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I Know, Right?

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I Know, Right?

Morgan Gesell Milders

Thesis submitted to the
College of Creative Arts
at West Virginia University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
with
an emphasis in sculpture

Committee:
Dylan Collins, M.F.A., Chair
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Division of Art and Design

West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia
2013

Keywords: sculpture, popular culture, kitsch, craft
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Abstract

I Know, Right?

Morgan Gesell Milders

My MFA thesis and supporting exhibition will highlight sculptural work that deals directly or indirectly with shared cultural experiences. A narrative explains my interests in meticulous craft and recycling cultural objects and the origins of the popular culture imagery used in the exhibition. I will explain how with parody and satire I am able to leave the viewer feeling at once judged and judgmental.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The work in this exhibition is essentially a self-portrait. It is a manifestation of things I love, associations and observations about our culture, and experiences that have made me who I am today. The following sections describe what feeds its creation.

“You’re so judgmental”

Human beings are naturally judgmental of each other. I too fall prey to judging. It is a part of my character that I understand and accept. Being judgmental fosters feelings of superiority and elitism and this elitism comes in varying forms. When I discover something unique in a thrift store I feel a rush of elitism from finding something special amongst the rejected objects. The belief that one possesses better taste than others when it comes to fashion, decorating, music choices, and practically anything that has to do with contemporary culture also feeds feelings of elitism. We often judge each other based on our consumer choices because our consumer choices are supposed to be a reflection of who we are. Therefore, those who genuinely love kitsch objects are considered to have bad taste. However, being aware enough to recognize the kitsch, and enjoy it ironically, places you above the perceived bad taste. In my work I explore the judgmental nature of humans, particularly in relation to culturally recognized kitsch objects.

All of the work in this exhibition embodies kitsch in some way. Kitsch has inherent mass appeal, even though we understand it to be tacky. Clement Greenberg believed that kitsch is how the majority of people give expression to their lives because it is the culture of

the masses.¹ My passion for thrifting supports my usage of kitsch. Like other kitsch lovers, I rescue objects that make me laugh and use them to make art that rises above the social rules of 'bad taste' we are supposed to abide by.² These kitsch objects also carry nostalgic weight because they were plucked from a moment in our past. In his book *Kitsch and Art*, Tomáš Kulka states, "Kitsch always implies the notion of aesthetic inadequacy. The peculiarity of kitsch consists, no doubt, in its appeal. Despite this appeal, kitsch is considered, at least by the art and educated elite, to be aesthetically bad."³ By appropriating kitsch objects such as landscape paintings and lawn flamingos I transcend these objects from their original intent, and re-contextualize them through the lens of high art, injecting these objects with new meaning. No longer simply "aesthetically bad" objects to be judged by the viewer, these objects now bear messages that turn judgment back on the observer.

This mash-up of cultural observations, recognizable imagery and relatable experiences becomes a reflection of our contemporary American culture and the structures therein. The audience is implicated and forced to reflect on both the imagery and the meaning. What does it say about the viewer if they find themselves attracted to something they know our society deems unattractive? Kitsch gives me the opportunity to reach a broad audience, since its purpose is to please the greatest possible number of people, and below the surface of kitsch the viewer can find meaning.⁴

¹ Peter Ward, *Kitsch in Sync: A Consumer's Guide to Bad Taste* (London: Plexus, 1991) 13.

² Ibid., 19.

³ Tomáš Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) 19.

⁴ Ibid., 27.

Collecting

I know people whose lives are dominated by their collections, ceaselessly searching in flea markets, auction houses and specialist book shops, never resolving their quest. Whether you are collecting versions of popular songs, postcards of lighthouses or votive sculptures of Our Lady of Montserrat, your collection will never let you be. You've started so you must continue, and with most collections, there is no end. Whether it is postcards of lighthouses or four-leaf clovers, there can never be the definitive collection.

For what is more inert than a finished collection?

-Tacita Dean, *Collections*, 2000⁵

I come from a family of collectors. To feed our collections we set out to explore thrift stores, garage sales, estate sales and flea markets. What began as a hobby has become a main force in my art making.

Around the age of 13 my family went through bankruptcy and my parents divorced, leaving us rather financially insecure. An inexpensive weekend activity for my family was going to garage sales. With the *Pennysaver*, a bargain-finding newsletter, in hand we would plan our route through town. I do not recall ever being on the search for anything specific, although I enjoyed walking through people's houses during estates sales and rummaging through old things. Peering into the lives of these strangers through their cast-off items is voyeuristic in nature. Peter Ward says in his book *Kitsch in Sync*, "It is at home that people commit themselves to the most intensively personal and revealing manifestations of their taste."⁶ Estate and garage sales are unique moments when we unabashedly reveal our personal belongings in the hopes of a profit. Stepping into the homes of strangers allows me to peek into their lives and I am able to piece together their life story based on their belongings. Kitsch objects often seem to have lives of their own, histories and pasts. Often

⁵ Margaret Iversen, *Chance* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010) 214.

⁶ Peter Ward, *Kitsch in Sync*, 21.

simply seeing such objects is enough to spark my imagination and establish creative connections.

