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Class Clown

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CLASS CLOWN

by

ANDREW ADAMSON

Under the Direction of Christina A. West, MFA

ABSTRACT

Class Clown is an exhibition of ceramic sculptures that uses a campy humor to remedy a distinct lack of unencumbered silliness within the traditionally serious-minded art gallery setting. “Class Clown” contains a double meaning: it refers to a student who disrupts the classroom through comical behavior, as well as “class” in the socioeconomic sense. Using an overly saccharin, kitsch aesthetic, this work sardonically investigates ideas about art that circulate in the academic setting. Examining and dissecting these systems provides an opportunity for my work to comically criticize whatever space it inhabits. In doing so, it ironically becomes part of the exclusive systems it is intended to lampoon. Combining the highly refined aesthetics and technical mastery of the medium with the absurd, my sculptures depict vignettes that highlight the role of humor as a tool for communicating about art.

INDEX WORDS: Art, Humor, Camp, Ceramics, Sculpture, Kitsch

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ANDREW ADAMSON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2019

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2019

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to the myriad of art mentors I have had throughout my life. Parents, grandparents, professors, teachers, friends; anyone who has showed me what they know about art. I am forever grateful for the abilities and passions you have instilled in me. I also wish someone had told me how long this would take so I could have just learned a trade, gotten into the stock market, or run away to join the circus.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Humor has always been my favorite social crutch. It appears in my sculptural ceramic work but is also an ever-present part of my social vernacular. It communicates difficult, controversial, or inappropriate opinions and societal concerns. I use it to relate to people, to lighten the mood, to make fun of friends, and to alleviate anxiety and an impending sense of doom. In my graduate work, I have been reflecting on and researching human communication and the unpredictable ways in which we use humor to participate in social settings.

According to art scholar Jennifer Higgie, humor has “been employed to activate repressed impulses, embody alienation or displacement, disrupt convention, and to explore power relations in terms of gender, sexuality, class, taste, or racial and cultural identities.”¹ Though sometimes it is purely used to satirize your mother (Insert joke here), these qualities also describe the variety of functions art can fulfill within a society or culture. I align myself with a tradition of humor within art that uses the absurd, silliness, and lampoonery as ways to connect with people as well as a methodology for critiquing myself and the world around me. Using humor in my work allows me to scrutinize the contemporary art gallery space and its ability to adequately reflect my ideas.

Class Clown is an exhibition of ceramic sculptures that uses humor to remedy a distinct lack of unencumbered silliness within the traditionally serious-minded art gallery setting. “Class Clown” contains a double meaning: it refers to a student who disrupts the classroom through comical behavior, as well as “class” in the socioeconomic sense. Using an overly saccharin, kitsch aesthetic, this work sardonically investigates ideas about art that circulate in the academic

¹ Jennifer Higgie, *The Artist's Joke*, Documents of Contemporary Art (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 12.

setting and strips out excessive or unnecessary seriousness. Examining and dismantling these systems provides an opening for my work to comically criticize whatever space it inhabits. In doing so, the work ironically becomes part of the exclusive system it is intended to lampoon. Combining the highly refined aesthetics and technical mastery of the medium with the absurd, my sculptures depict vignettes that highlight the role of humor as a tool for communicating about art.

Because humor is a basic element of social behavior, it is unsurprising that the history of artists using humor to express ideas is long and stretches into the contemporary art world. Early cave paintings at least fourteen million years old show rudimentary displays of laughter, although whether these drawings demonstrate humor is debatable, since at that point in time our ancestors were pretty much hybrid monkey-people who opened their mouths to express a general sense of playfulness.² There are few rules for both art and humor and those that exist are extremely loose and ill-defined. There are similarities I could ascribe to both art and humor: neither one follows any rules consistently; the audience's reaction to both hinges heavily on taste, which is highly subjective; and the success of both depends on the method and timing of delivery. However, the most useful common trait between art and humor is the power to help humans cope with difficult situations and process complex emotions.

In her essay "Art and Visual Humor," Shari R. Klein enumerates the types of humor commonly seen throughout art history: "parody, satire, pun, paradox, irony, dark humor, sarcasm, and nonsense or gag."³ When considering making a show about humor I knew it would be important to use most, if not all (as some of these overlap) types of humor to offer both

² Joseph Polimeni and Jeffrey P. Reiss, "The First Joke: Exploring the Evolutionary Origins of Humor," *Evolutionary Psychology*, 4 (2006): 352.

³ Sheri R. Klein, "Art and Visual Humor" in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, edited by Salvatore Attardo (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014), 64.

comedic and visual variety (See figure 1 for pun). By using all these different types of comedy, I could force an incongruity that would increase each piece's functionality. Researching the various aesthetic problems inherent in artistic comedy is a recent area of formal exploration, but I have informally been a student of comedy throughout my life.



Figure 1. *Badminton*. Ceramic, glaze, luster, cotton. 7.5"x4"x3". 2019

2 THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE MAN LION

E.B. White says: “Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”⁴ This idea provides much-needed levity before I pick apart humor like so many frogs in a high school biology lab.

