotional public "front end" website uses Wordpress and provides general biographical information and selected images online at burtondickerson.org.

Research Materials

The Omeka-S catalog includes artwork as well as research materials, such as scanned newspapers, diary entries, photographs and other ephemera.

Growing up, I had heard a story that a Burton Dickerson painting was once mistaken for a work by Willem de Kooning. Was there any truth to that? After doing some research, I found a correction in the *Detroit Free Press* newspaper stating that in an earlier issue, a painting had been incorrectly attributed to Hans Hofmann. The artist was in fact Burton Dickerson.

The original article and the correction are now in the "Documentary Materials" item set in the Omeka-S catalog.



Detroit Free Press - Hans Hoffman painting - September 19, 1992

Family Remix and the Importance of Music

Dickerson's sons (my father and uncles: Lindy, Travis and Brandy) were musicians living in Los Angeles, California. They performed as the band Mr Wilson in the 1980s and 1990s. Dickerson created a stop-action animated music video for Mr Wilson that played on MTV Basement Tapes in 1986. His sons also integrated his art into their own creative projects. Work by Dickerson hung for decades in my uncle Travis Dickerson's recording studio in Los Angeles, influencing the musicians that recorded there. The many generative media (both physical and digital) are a challenge to organize.



Above image: Compilation of screenshots showing selected frames of Dickerson's animated video for "Blinded by Glare" which aired on MTV in 1986.



Above image: The Los Angeles punk band X performing on the Tonight Show with Jay Leno in the 1990s. Drummer DJ Bonebrake decorated his drum face with Dickerson's dancing figures. Bonebrake is a frequent collaborator with my uncle, musician Travis Dickerson. This image is a screenshot and part of the "Documentary Materials" item set in the Omeka-S database.



Above image: Screenshot of a 2015 music video created by Travis Dickerson (shown playing piano) with a 1960s-era "hard edge" painting by Burton Dickerson edited into the background.

Tagging Abstraction

Dickerson believed in pure abstraction and that art should speak for itself. But text-based tags in Omeka-S help me to see and identify patterns and visual motifs.



"1960s"

"Jacks"

"Hard Edge"

"Candy Stripes"

"1970s"

"Bosoms/Shields"

"Grids"

"Peaks and Wings"

"Snake"

"Color Burst"