I now turn to thrift stores and flea markets for inspiration in my art making. These are not pretentious environments filled with items of great value, but rather the familiar, the obscure and affordable. To be sure, most of what inhabits these places is junk; but there is always a chance to find a treasure among the rejects. Artistically, I utilize thrift stores as a resource to appropriate objects and inject them with new meaning. Familiar objects found secondhand have an anonymous history. I have permission to deconstruct or breathe new life into each object because I have no specific sentimental connection to them. However, there is a cultural sentimentality that I connect to which lures me into purchasing these items in the first place. Subconsciously kitsch has risen to a prominent role in my work due to my regular visits to flea markets, thrift stores and garage sales.

Process

My creative process begins by focusing on specific imagery or materials. After long periods of contemplation, ideas for my work will come to me in what I describe as epiphanies. After an epiphany, I excitedly attempt to work out the process and material details in my head. This is my version of sketching. The variety of imagery and materials in my work comes from my love of pop culture and experimenting with new craft techniques. For example, in my first semester here at WVU, I was fortunate to learn mold making and casting. I have also taught myself latch hook, punch-needle, and several paper crafting techniques.

Contemporary artist Ann Hamilton (b. 1956) states that, “Many younger artists are using materials as a means for thinking through tactile processes that are very conceptual. There is perhaps a new value on making by hand and at the scale of the body.”⁷ The scale of my work all suggests the handcrafted quality. I am not a studio artist, I prefer to work from home and have adjusted my approach to create “lap-sized” art. Repetitive actions allow me to create small, manageable pieces that make up the whole.

After deciding on a new project I gather the necessary materials, which often means a trip to the thrift store, and learn my selected craft technique. Because the processes and craft techniques I tend to utilize are time consuming, I allow myself to become a machine and let my hands do the work. Giving myself the freedom to watch TV or movies is very meditative, and is the only way I can accomplish the tedious work required to make my art without feeling rushed or bored. This method has two distinct benefits. I am able to accomplish the task at hand while staying updated on current pop culture, which then comes back into my work. After a piece is completed I reflect on my decisions and look with a critical eye to interpret what I have done.

Because of the handcrafted quality of my work, time is always evident either directly or indirectly. The time spent creating the pieces in this show ranged from a solid week of non-stop work to several months. I am often imitating or recreating machine made processes so it is very important that my hand is seen in the work. I make artistic decisions intuitively so the time I spend creating also represents my confidence in the work. The time spent transforming these objects adds new value and makes it apparent that these

⁷ Ann Hamilton, interview by Christmas Renee Ivory-Thomas, August, 11, 2012 “*Brilliant Return: Interview with Ann Hamilton*,” <http://foconow.com/2012/08/11/brilliant-return-interview-with-ann-hamilton/>.(accessed 5 April 2013)

things have personal meaning. Because of the connection to pop culture and time, these pieces often also have a meaning for other members of my generation that feels personal.

Tom Friedman (b. 1965) is a contemporary sculptor who utilizes meticulous and tedious craft to transform mundane objects. In 1990, he inlaid his own pubic hair into a perfect spiral on a bar of soap. (fig. 1)⁸ His works are the everyday gone strange, not easily interpreted immediately. For example, Friedman's piece *Hot Balls* (fig. 2), appears to simply be a collection of toy balls. The context of the work instantly changes when you find out each of these balls were stolen by the artist over a period of six months.⁹ Time is an important factor in his work and it varies with each piece. I find parallels between my work and Friedman's because of the tedious yet casual craft, the repetition, the process of collection, and the importance of material choices in the work.

Subversive craft is a current cultural movement in which artists use traditional craft techniques with a modern context.¹⁰ The book *Indie Craft* by Jo Waterhouse chronicles many artists who use textile crafts in non-traditional ways. I feel connected to this movement, though I set myself apart because, unlike many of the artist in Waterhouse's book, I am not indebted to one material. Each technique I use is specifically chosen for its relation to the meaning behind each piece. I learned many of the techniques I used for the work in this exhibit through tutorials found on You Tube internet videos and Pinterest, a website used for sharing, collecting and organizing images from the web. Learning new skills quickly through this accessible media allows my ideas to continually evolve.

⁸ Bruce Hainley, Dennis Cooper, and Adrian Searle, *Tom Friedman*, (London: Phaidon) 2001, 13.

⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰ Jo. Waterhouse and Faythe Levine, *Indie craft*, London: Laurence King Pub., 2010) 10.

Cultural Observations

This exhibition stems from mining my childhood for what is important to me and what shaped who I am today. The work is a manifestation of how personal meaning intersects with cultural meaning. When I begin the art making process I do so in what might be considered a naïve way. The more profound implications of meaning are worked out through the process of making. I appropriate certain materials, images or objects that hold reflections of my past. I then make cultural connections with those materials, images or objects that are amusing to me. Specifically, I am interested in objects that were once held in high esteem by the masses but for varying reasons became passé. The original meaning associated with these objects has been stripped away with time. Now they are either outdated; cease to function in the way they were once intended to, or they are no longer viewed as having cultural value.

By its nature, most pop culture eventually cycles into obscurity. However, I believe the pop culture we absorb as kids never really leaves us. Much of the work in this exhibit is derived from things I loved and experienced as a child. For example, like most kids, in middle school I started to discover music. During those three years I had one true love: 'N Sync, a boy-band that performed catchy pop songs with synchronized dance moves. (fig. 3) My walls were covered in posters from the popular teen magazines BOP and Tiger Beat. I memorized all the choreography from their music videos, knew all the words to their songs, and went to the 2000 "No Strings Attached" concert with my mom. In hindsight, I was no different than today's "Beiber Fever" tweens or previous generations obsessed with The Monkees, David Cassidy or New Kids on the Block. Culture is cyclical. Young people

today diagnosed with “Beiber Fever” will most certainly feel the sting of embarrassment later in life.