As long as there have been humans there has been humor, as we are all born with the ability to laugh. Humor is an elusive concept that can be hard to define. When it begins and how it functions are sources of historical, anthropological, and philosophical debates. I submit that the first joke was probably based on flatulence, though I have no historical sources to back this assertion up⁵.

Around fifty-thousand years ago, humans displayed the first signs of symbolic thought, an important precursor for the ability to appreciate and understand humor. At around thirty-two thousand years ago, “A figurine integrated the head of a lion with the legs of a person...[was] among the earliest evidence for symbolic thought in art. Placing importance on items that integrate complementing facets (human legs and lion head for instance) from two disparate categories (lion and person) does create a certain resemblance to the postulated integration of the congruent and incongruent aspects of humor.”⁶

This man-lion “combo platter” could be the first instance of object-based comedy, though it’s important to note that an incongruent situation cannot always be construed as humorous, since “acting in a socially bizarre or ‘incongruent’ manner is not enough to be funny—the incongruency must violate the ‘subjective moral order’.”⁷ To rephrase these claims in the case of the man-lion sculpture, the violation does not occur solely based on the oddity of what is being

⁴ E.B. White, “Some Remarks on Humor,” in *Essays of E. B. White* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 303.

⁵ It’s just a *gut* feeling. Get it?

⁶ Polimeni and Reiss, “The First Joke,” 360.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 361.

represented, but rather the inability of such a creature to be alive. In this case, the “subjective moral order” is our rational disbelief that a living person could have the head of a lion. The combination of biologically incongruent body parts, mixed with our expectations and layered with the violation of moral order, creates what could be the first humorous sculpture. The incongruity of two opposing ideas results in a mental dilemma, which in turn initiates an element of surprise. “[Humor] has been conceptualized as a contrast between expectation and experienced stimuli, as the failure to ‘make sense’ of an event...generalized as a divergence from expectations.”⁸

3 THE WRATH OF GOD AND JOKES ABOUT DICKS.

History offers some specific examples of how humor is used. Humans have likely been engaged in comedic situations since we gained the ability to communicate through spoken language, and undoubtedly before. Humor can even be found in Christian and Hebrew sacred texts. An instance of sarcasm appears in Exodus 14:11, when Israelites ask Moses, “‘Was there a lack of graves in Egypt that you took us away to die in the wilderness?’”⁹ after he led them out of Egypt. The Bible also uses humor to communicate and emphasize wisdom in Proverbs: “To the injunction not to withhold correction from the child, it is dryly added, ‘For if thou beat him with the rod he will not die’—no matter how hard he may yell!”¹⁰

Jesus is purported to be equal parts divine being and human being, simultaneously 100% god and 100% man,¹¹ though Jesus is clearly funnier than his Dad. Biblical scholars debate this point: “Several scholars argued that many of the clever sayings of Jesus in the Gospels can be

⁸ Klein, “Art and Visual Humor,” 383.

⁹ Ibid., 81.

¹⁰ M. C. Hazard, “Humor in the Bible,” *The Biblical World* 53, no. 5 (1919): 516, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3136261>.

¹¹ I argued this point with my Sunday school teacher because mathematically I couldn’t understand how this added up. That poor woman.

considered humorous. One example is when Jesus said to his followers that ‘it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God....’¹² Initially, the absurdity of the image (a camel’s immense proportions fitting into the tiny opening of a needle’s eye) is hilarious. When compounded with the idea that this passage might be interpreted seriously and literally¹³, the situational ridiculousness adds an additional layer of comedy. Oh Bible, you are hilarious! This humor is certainly not top-drawer material, but zingy witticisms aren’t the primary purpose for holy scriptures.

The excavation of Pompeii has led to many discoveries regarding social interaction and comedic translation through the relationship between images and texts. In her article on graffiti in the ancient Roman city, archaeologist Rebecca Benefiel points out that even though only one third of the city has undergone excavation, nearly eleven thousand wall inscriptions have been documented.¹⁴ One example of humor lies in a piece of graffiti with one unusual characteristic: Benefiel describes this piece as a portrait of a head, but the man’s nose has been replaced with a phallus. Two different names scrawled around the drawing, dating to two different times, indicate that at various points two different individuals were depicting this phallus-faced individual. This early example resembles much contemporary public bathroom graffiti. These types of drawings are not the most enlightened form of artistic expression, but demonstrate that juvenile humor has existed for many centuries and that sometimes drawing crude imagery on walls is a basic human outlet for communicating our feelings.

In his essay on dwarfs in Italian Renaissance court imagery, Robin O’Byrne outlines the various ways dwarves were used as court jesters. The “joke” in these instances, often revolved

¹² Klein, 82.

¹³ Because translation of biblical text has never not been problematic.

¹⁴ Rebecca R. Benefiel, “Dialogues of Ancient Graffiti in the House of Maius Castricius in Pompeii.” *American Journal of Archaeology* 114, no. 1 (2010): 59-101, 2.

around physical humor relating to the dwarf's diminutive stature. This humor mirrors the social norms of the time, although some critics of the practice called "for limits in mocking those with bodily disfigurements."¹⁵ This advice was ignored. Using a person with a disability as the butt of a joke is not compatible with modern notions of propriety, although there is a comedic element, at least according to Cicero: "laughter has its foundation in some kind of deformity and baseness."¹⁶

There have always been multiple comedic approaches that, when layered together, create a meaningful tapestry of humor. Even though the nuances of humor are subjective and change over time, some things seem to be universally funny. This section of the *Camera degli Sposi* (*Bridal Chamber*), a fresco by Andrea Mantegna depicts Ludovico Gonzaga and his family. The painting contains one of these universally funny tropes: and in this instance, a lewd joke of a sexual nature.



Figure 2. Section of *Camera degli Sposi* of Ludovico Gonzaga and Family. Andrea Mantegna. Fresco. 1465-74

¹⁵ Robin O'Bryan, "Grotesque Bodies, Princely Delight: Dwarfs in Italian Renaissance Court Imagery," *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 1, no. 2 (2012): 257.

¹⁶ Robert Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 74.

At first glance, the fresco appears to be nothing more than a group of figures, traditionally arranged in the space. Some of the figures face each other, but others dramatically gawk into the distance to a space outside the pictured scene. Upon closer investigation of this seemingly mundane family portrait, one notices a light-hearted element that is easily overlooked: “Mantegna has clearly captured the dwarf’s physical attributes, but he has also used her special physiognomy to command attention. As those allowed entry into Ludovico’s intimate chamber would have observed, the dwarf is the only figure in the entire grouping to look directly at the viewer, and what is more, she is making an obscene gesture, her index finger inserted into a closed fist.”¹⁷

The main point of interest is the painting’s location: this fresco is in closed viewing area inside a foyer of the Ducal Palace.¹⁸ We can infer from this discrete location that the visitors allowed to see this painting were esteemed guests, deemed worthy of gaining access to view this opulent chamber. Perhaps because it is a rather somber painting, Mantegna wanted to add an unexpected, somewhat obscured sexual reference that rewarded a courtly passer-by who stopped to notice this small lewd detail. O’Byran’s essay does not mention whether the inclusion of this gesture was requested by the Gonzaga family, but it is so subtle that one can assume it was a small act of rebellion on the part of the artist.

These historical examples employ sexual imagery as their main sources for humor, but many other forms of humor were used in the past. Because humor has so many variations, it seems likely that jokes of a sexual nature appear throughout the course of history because they have timeless relatability. There was a varied array of humor disseminated across cultures, but it

¹⁷ O’Byran, “Grotesque Bodies,” 258.

¹⁸ John T. Paoletti and Gary M. Radke, *Art, Power, and Patronage in Renaissance Italy* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005): 356.

would have been difficult to appreciate comedic interventions outside the times and places in which they were created due to cultural differences. Still, some types of comedy can transcend these boundaries.



Figure 3. Detail of *Camera degli Sposi* of Ludovico Gonzaga and Family. Andrea Mantegna. Fresco. 1465-74

History shows that jokes about the male anatomy are a time-honored tradition, and one that I can use in my own work. *Surf and Turf* or *A Small Wet Cock* is a simple joke structured in the same manner as its historical forebears. The visual joke is a rather simple one, but deeper consideration yields another layer of meaning. Like all the work in the exhibition *Class Clown*, this piece uses lowbrow humor in a specific and strategic way.



Figure 4. *Surf and Turf or A Small Wet Cock*, Ceramic, glaze, resin. 15”x7”x6”. 2019

This piece consists of a rather stoic-looking rooster riding a surfboard. Like the man-lion prehistoric sculpture, the juxtaposition of these two objects is absurd. Unlike the man-lion example, all aspects of the work are realistically rendered so as not to distract the viewer with lack of craftsmanship. The viewer can enter the joke (or not) through aesthetic ensnarement or through the absurdity of the composition. Once I have engaged the viewer with this simple yet precisely rendered sculpture, I deliver the punchline through the piece’s primary title: “Surf and Turf.” This part of the joke is accessible: simple, and innocent. The viewer, entertained by this bit of food-based wordplay, then perceives the second half of the title: “...or A Small Wet Cock.” In this secondary layer of humor, I knowingly entrap the viewer in a sexual reference, implicating the guiltless chuckle elicited moments before.

Viewers may respond, “So... it’s a dick joke, right?” It is, but understanding the mechanics of the humor involved is much harder to decipher and much more complicated than the finished piece implies. In “Surf and Turf,” the basis for the humor is tied to gender: perceptions of masculinity, and the context in which the joke is being told. Response to humor

can be conscious or subconscious, completely dependent on the person “receiving” the joke and their individual taste, background, history, etcetera. This means that even when two people laugh at the same joke, they could well be laughing for completely different reasons. In Carol A. Mitchell’s article “Sexual Perspective in the Appreciation and Interpretation of Jokes,” she uncovers commonalities in the reception of phallic-based humor.