To the teenybopper kitsch does not exist, because the appreciation of kitsch is a sophisticated response that does not come instinctively. But, when the taste buds mature, the taste of our younger, less sophisticated selves is often a source of embarrassment to us. These naïve former incarnations are often disowned as different beings – the possessions of youth either forgotten, left behind at the parental home or burnt in a ritual exorcising of youth. But the skeletons are unfortunately not bio-degradable and the ghosts of our adolescence will always be on hand to haunt us.

-Peter Ward¹¹

I am also drawn to using movies I loved as child. *Forrest Gump* and *Titanic*, for example, are stores with significant cultural and personal placement. In his article “Fans and Fan Culture” Matthew Hills describes fans as having “developed an extensive knowledge and expertise about their shows . . . also characteristically feeling a sense of ownership over ‘their’ object of fandom.”¹² I agree with this synopsis. I too feel deeply connected to the movies I grew up with, to the point where I do feel a sense of ownership towards them. Television has also been an integral part of my life since I received my first TV at the age of eight. In my home the TV is turned on all day everyday, even if only for background noise. The continual presence of television in my life comes through in my work.

Working with subject matter such as ‘N Sync and *Forrest Gump* is representative of 1990’s America. Although the themes of my work have broad implications, knowledge of this era of pop culture is required to understand and enjoy the specific references in the work. A shared understanding of pop culture often acts to unite and connect people, regardless of era. For my generation, reciting quotes from a television show or movie can

¹¹ Peter Ward, *Kitsch in sync: a consumer's guide to bad taste* (London: Plexus, 1991) 71.

¹² Matthew Hills, “Fans and Fan Culture.” *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. Ritzer, George (ed). (Blackwell Publishing, 2007) 1.

bring strangers together. This collective memory is present in all of the work in this exhibition. Recognition of the icons I use will instantly remind the viewer of his or her past experiences and knowledge of the topical imagery.¹³

Complicity and Humor

The presence of humor in my work gives it accessibility and allows the viewer to draw in for further exploration. Blaise Pascal, a French philosopher from the 1600's assumed a theory of incongruity that said, "Nothing produces laughter more than a disproportion between that which one expects, and that which one sees."¹⁴

Transformation of materials, incongruities between subject matter and titles are all elements I use to add humor to my work. My work, however, is not inherently funny. The viewer must project humor onto the work by understanding its context.¹⁵

In her book *Sweet Dreams*, Johanna Drucker says, "I don't feel it is the responsibility of an artist to judge whether a culture is good or evil – art intersects and exists with civilization. For these artists it is important their work functions in total complicity with the context they are confronting."¹⁶ While I find myself humorously implicating different aspects of our culture, the reality is that is *my* culture as well. I use satire and parody to subvert or undermine our culture, but I am not dismissing it outright. Viewers of my work

¹³ Tomáš Kulka, *Kitsch and art* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) 35.

¹⁴ Sheri Klein, *Art and laughter* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007) 10.

¹⁵ Jennifer Higbie, *The Artist's Joke* (London: Whitechapel, 2007) 212.

¹⁶ Johanna Drucker, *Sweet dreams: contemporary art and complicity*, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2005) 39.

are also complicit with this culture. The hope is they will see themselves in my work and still be able to laugh.

Sheri Klein describes satire in her book *Art and Laughter as*, “mimicking the knowledge and behavior of our culture to emphasize and exaggerate aspects of life and its foibles.” She states, “The aim of satire is to prompt us to re-examine our values, social behaviors and morals. The visual satirist uses the knowledge of the behavior and conventions of a culture or group to mimic and magnify the ridiculous.”¹⁷ In my work satire creates discomfort in the viewer by making them feel implicated by association.

Humor is important to my creative process; it is my own access point for creating. From the start of any project I must be amused by an idea before I decide to begin its creation. While my own feelings about a piece are the starting point, most important for the work is that the viewer find humor by connecting with the ideas and imagery presented. After the humorous punch, the meaning then unfolds, revealing implications in the work that leave the viewer questioning him or herself. The humor in my work comes when two disparate ideas or images come together in an unexpected way. To be successful these incongruities rely on the viewers’ understanding; making one’s culture, social class, education and gender very important in understanding the work.¹⁸ In addition, the incongruities force the viewer to question my choices. They also give them the task of making sense of these apparently disparate ideas.

¹⁷ Sheri Klein, *Art and laughter* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007) 16.

¹⁸ Ibid., 6.

I Know, Right? – The Exhibition

“I know, right?” is an example of a contemporary colloquial phrase used by my generation. The phrase is used as an affirmation that you not only understand what someone has said but that it is something you have already thought about or already knew. This title is used to inform the audience of my interests in pop culture and conversational speech. Justifiably, the work in this exhibition might also elicit this exact response from viewers. As the title suggest, the exhibition represents a wide variety of different approaches to a common idea. The work taps into cultural niches that groups of people can understand and relate to, while also restating, or representing things that people may have already thought about or already know. Therefore, the judgmental undertone in the work makes the viewer aware that they share these experiences of judging and being judged. This, in turn, creates a subconscious uneasiness that permeates the exhibition.