In general, jokes that seem humorous to the members of one sex are also humorous to members of the opposite sex, but there do seem to be definite trends in the degree of appreciation of specific jokes according to sex. For instance, men are less likely to appreciate a joke that seems extremely derogatory to the male sex, and women are less likely to appreciate a joke that seems extremely derogatory to the female sex. This, of course, should be expected since no one wants to be the butt of a joke. In determining the degree of appreciation of jokes, the sex of the performer and the audience is probably as important as the content of the joke itself. For instance, a joke that is primarily derogatory to men is more likely to be appreciated by men when it is told by one man to other men, but it seems less funny to men if it is told to them by a woman, and the reverse holds true of jokes that are primarily derogatory to women. But perhaps even more interesting is the fact that while men and women usually enjoy the same jokes, especially in the case of sexual jokes, men appreciate the joke for one set of reasons and women appreciate the joke for a somewhat different set of reasons.¹⁹

Mitchell unpacks sexual humor and how it works (or doesn’t work) in relation to the people telling/receiving the joke and the contexts in which the joke is delivered. This means the comedic

¹⁹ Carol A. Mitchell, “The Sexual Perspective in the Appreciation and Interpretation of Jokes,” *Western Folklore* 36, no. 4 (1977), 305

reception of “A Small Wet Cock” is going to be entirely subjective dependent on one’s taste in humor; however, using such a universal comedic trope casts a wide net for comedic reaction.

Sexual humor is one of the oldest comedy tropes in existence. These jokes transcend time and cultural differences. Discussing something that is seemingly rather immature in such depth demonstrates the intelligence at work in creating humor. Something as simple as a joke about penis size can be complex, subjective, and culturally significant.

4 CONTEMPORARY AS A FOUR-LETTER WORD

Referencing Henri Bergson’s “Le Rire: Essai sur la signification due comique” (“Laughter, an essay on the meaning of the comic”), Leon Golden offers some general arguments about the philosophy of comedy, though it’s important to note these Aristotelian ideas are not all-encompassing or current, but rather crucial to a generalized conception of what comedy is.

The basic goal of comedy... [is emancipating] affected individuals from the bonds of rigidity into which they have fallen, so that they can respond with the flexibility and grace that is inherent in their human nature and which is very much valued and needed by society in general. Thus, comedy serves as the instrument of the superior institution of society as it chastises and modifies the inferior and incongruous behavior of an individual.”²⁰

In short, comedy helps people function within society by giving them the means to communicate difficult truths. It is worth noting the idea of “incongruous behavior” since this becomes the foundation for many comedic situations, from the historical examples referenced above through to the present day.

²⁰ Leon Golden, “Aristotle on Comedy.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42, no. 3 (1984): 283-90.

Given the theoretical origins of humor, the contemporary notion of a seamless marriage of comedy and art arose from the surrealist art movement. Surrealism began in France around 1917 but quickly spread²¹ to other parts of the world. Much like comedy, surrealism became hard to clearly define.²² The nature of the surreal is its misalignment with reality, and much like comedy, can be defined as “incongruous behaviors.” Frequently surrealism manifests itself



Figure 5. *The Treachery of Images*. René Magritte. Oil on Canvas. 1929

through illogical situations that are made absurd or preposterous. This misalignment with reality frequently takes on comedic overtones, thus the idea of surreal or absurdist humor is born. *The Treachery of Images* by Rene Magritte is one example of an iconic surrealist painting that uses the idea of incongruity to create absurdity.

“The Treachery of Images” presents us with the simple depiction of a pipe. The first incongruity occurs with the subject matter: a simple painting of a pipe is incongruous with our expectations of what a painting should be, especially at the point in art history during which

²¹ Peter Stockwell, *The Language of Surrealism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 3.

²² *Ibid.*, 4.

Magritte was painting. The subject is quotidian, and the composition is boring. Below the pipe, we see the words “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” which translates to “This is not a pipe.” This sentence is the second incongruity: the viewer experiences a discrepancy between what they are seeing and what Magritte says. Non-French speaking viewers have the additional hurdle of interpreting the French text. Magritte is playing with the viewer’s expectations for images and language, thereby violating the cultural order. The result is not only a newfound distrust of images, but also a humorous take on the dissemination of paradoxical information.

In my piece, “This is Not a Pipe...” I pay homage to Magritte’s beautifully simple premise regarding the illusion of language and images. I distill this idea to make a thoughtful, albeit silly, joke about a famous work of art. I also stretch Magritte’s naming conventions, pushing the viewer to read a lengthy gallery tag in order to get the full extent of the joke. Much like in the original work, there are a series of obstacles that can prevent viewers from being completely in on the joke.

By incorporating art historical references that are somewhat exclusionary in nature into a work that is humorous and lowbrow in its approach draws each element into sharper focus. I am simultaneously using the language of the original work while satirizing the landscape of art history education, academia, and fine arts. I reject the idea that in order to appreciate art one must possess a vast knowledge of art history. Using knowledge to assert intellectual superiority does little to improve the public’s perception of the art community and only serves to exclude the less educated in the most contemptable way. The sloth bong’s coded reference to a Magritte painting might not resonate with viewers who are not familiar with “The Treachery of Images,”

but they can still appreciate the piece because of the technical mastery with which I created the work and the humorous nature of the piece in general.



Figure 6. *This is Not a Pipe, it's a Water Pipe or Sir if You Keep Calling It a Bong, We Will Have To Ask You To Leave the Store.* Ceramic, glaze. 12"x3.5"x3". 2019

Prior to any major relinquishment of Marijuana prohibition laws, bongs were required to be called water pipes due to the linguistic connotations: “Marijuana pipes and bongs, for example, frequently carry a misleading disclaimer indicating that they are intended to be used only with tobacco products.”²³ Furthermore, “The drug paraphernalia statute, U.S. Code Title 21

²³ National Drug Intelligence Center, U.S. Department of Justice, *Drug Paraphernalia Fast Facts*, n.d., 2.

Section 863, makes it ‘unlawful for any person to sell or offer for sale drug paraphernalia....’²⁴ For the purveyor of these goods, the terms “water pipe” and “tobacco pipe” distance them from being implicated in any illegal drug use.

My piece implies that using incorrect terminology may result in being asked to leave the store, in order to prevent any disparaging light from being cast on the products within. The piece also uses the specificity of language (and the implied transgressions) to exclude people who lack knowledge of drug paraphernalia and their proper naming conventions. Viewers who understand the language are implicated, since they recognize the joke being told.

The joke would have worked well enough on its own, but the resulting sculpture would have been a bit plain. Most ceramic studios have a set of unspoken guidelines about what *can* and *cannot* be made. The most universal rule is: *No pipes or bongs*. The reason for this rule is that, much like a tobacco shop (ahem), the studio or school does not want to be held liable, or have any connection with, illegal activities like drug use. My intent in making this work was to undermine these implied rules, but to do so in a way that *looked like* I was trying to get away with something, but also clearly showed that I knew what I was doing. Obscuring the bong’s function by designing it to mimic a sloth in a tree was how I imagined an ornery student might attempt to fashion a pipe under the radar of a professor.

By using porcelain, a delicate material associated with fine decorative art pieces, I was able to achieve elaborate details and highlight my act of arrogance in circumventing the rules. The material choice also imbues the sculpture with a sense of preciousness. This further amplifies the tension between a high vs. low/art vs. kitsch often associated with art making, and

²⁴ Ibid.

with ceramic art in particular. The inclusion of the sloth is a faultless stand-in for the happy stoner cliché.

Interpreting these works is multifaceted. My personal interpretation is lighthearted, but some viewers might see political or religious meaning in the work. Sloth, for example, is one of the seven deadly sins; drug laws and drug abuse are issues hotly debated in our society. It is through these contextual counterpoints that the element of humor is magnified. Using humor to provoke thought on complicated topics, as straightforward as my work may initially seem, is cautiously executed in order to examine all the elements I have just outlined.

This work, along with the previously discussed “Surf and Turf,” are the most conceptually and comedically simple works in my exhibition; however, as I have proved, even the simplest jokes are more complex, nuanced, and thoughtful than one might assume. It stands to reason that the more complex sculptures within the show are even more wrought with dense complexities. These complications are exhibited with the most technically and conceptually rigorous piece in *Class Clown*, “Marta Martyr” (See figure 7). This work presents a sacrilegious pastiche of problematical Atlantan ideas and symbols. The political connotations of religious iconographies, public transportation’s associations to wealth distribution, and implications of a southern food staple create a visually absurd satire of a city steeped in sobering complexities.

5 STRUGGLING TO FUNCTION

Art, at its most fundamental, follows the formula for an unintentional comedy. One could argue that making art has no point, that to be a professional artist is antithetical to traditional notions of careers and employment. Dave Hickey summarizes some of these ideas in his essay “Frivolity and Uction:” “why don’t all of us art-types admit it, summon up the moral courage to



Figure 7. *Marta Martyr*. Ceramic, glaze, acrylic paint, LED. 11"x25"x6". 2019

admit that what we do has no intrinsic value or virtue...in its ordinary state, unredeemed by courage and talent, it is a bad, silly, and frivolous thing to do.”²⁵ In other words, as artists, everything we do hypothetically lacks worth if scrutinized with enough nihilism.

²⁵ Dave Hickey, “Frivolity and Uction” in *The Artist’s Joke*, Documents of Contemporary Art, ed. Jennifer Higgie (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 116.

Hickey goes on from this rather bleak statement to give reasons why we should continue to make art. Creating art for art's sake is to deny the bureaucracy of arbitrary values and standards ascribed by a commercial art market. Hickey argues: "Seducing oneself into believing in art's intrinsic 'goodness,' however, is simply bad religion, no matter what the rewards. It is bad cult religion when professing one's belief in art's 'goodness' becomes a condition of membership in the art community... Imagine the *lightness* we would feel if this burden of hypocrisy were lifted from our shoulders- the sheer joy of it."²⁶ Hickey offers the idea making art in a passionately selfish way and illuminates the infinite freedom this type of expansive thinking could illicit by making art that is freed from deception.