Mr. Pink, Sounds Like Mr. Pussy

Upon entering the Paul Mesaros Gallery the viewer is struck visually by a pink swatch of wall to the left and the words “LOVE PINK” to the right. *Mr. Pink, Sounds Like Mr. Pussy* (2012) (fig. 4) is a punch-needle embroidery of actor, Steve Buscemi’s character “Mr. Pink” from the movie *Reservoir Dogs* (fig. 5). The lingerie company Victoria’s Secret LOVE PINK logo (fig. 6) covers most of his face. This piece is parody of popular culture as Sheri Klein states in her book *Art and Laughter*, “Parody gently mocks ... cultural icons through

appropriating and altering images, and layering them with new meanings.”¹⁹ *Mr. Pink, Sounds Like Mr. Pussy* is a representation of disparate generational trends, and how these same trends come and go. It explores the question of how we learn to make cultural decisions and how this affects who we become.

To understand the specifics of this piece you first must understand two different eras of popular culture. The phrase LOVE PINK, printed on Victoria’s Secret brand sweatpants and T-shirts, is a current fashion trend with college-aged girls. The popularity of this fashion statement is at an all time high, but, it will undoubtedly soon be out of fashion. The LOVE PINK logo reflects a certain stereotype, which is quite different from the stereotypical viewer of the movie *Reservoir Dogs*. Juxtaposing these two disparate cultural icons questions in what ways these two types of people are the same and in what ways they are different. The feminine logo fused on the masculine image also talks about gender specific cultural phenomena and how these can overlap. To recognize the humor in the work one must recognize both of these images and understand the connection. Humor is also attributed to the title of the piece, which is a line from *Reservoir Dogs*. The whole reason this insult works is because Mr. Pink is being emasculated, calling attention to the feminine name this tough guy has been given.

Mr. Pink, Sounds Like Mr. Pussy mimics the embroideries crafted by an older generation of women in America. These embroideries, created as a hobby from kits with patterns, were also used as a decorative object in the home. Recently, there has been resurgence in the use of these crafty, homespun techniques. Kate Westerholt creates cross-stitch in the style of Victorian samplers, but incorporates quotes from movies, song lyrics

¹⁹ Ibid., 13.

and street slang. Westerholt's humorous take on a traditional technique will "in a hundred years' time give insight into our society and culture today", like her piece *Bless This Crack House*.²⁰ (fig. 7) Traditional "women's work" is referenced in *Mr. Pink, Sounds Like Mr. Pussy*, but it is not my intention to apply a feminist context to the work. Instead, I am creating a decorative kitsch object that has a domestic touch. *Mr. Pink, Sounds Like Mr. Pussy* was the longest continuous project in the show. The punch-needle technique involves using many colors of embroidery floss and a punch needle to create thousands of loops on the surface of the fabric that creates the image. The texture looks very similar to the texture of a varsity letter, which I associate with the LOVE PINK brand. Multiplying a simple action by a hundred or a thousand times creates the association with process, and becomes a reflection of the time afforded in making the piece, along with my affection for the work.

Commemorative Frenemy Plates

In the gallery, to the left of *Mr. Pink, Sounds Like Mr. Pussy*, is a section of wall covered in hand-made pink wallpaper on which three ceramic plates hang in a vertical row. This piece, *Commemorative Frenemy Plates* (2013) (fig. 8), is about experiencing childhood bullying and reflecting on one's youth. The plates each commemorate a different young girl, featuring a black and white yearbook photo with each girl's name in script surrounded by decorative flowers. (fig. 8.1) These three girls were my fifth grade bullies, my "frenemies", best friends one day and enemies the next.

²⁰ Jo Waterhouse and Faythe Levine, *Indie Craft*, London: Laurence King Pub., 2010) 120.

Obviously, these three girls are the opposite of what normally belongs on a commemorative plate. Commemorative plates traditionally depict royalty, cultural landmarks, presidents, or other historically significant events we wish to remember. By putting these young bullies in the place of what is normally reserved for positive imagery, I am flipping the expectations of the viewer.

Although what these girls represent is specific to me, the viewer can see him or herself in the work by relating it to their own negative experiences. There are events in our past we can never let go of or forget, even if they no longer affect us day-to-day. As an adult, it is satisfying to talk about these experiences and reflect on them, and most of the time it is something we can now laugh about.

The wallpaper backdrop in *Commemorative Frenemy Plates* is used as a metaphor for the perception of what being a 10-year-old girl is like, standing as the façade of the actual experience. (fig. 8.2) Being a 10-year-old girl should be a happy, giggly, carefree and innocent time. In reality, this is a time when kids become mean, friends become frenemies and backstabbing is everyone's favorite pastime. During this time, a social agenda is put into play and the middle school hierarchy begins. The Titanic image stands in as a reference to a the year I was in fifth grade, 1997. This year is also when the movie, *The Titanic*, was released. *The Titanic* immortalized the historical tragedy for my generation by imbedding a youthful love story into the account. In my piece, the ship represents innocence, excitement and new experiences, but we all know the story ends in tragedy. The Titanic's façade signified strength, but inside, the vessel was riddled with structural weakness. As people, we often adopt the façade of strength, but inside there will forever be self-consciousness that usually stems from childhood trauma. This piece has allowed me to

reflect on that time in my life and allows the viewer to connect his or her own similar experiences.