While I agree with some of Hickey's concepts for art making, I am not in total agreement that his assertions can operate in academia. Despite declaration of freedoms presented within the context of art in academia, the implications of collegiate expectations remain; therefore, it is difficult to achieve an uncontaminated perspective of art itself. These contentions and incongruous expectations of fine art, especially as practiced within the confines of academia, are unavoidable ingredients in the formula for hilarity. The subjectivity of fine art mirrors the subjectivity that *can* exist within academic art programs. Dependent on how you are defining values, it is absurd to ascribe value to something of subjective value, like a degree in art. Therefore, the entire endeavor becomes quite comical (See figure 6). Whether the comedy is construed as cynicism or brave honesty is yet another subjective judgment.

Hickey's virtually anarchic beliefs, though appealing, are dismissive of the art world at large and do not seem based in reality; perhaps that is his point. It is difficult to set aside the art world's hypocrisy, however. As an artist, I will make things that will be purchased, potentially

²⁶ Ibid., 118.

by people with extreme wealth yet little class and less aesthetic judgment. This consumerism, as problematic as it is, does exist.

Hickey's earnest, perhaps overly optimistic or utopian perspectives on art bring attention to fundamental oppositions and challenges that can exist within the art world. This kind of writing about art has always attracted me, and examining this attraction became a conduit to revelations regarding how I think about art, and, more importantly, how I think about my own work. Though I respond to the content in this type of writing, the overall tone matches the frustrations²⁷ I've felt trying to exist in the art world: the writing is as angsty and cynical as I am, though is tempered by humor, as seen in "Untitled 9."



Figure 8. *Untitled 9*. Play-Doh, Play-Doh containers. Dimensions Variable. 2019

²⁷ See regarding Note 54. on pg. 27 within this paper in reference to Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp*.

6 CAMPING WITHOUT A TENT²⁸

The body of work I made for *Class Clown* is humorous and well crafted, but also relies heavily on kitsch and camp; these are important aesthetic elements in my work. Although a kitsch object can become a piece of camp, and something campy can be kitsch, these ideas cannot be used interchangeably. Kitsch is a condensed representation of working-class cultural aesthetics, while camp depicts the taste of the innocently humorous and purposefully serious, resulting in a deliberate artificiality. For example, the work in my show has a distinctly kitsch aesthetic, but only becomes a campy object due to the earnest fabrication and the performative elements of humor. Clement Greenberg's 1961 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" and Susan Sontag's 1964 "Notes on Camp" are as relevant to debates about high vs. low/art vs. craft now as they were when they were written.²⁹ The ideas contained in these two essays provide a conceptual backbone for my work as well as an aesthetic "vocabulary" that touches on my background.

Greenberg asserts that the birth of kitsch arose from consumerist demands: "To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide."³⁰

Perhaps the most useful contribution within the essay is Greenberg's definition of kitsch, a set of parameters we still use in identifying kitsch:

²⁸ I unpack a lot, maybe even too much, in this next section, so to quote Samuel L. Jackson's character in *Jurassic Park*: "Hold on to your butts."

²⁹ While there are plenty of other essays on kitsch and camp, I find that these simply rehash the Sontag and Greenberg's arguments.

³⁰ Clement Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," *The Partisan Review* VI, no. 5 (Fall 1939), reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 534.

Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insensibility. It is the source of its profits. Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money-not even their time.³¹

Greenberg's assertion that kitsch operates on a formulaic structure echoes the formulaic function of comedic elements within my work. One further point within the essay seems to redeem the value of kitsch: "Kitsch is deceptive. It has many different levels, and some of them are high enough to be dangerous to the naive seeker of true light."³² This idea of levels of deception appeals to me, both as a concept for my work as well as a method for navigating the art world. My works are knowing imposters, manipulating the visual conversation, and diminishing the gravity of the gallery setting.

Greenberg also mentions that kitsch objects are machine-made, manufactured cheaply and poorly³³ to undercut the price of the genuine article. I adapt this premise to my work as well, as I subvert that notion art's preciousness by depicting objects of "low" cultural value. My work is well made but stylized in a manner that intentionally and ironically mimics kitsch objects. The application or assessment of value only occurs by declaring the object to be art by placing it in a gallery setting. I further manipulate this art-value system by imbuing the objects with crude or

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 535.

³³ Ibid., 534.



Figure 9. *Winnie the Pooouguhrlurgluuugluhlgoodgrrluuhgroooh*. Ceramic, glaze. 7"x7"x5". 2019

base humor (See figure 9). Humor lessens the importance assigned to these art objects; in doing so, the humor is further amplified as the pieces pretend to not take themselves seriously.

Kitsch's relationship to bourgeois culture mirrors contemporary ethical debates over art's accessibility to only the super-wealthy. The United States is still considered a first world country even though the gap between the rich and poor is ever widening, with the wealthy making up a small percentage of the total population. This chasm between rich and poor leaves most of us on the other side of wealth, which, according to Greenberg's theories, could account for the

saturation of kitsch goods within popular culture. This inundation of kitsch becomes a reflection of our modern society in which the cyclical nature of consumerism eventually results in culture collapsing back on itself. By reflecting both contemporary popular culture and contemporary art, my sculptures offer critical commentary of this phenomenon (See figure 9).

The other major aspect of my work is camp. The aesthetic of camp, as stated in Sontag's 1964 essay, is "love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration... something of a private code" that converts the "serious into the frivolous."³⁴ She writes that to "talk about Camp is [to] betray it. If the betrayal can be defended it will be for the edification it provides, or the dignity of the conflict it resolves."³⁵ Based on this I am "betraying" camp by acknowledging its use but dignifying its employment to resolve conflicts within my work. Sontag lays out her argument in an extensively numbered treatise of fifty-eight guidelines for effective camp. The statements quoted below³⁶ are particularly significant to my work, but I would contend that my work fits most, if not all, of Sontag's guidelines. This essay has affected a conceptual shift within my work, allegorically transforming my practice from an ugly duckling into a beautiful swan:

1. [Camp] is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That was, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization.
7. All Camp objects... contain a large element of artifice. Nothing in nature can be campy...
19. The pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious.
26. Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is "too much".

³⁴ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 1966), 1.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ So maybe more than just a few.



Figure 10. *Doug the Party Unicorn (Who parties to deal with his crippling anxiety and depression while convincing himself it's not a problem)*. Ceramic, glaze, luster, PBR cans. 25"x9"x7". 2019

27. What is extravagant in an inconsistent or an unpassionate way is not Camp. Neither can anything be camp that does not seem to spring from an irrepressible, a virtually uncontrolled sensibility.
35. Camp taste turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgement. Camp doesn't reverse things. It doesn't argue that the good is bad or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different – supplementary – set of standards.
41. The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to “the serious.” One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.
44. Camp proposes a comic vision of the world. But not a bitter or polemical comedy. If tragedy is an experience of hyperinvolvement, comedy is an experience of underinvolvement, or detachment.
54. The experiences of Camp are based on the great discovery that the sensibility of high culture has no monopoly upon refinement...Camp taste supervenes upon good taste as a daring and witty hedonism. It makes the man of good taste cheerful, where before he ran the risk of being chronically frustrated.
55. Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation – not judgement. Camp is generous. It was to enjoy. It only seems like malice, cynicism. (Or if it is cynicism, it's not a ruthless but a sweet cynicism.) ...

These portions of Sontag's essay, as well as many I have left off, can easily be applied to my work with little mental effort.

This body of work, full as it is with artificiality, with both the serious and the silly, the classy but also classless, is totally dependent on kitsch and camp; I didn't originally understand this aspect of my work, but incorporating these theories validates my entire aesthetic. I liken my process of conceptual discovery to the phrase “Camping without a tent.” Initially, I had no structure on which to hang my ideas, I worked instinctually, making aesthetic decisions because they *felt* right. My inability to place my work within the contemporary art world's context is the same reason I continued to excel technically, working within the kitsch aesthetic demanded technical mastery as validity over conceptualized ideas. Surrounded by kitsch objects all my

life,³⁷ I could not see my work through this conceptual lens because the basis for my artistic judgment was already deeply rooted in camp and kitsch aesthetics.

My parents are both artists who worked in stained glass. This craft is difficult to master and demands a level of technical expertise but is simultaneously very kitschy in nature. A stained glass rendering of Bart Simpson, made by my parents, perfectly encapsulates the high vs. low complexity of the medium, although my parents' typical work consisted of subject matter that is more "dignified": flowers, angels, birds, and other decorative nonsense.

Another formative experience with my grandmother reinforced my kitsch-filled early years. She was a landscape and covered bridge oil painter and frequently sat me down with VHS tapes of Bob Ross to paint alongside her in her antiques-laden house. We would pause and rewind until I had completed my woodland scene, tiny cabin and all. My other grandmother engaged me in her hobbies as well, inadvertently force feeding me the sentimental country craft aesthetic she enjoyed through a series of projects such as carving soap, building miniature towns from found objects, and creating complicated construction paper shoebox dioramas illuminated by holes poked into the box tops. We also drew constantly, going through reams of paper. Occasionally, we would take trips to magical places only grandmas could enjoy like the porcelain temple of kitsch that is the Precious Moments Chapel.

My father worked at a lithography company and showed us samples of his work. He taught us how to draw flipbook animations, how to use an image to etch onto glass, and how you could create a magazine cover out of many dots of color. My mother took me to her hobby circles to paint tiny figurines and flaunted her little artistic savant to the crafty women at Michael's. Looking back, my childhood seems like an endless stream of craft projects. The thing

³⁷ ...or like my grandma says, "If it was a snake, it would have bit yah."

I was not paying any attention to what was fine art. The art training I received was not formal in the traditional sense, but I loved it and it established my appreciation for the aesthetics of Missouri-folk-kitsch.

The haphazard way in which my taste has developed, and examining those early experiences may help to explain how I was able to create *Class Clown*. My instincts were good, but I was oblivious to why I was making specific aesthetic choices: scale, colors, glazing techniques, compositions. All these elements were informed by my academic education but were also being manipulated by the aesthetic values instilled by my family.