On the surface *Commemorative Frenemy Plates* is incredibly kitschy in a very domestic way. The section of wall seems to be plucked from a household that appreciates decorative objects, yet there is content found in this piece that would not be found in normal floral wallpaper or commemorative plates. Ceramic artist Kathy King's (b. 1968) *Commemorative Plates Series* similarly memorializes her own personal narrative with pieces such as *Virginity* (fig. 9) and *Self Restraint* (fig. 10). Her plates also depict life-altering experiences, shared by many, that mold us into adults.²¹

That's All I Have To Say About That

Walking down the ramp into the gallery the viewer will see *That's All I Have To Say About That* (2013) (fig. 11, 11.1, 11.2), a long horizontal line of black bows that spans the entire length of the stone wall with a few feet continuing on the adjacent wall. This line of bows sparkles under the gallery lights; complementing the glittery quality that is inherent within the architecture of the stone wall in the gallery and creating a resemblance to an exposed geode. It is not until the viewer walks the entire length of the line that they will discover these bows are made from a single *Forrest Gump* VHS tape ribbon. Used this way, the title card becomes integral to the piece. It functions as the punch line as well as an informational placard. Walking along the wall, I am leading the viewer on, and the recognition of the material after reading the title card at the end of the row creates the "ah

²¹ Kathy King, *Commemorative Plate Series* <http://www.kathykingart.com/artwork/commemorative-plates/1830> (accessed 20 April 2013)

ha” moment for the viewer. The odd decision to include the extra bows on the adjacent wall at the beginning of the piece hints at the truth to the material. In order to use the entire contents of the VHS tape, the line had to continue past the end of the wall.

A bow is an ordinary, mass-produced, inexpensive way to decorate presents. However, bows hold the power to elevate an ordinary object into something important. With a bow attached, anything instantly becomes a gift. This long line of bows can be viewed as an abstraction of the movie *Forrest Gump*. The entire story revolves around a conversation over a box of chocolates, something usually given as a gift. The repetition of these small objects hints at the movie, a long series of scenes, each holding their own weight in our collective memory.

The inspiration for this piece came after several months of collecting *Forrest Gump* VHS tapes from various thrift stores. (fig. 12) I chose to use the magnetic ribbon encased in the VHS tape because of its material quality. Hand-making bows is an almost unnecessary craft within the context of time and money, it is inexpensive and more convenient to buy a bag of mass-produced bows from a store. The dimensions and integrity of the magnetic ribbon is the perfect material to imitate and reconstruct the look of a store bought bow. Shiny metallic black ribbon is not often used in bow manufacturing, due to the fact that our culture does not employ black in celebrations that require gift giving. Since the color black carries connotations of aging and death in our cultural society, the negative connotation of the black bows gives the piece a dark sense of humor. At the time the movie *Forrest Gump* was released, VHS tapes were at the height of their popularity. The piece *That's All I Have To Say About That* is a memorial not only to *Forrest Gump* but also to VHS technology. Time has rendered this technology obsolete and has also stripped the movie *Forrest Gump* of its

cultural relevance. These things are part of our collective memory but hold little more than nostalgic value in the present.

Bye Bye Bye

The 1990's boy band 'N Sync has not been culturally relevant for over ten years. One the dominant artifacts that remain from their era are the posters girls hung on their bedroom walls. In *Bye Bye Bye* (2012) (fig. 13, 13.1) I crafted flowers from these posters and formed them into a funerary wreath, which becomes a symbolic representation to childhood guilty pleasures and the embarrassing moments in life that we put to rest as we grow up. Irony is prevalent in this piece, and is achieved through re-contextualizing the original objects intent, and transforming it to accommodate new content through the creation of a funeral wreath – a symbol of death.

Bye Bye Bye is similar to *That's All I Have To Say About That* in that both required repetitive processes to be completed. In the case of *Bye Bye Bye*, hundreds of flowers were made by hand. Paper flower tutorials are currently “trending”, or becoming popular, on Do-it-yourself blogs and the flowers themselves are typically used for home and wedding decoration. Instead of the usual plain paper, I decided to cut up my 'N Sync wall posters and centerfolds from teen magazines from my youth to make the flowers. I used a combination of three different online tutorials to create my own way of making paper flowers. These posters were once sacred to me so there was a sense of reluctance on my part in regards to destroying a symbol of my childhood.

The morbid sense of humor present in *Bye Bye Bye* relies on some basic knowledge of the 1990's boy band 'N Sync. The title of the piece comes from 'N Sync's hit song of the

same name. It is written in gold script on a white ribbon that is pinned onto the wreath. This phrase on a funeral wreath, and flowers made up of images of the boy band, creates an amusing juxtaposition. The memorial is for the broken-up band; the individual members are all still alive and well and will be forever known as members of 'N Sync. This piece also uses self-deprecating humor. It mocks my childhood self as much as 'N Sync; creating comedy by putting myself in a vulnerable position and sharing this part of my past with the viewer.²²

Several artists have recently used funeral wreaths as a symbol in their work to convey a message of loss. The Carmichael Collective created miniature arrangements of funeral wreaths in their *Bug Memorials* (fig. 14), which memorialize the normally insignificant deaths of flies²³, and Gina Dawson's *Wreaths* (fig. 15) are small funeral wreaths with text from rejection letters.²⁴ The context of a funeral wreath is normally a serious one. However, contemporary artists are using them as a symbol to create dark humor and explore ideas of memorializing what normally goes unnoticed.

In real life we encounter funeral wreaths near caskets. Because of the solemn atmosphere of funerals we are instinctually careful around them. By placing it on the gallery floor, giving a wide berth from the curved wall of the ramp, I put the wreath in a vulnerable position. It is easy to walk around to view from all sides, but the fragility of the spindly legs makes the viewer cautious.

²² Jennifer Higgie, *The Artist's Joke* (London: Whitechapel, 2007) 213.

²³ Carmichael Collective, *Bug Memorials*, <http://www.carmichaelcollective.com> (accessed 15 April 2013)

²⁴ Gina Dawson, *Funeral Wreaths*, <http://gldawson.blogspot.com/2009/05/funeral-wreaths.html> (accessed 15 April 2013)

Cluster Flock

In the middle of the gallery floor sits *Cluster Flock* (2013) (fig. 16), seventeen pink plastic lawn flamingos, each standing on two spindly legs on their own circular base of artificial grass, seemingly plucked from their natural environment. Once the viewer investigates this piece further they will discover that the back of each flamingo is filled with golden clusters of crystals. (fig. 16.1)

Cluster Flock is a representation of the inescapable kitsch that inundates our lives. For many people, a couple of plastic flamingos planted in one's front lawn can bring joy. However, cherishing kitsch comes with consequences. These objects have ridden the tide of popularity and landed at the bottom. Their cultural significance is now synonymous with tacky, or ironic decoration. When envisioning this piece I wanted to take this ultimate kitsch object and imbue it with unexpected significance. I wanted to, metaphorically and literally, crack open a kitsch object and fill it with treasure. Each flamingo is filled with geode like crystals. Contemporary artist Paige Smith creates geode street art, filling cracks and crevices with paper crafted crystals.²⁵ (fig. 17,18) Her geodes, mimicking a naturally occurring phenomenon in an urban environment, create unexpected experiences for passersby. I am looking for a similar experience with my piece.

At first glance these pink flamingos seem normal, sitting on their very own patch of AstroTurf. However, this every day kitsch object has grown strange with the unnatural growth of crystals. By constructing this growth inside the flamingos I did not in fact fill the backs with treasure, instead I only added more kitsch to kitsch. Although crystals are

²⁵ "Geode" Street Art, *A Common Name Studio*, <http://acommonname.com/street-art-project/> (accessed 16 April 2013)

naturally occurring formations, their popularity also comes and goes with trends. By creating this alluring grouping of flamingos, I intend to trick the viewer into enjoying something that is taboo – twice.

Unlike most of the work in this exhibition, the process I used to create *Cluster Flock* is hidden in the piece. I used a multi-stepped process of mold making and casting to recreate an object that looks as close to the original as possible. I started by making two rubber molds of real crystals in varying sizes, using urethane rubber. I then cast hundreds of these crystals in foundry wax. During this casting process I cut open a pair of Don Featherstone plastic lawn flamingos giving me four hollow halves. I then filled each interior with the wax crystals to create my “pattern”. The quality of the wax allowed me to easily manipulate the crystals by melting and fusing them together to create a tight cluster. I used a sticky wax to fill in holes between crystals to give a good seal before the next step. I then prepared the pattern to create a final two-part rubber mold with a plaster mother mold. After completing the four molds I cast the flamingos with polyurethane plastic using a filler to increase the amount of castings. With 30 lbs. of plastic I was able to produce seventeen flamingos. After a light clean up with a Dremel I painted the flamingo side to imitate the original pink lawn flamingo and the crystal side with liquid gold leaf. This process spanning many months, results in objects that look mass-produced, yet show my hand after close inspection in the imperfect castings and paint jobs. Unlike identical mass-produced kitsch objects, these flamingos are all slightly different, much like the array of people who love kitsch.

House Hunters

On the back wall of the gallery is *House Hunters* (2013) (fig. 19) a cluster of landscape paintings, each with a different quote from the HGTV show “House Hunters”, in which people tour homes that are on the real estate market. The paintings are arranged salon style, pieced together like a puzzle, fifteen feet wide and eight feet tall.

Generic landscape paintings were once commonly used to decorate homes. These landscape paintings were originally either painted or purchased then displayed on the wall by their original owners simply because they liked them.²⁶ They were seen as a “window” to a pristine and romanticized wilderness. Unfortunately, this trend of accessorizing walls with these uninhabited wilderness scenes has passed. These paintings now can be found in excess in thrift stores, flea markets and garage sales. In my *House Hunters* series I have rescued these rejected paintings and injected them with new life by manipulating the existing compositions through the application of text. Some of the paintings are mass-produced reproductions while others are hand-painted originals of hobby artists, some with glitter paint still intact. I did not discriminate based on style or technique when collecting the paintings, so any artistic judgment of the original painting is left up to the viewer. Despite the different styles of landscapes, these paintings all are connected by the fact that someone did not want them anymore. They now bear quotations from “House Hunters” related to home buying and domestic expectations. Contemporary societies’ understanding of the idealized home now covers up the paintings that once symbolized our idealistic landscapes.

²⁶ Tomáš Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) 20.