7 CLOWN BABY

I was born on December 25th, 1986. My parents decided my middle name should be “Nicholas,” as an homage to the holiday. Being born on a major holiday does something to you, especially when it is *the* major holiday for the culture in which you live. It tends to overshadow the birthday: everyone forgets your presents, your presence, your party, your cake, your day³⁸. As I have gotten older this stings less and less, though even this small affront to one’s existence can affect feelings of self-worth and cultivate a cynicism. The tyranny of Christmas has not quite killed me yet, and I have been incrementally exacting my revenge.

“Coming Down Your Chimney” represents a turning point for both the technical and conceptual lucidity in my work. Not only does this small bust³⁹ demonstrate my proficiency at rendering, but it also deals with my personal narrative in an honest way I had not used before.

³⁸ As if this weren’t enough, my family discovered one eventful holiday season that I am deathly allergic to pine trees. Like the things Christmas trees are made of.

³⁹ This work is not the typical or classical bust from the chest up; I reference it as a bust because I am using the traditional art-historical plinth to elevate the work both literally and conceptually.



Figure 11. Coming Down Your Chimney.
Ceramic, glaze, luster, flocking. 8"x3"x4". 2018

The humorous choices at play in the title and composition are the focus of this piece, supported by the materials and composition used. The connotations of both high and low art are described using porcelain, a historically precious material that has also been used to manufacture kitsch objects. Santa's orgasmic demeanor, as well as the sexually suggestive title of the piece, are other ways in which I violate cultural expectations for comedic effect.

The flocking applied to Santa's hat adds an element of realism, but also campily references the excessiveness of the holiday: cheaply made Christmas decorations, disposable gifts, fake trees, and mall Santa costumes. The imagery and materials work in conjunction,

allowing me to exorcise a personal grievance in a lighthearted way, but also prompting viewers to reflect on the holiday's consumerist overtones. What started as a pagan midwinter celebration to elevate people's spirits through the winter's darkness has been twisted by capitalist society into a marathon of spending and an ostentatious display of wealth. Through producing this piece, I found a predictably successful formula that turns my disdain for the kitsch aesthetics ingrained in me since childhood into valuable tools with which I can express sarcasm and subversive thoughts.

There are two further growing-up experiences that have been major influences in my art making. I received a giant boombox when I was nine years old. It had a dual-cassette tape deck, a CD player, a rather mysterious-yet-exciting auxiliary port,⁴⁰ giant speakers, and enough ridiculous, probably useless bells and whistles to make my parents want to bury it in an unmarked grave in the backyard. I used this miraculous device to ceaselessly play the first two CDs I ever owned: Alanis Morrissette's *Jagged Little Pill* and *Dr. Demento's 20th Anniversary Collection* comedy album.⁴¹ I somehow managed to keep my parents ignorant of both recordings' abhorrent inappropriateness for my impressionable young mind. I was not prepared for the adult themes Morrissette sings about on *Jagged Little Pill*, but her existential struggles, manufactured or not, spoke to my heart. Although the songs had some humorous moments, the overall themes are grim—heartache, betrayal, apathy and anger. Deciphering the lyrics and interpreting the songs' narratives gave me insight into a world beyond my pre-teen years.

⁴⁰ What could this be for? I don't know, but it seems like *the future*.

⁴¹ Hey. I was ten.

Dr. Demento's work, on the other hand, was a two-disc compilation of thirty-six songs featuring the comedians like Tom Lehrer, Steve Martin, "Weird Al" Yankovic, Spike Jones, Cheech and Chong, Shel Silverstein, Frank Zappa. The songs were satirical, silly, and ridiculous. As with Morrissette's music, I hung on every word, trying to decode the meaning of every song. Instead of grappling with a Canadian pop-singer's emotional hardships, I was now trying to break apart fish puns in a song titled "Wet Dreams"⁴²(See figure 8). This album was my entry



Figure 12. *Bed Wetter*. Ceramic, acrylic paint, resin. 12"x6"x5". 2019

point into learning about the art of comedy. Intensely exploring these two seemingly contradictory albums at that stage of my development affected my outlook on life, instilling sincerity alongside healthy doses of skepticism and humorous irreverence.

⁴² It was many years before I understood the title of that song. See above footnote.

8 CONCLUSION: CLASS CLOWN



Figure 13. Class Clown exhibition image. 2019

In *Class Clown*, I use humor to break down barriers of understanding that sometimes prevent ordinary people from accessing art. I employ a variety of comedic approaches to invite viewers in, blending in elements from my background as well as moments of sociopolitical provocation along the way. This approach is especially relevant for art produced within the boundaries of academia because we must fight the charges of elitism and snobbery that are frequently hurled in our direction. *Class Clown* represents my discomfort with the conformity often inherent in educational systems and my frustration with the structural inequalities regarding access to education. However, it also represents my budding proficiency to express rebellious thinking within the academic context in an artistic, intentional way. My instinctual rejection of institutional rigidity has become my greatest strength, as it has pushed me to develop strategies for expressing my thoughts through humor, critical thinking, and technical mastery.



Figure 14. Class Clown Exhibition Image (Rear View). 2019

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