In his essay “Infinite Jester”, Tom Morton describes contemporary art world jokester Maurizio Cattelan (b. 1960) as a clown who holds up a mirror to our pomposities, foibles and fears.²⁷ Although some of the phrases included in *House Hunters* are superficial and absurd, others seem quite practical in relation to homeownership. This dichotomy is not fixed. Each viewer will bring his or her own experiences to the piece. What seems like a ridiculous notion to some will seem quite appealing to others. The quote “We can sacrifice the living room for the pool table” in the *House Hunters* series is an example of such assumptions. (fig. 20) Ecological issues and the hypocrisy of American society are also present in the work through the irony that is prevalent within the finished compositions. The background of each painting is an ideal landscape but the text on the foreground expresses ideas about land ownership, construction and amenities.

By clustering the paintings together in a manner that reflects the clutter of a collector’s home, the viewer can stand in one spot and take in all of the information presented, much like the experience of watching TV or surfing the Internet. The repetition creates a bombardment of images, an overwhelming amount of information. Presented this way the group of paintings become a cloud of ideas that function best as a whole. Some of the fun to be had with *House Hunters* is reading the quotes aloud with friends. Relating to the phrases and laughing at the absurdity connects the viewers and gives them an engaging viewing experience. When discussing his word paintings in the documentary *Beauty is Embarrassing* artist Wayne White (b. 1957) states, “I’ll settle for laughter any day. Laughter’s a deep thing. Most people don’t think it is but it is.” In the film he criticizes the art world for not accepting humor as an important concept when viewing art. He believes

²⁷ Jennifer Higgie, *The Artist’s Joke* (London: Whitechapel, 2007) 205.

that humor is the most important thing we have as human beings, and that without it we're dead.²⁸ It is quite clear his paintings are meant to evoke laughter with his frequent use of the word "fuck" over vintage landscapes. (fig. 21, 22) However, his paintings also contain thought-provoking messages of vanity and ego.²⁹(fig. 23)

For *House Hunters* I hand-painted the letters with white acrylic in a Baskerville one-inch font, centering the phrases on each painting. By spending time to hand paint each phrase I put my touch on the paintings and create a precious object from "junk". I am creating sentimental value in something that was, for me, an anonymous thrift store painting. This work creates an unusual collaboration with unknown artists to add new content to the paintings.

Conclusion

The work in this exhibition highlights my passion for recycling cultural objects. With meticulous process and a juxtaposition of everyday objects, old and new, I create new meaning. Many shared cultural experiences are visible in the work and are filtered through my specific point of view of having grown up in the 1990s. Knowledge of popular culture of that era will enable the viewer to find humor mixed with poignancy in the work. With satire and parody I am able to directly connect with my audience. In doing so, I almost trick them into sensing the deeper narratives of the work, that address our own psychologies, leaving the viewer feeling at once judged and judgmental.

²⁸ *Beauty is Embarrassing*, Dir. Neil Berkeley, Perf. Wayne White, (Future You Pictures) 2012. Netflix.

²⁹ Wayne White, *Word Paintings*, <http://waynewhiteart.com> (accessed 21 April 2013).

Illustrations

Fig. 1 Tom Friedman, *Untitled*, 1990. Hair, soap. Reproduced from http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/aip/tom_friedman.htm (accessed on April 21, 2013)

Fig. 2 Tom Friedman, *Hot Balls*, 1992. Stolen balls. Reproduced from <http://manmadelakes.blogspot.com/2010/09/tom-friedman.html> (accessed on April 21, 2013)

Fig. 3 'N Sync 2000 Reproduced from <http://se7enx-mp3.com/2012/04/nsync-triple-album-download.html> (accessed on April 29, 2013)

Fig. 4 Morgan Gesell Milders, *Mr. Pink, Sounds Like Mr. Pussy*, 2012. Embroidery floss on fabric, wood frame.

Fig. 5 Steve Buscemi as “Mr. Pink” in Quentin Tarantino’s film *Reservoir Dogs* Reproduced from <http://cinema1544.wordpress.com/cinema-1544/reservoir-dogs/> (Accessed on April 27, 2013)

Fig. 6 LOVE PINK brand Reproduced from
http://www.ak47.net/forums/t_1_5/1383478_Women_wearing_sweatpants_shopping___Yea_or_Nay_.html&page=5 (Accessed on April 27, 2013)

Fig. 7 Kate Westerholt, *Bless This Crack House*, cross-stitch. Reproduced from <http://tell.la/view/1011> (accessed on April 16, 2013)

Fig. 8 Morgan Gesell Milders, *Commemorative Frenemy Plates*, 2013. Ceramic plates on wallpaper.

Fig. 8.1 Morgan Gesell Milders, *Commemorative Frenemy Plates*, 2013. Ceramic plates on wallpaper.

Fig. 8.2 Morgan Gesell Milders, *Commemorative Frenemy Plates*, 2013. Ceramic plates on wallpaper.

Fig. 9 Kathy King, *Commemorative Plate Series – Virginitiy*, 2004. Carved Porcelain, Glaze, China Paint. Reproduced from <http://www.kathykingart.com/artwork/commemorative-plates/1830> (accessed on April 20, 2013)

Fig. 10 Kathy King, *Commemorative Plate Series – Self Restraint*, 2004. Carved porcelain, Glaze, China Paint. Reproduced from <http://www.kathykingart.com/artwork/commemorative-plates/1834> (accessed on April 20, 2013)

Fig. 11 Morgan Gesell Milders, *That's All I Have To Say About That*, 2013. One Forrest Gump VHS tape ribbon.

Fig. 11.1 Morgan Gesell Milders, *That's All I Have To Say About That*, 2013. One Forrest Gump VHS tape ribbon.

Fig. 11.2 Morgan Gesell Milders, *That's All I Have To Say About That*, 2013. One Forrest Gump VHS tape ribbon.

Figure 12 *Forrest Gump* VHS tapes stacked in artist's studio

Fig. 13 Morgan Gesell Milders, *Bye Bye Bye*, 2012. 'N Sync posters, ribbon, wreath, wreath stand.

Fig. 13.1 Morgan Gesell Milders, *Bye Bye Bye*, 2012. 'N Sync posters, ribbon, wreath, wreath stand.

Fig. 14 The Carmichael Collective, *Bug Memorial*. Reproduced from <http://www.carmichaelcollective.com> (accessed April 15, 2013)

Fig. 15 Gina Dawson, *Wreaths*. Reproduced from <http://gldawson.blogspot.com/2009/05/funeral-wreaths.html> (accessed on April 15, 2013)

Figure 16 Morgan Gesell Milders, *Cluster Flock*, 2013. Cast plastic, acrylic, nail polish, liquid gold leaf, steel, artificial grass, wood.

Fig. 16.1 Morgan Gesell Milders, *Cluster Flock*, 2013. Cast plastic, acrylic, nail polish, liquid gold leaf, steel, artificial grass, wood.

Fig. 17 Paige Smith, Geode #3, DTLA, paper. Reproduced from <http://acommonname.com/street-art-project/> (accessed on April 16, 2013)

Fig. 18 Paige Smith, Geode #9, Downtown LA, paper. Reproduced from <http://acommonname.com/street-art-project/> (accessed on April 16, 2013)

Fig. 19 Morgan Gesell Milders, *House Hunters*, 2013. Acrylic on found paintings.

Fig. 20 Morgan Gesell Milders, *House Hunters (detail)*, 2013. Acrylic on found paintings.

Fig. 21 Wayne White, *Clusterfuck*. Reproduced from <http://waynewhiteart.com> (accessed April 21, 2013)

Fig. 22 Wayne White, *Fanfuckingtastic*. Reproduced from <http://waynewhiteart.com> (accessed April 21, 2013)

Fig. 23 Wayne White, *The Most Expensive Painting in the World*. Reproduced from <http://waynewhiteart.com> (accessed April 21, 2013)

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Resume

EDUCATION:

- Currently **Graduate Student, West Virginia University**
In final semester of a studio MFA program, cumulative 4.0 GPA.
- 2009 **Bachelor of Fine Arts**
Flagler College, St. Augustine, Florida

EXHIBITIONS

- 2013** **Confluence**, Artists Image Resource, *Pittsburgh, PA*
I KNOW, RIGHT?, Paul Mesaros Gallery, West Virginia University, *Morgantown, WV*
- 2012** **Juried Student Exhibition**, West Virginia University, *Morgantown, WV*
- 2011** **Home Grown**, Artists Image Resource, *Pittsburgh, PA*
Souvenirs, Monongalia Arts Center, *Morgantown, WV*
Ego/Anti-Ego, Laura Messaros Gallery, West Virginia University, *Morgantown, WV*
In-Organic, Collar Works, *Troy, NY*
Alumni Exhibition, Crisp-Ellert Art Museum, Flagler College, *St. Augustine, FL*
- 2010** **Graduate Seminar Brew Pub Show**, Morgantown Brewing Company, *Morgantown, WV*
- 2009** **Bachelor of Arts Exhibit Portfolio**, "Open Studio", Molly Wiley Art Building, *St. Augustine, FL*
Bachelor of Fine Arts Exhibit Portfolio Show, Crisp-Ellert Art Museum, *St. Augustine, FL*
Student Juried Art Show, Crisp-Ellert Art Museum, *St. Augustine, FL*
- 2008** **No Daddy, I Don't Have a Chainsaw**, Simple Gestures, *St. Augustine, FL*
Student Juried Art Show, Crisp-Ellert Art Museum, *St. Augustine, FL*
Spring SIFE Eco-Art Show, Flagler College, *St. Augustine, FL*
Fall SIFE Eco-Art Show, Flagler College, *St. Augustine, FL*
- 2007** **The Gala**, Rockin' Bean, *St. Augustine, FL*

HONORS AND PERMANANT COLLECTIONS

- 2012** **Faculty-Student Mentored Research Award**, First Place, West Virginia University, *Morgantown, WV*

- 2011** **Third Place**, "A Day in the Life", Graduate Photo Contest,
West Virginia University, *Morgantown, WV*
- 2009** **Morton J. May Foundation Gallery**, Maryville University,
St. Louis, MO
- 2008** **Mural**, Julington Creek Elementary School, *St. Johns, FL*
Member of Alpha Chi, Flagler College, St. Augustine, FL

PUBLICATIONS

- 2013** **'N Sync Farewell Wreath**, <http://blog.makezine.com/craft/n-sync-farewell-wreath/>
- 2012** **Latch Hooked Mrs. Doubtfire Rug**,
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- 2009** Bardin, Rachel. "The Tacky Artist." Drift Magazine; May 6, 2009; centerfold.

WORK EXPERIENCE

- 2011-Present** Graduate Teaching Assistantship, West Virginia University,
Morgantown, WV