Tender Generic

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Tender Generic

by

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of the requirements of the degree of
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DEPERSONALIZATION/DEREALIZATION DISORDER (DDPD)

The diagnostic criteria defined in section 300.6 of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders are as follows:

- Longstanding or recurring feelings of being detached from one's mental processes or body, as if one is observing them from the outside or in a dream.
- Reality testing is unimpaired during depersonalization.
- Derealization, experiencing the external world as strange or unreal.
- Macropsia or micropsia, an alteration in the perception of object size or shape.
- A sense that other people seem unfamiliar or mechanical. ¹

My experience of living with Chronic Depersonalization/Derealization Disorder has wholly altered my visual and psychological perception of reality. The world is strange and unfamiliar to me. I often experience the reality through visual disturbances. Some of these distortions include a vignette of darkness that covers my peripheral vision, a blurry veil called “visual snow.” As if moving out of of focus, sometimes the world appears flattened but can also shift into a heightened visual acuity, wherein my vision sharpens into hyper-focus. Many days my loved ones and my home are only faintly familiar to me. Though cognitively aware that I, in fact, have lived in my apartment for five years, it feels deeply unfamiliar to me, as if I had never been there before. In my paintings I attempt to recreate this perception of the world for the viewer. To do

so, I use stock imagery from because I am interested in our cultural languages for expressing emotions. I am drawn to generic depictions of images perhaps because the world to me is represented as flattened, without personal or special associations. My current series investigates feelings and beliefs. Cliché and kitsch images of doves, lilies, candles are commonplace in sympathy cards and easily experienced as overly sentimental and sappy. But are these motifs not also heartfelt, sincere expressions of love and dominant in our culture? My current body of work investigates feelings and beliefs and the territory that lies in-between.

**DEEPEST SYMPATHIES**

In the painting *The Border* (fig. 1) a generic grey, rectangular border is depicted inside of a large, flat black field. Balloons and streamers, recalling those featured on birthday cards, rest in the left hand corner of the image. Within the vertical format, the space that would normally contain words such as “Happy Birthday,” is left blank. The composition is borrowed from illustration and design.

Both of my parents died within the last couple of years. In my current body of work, I wanted to investigate how we talk about death in our culture. Sentimental images of flowers, candles, doves and hearts are ubiquitous motifs in these sympathy cards. Are these not also the dominant expressions of heartfelt, sincere love in our culture? What does empathy look like? How are eternal emotions expressed in mass culture? Why have we chosen to design our despair in such a way? I am interested in the messy in-betweenness of sincerity and irony, attraction and repulsion; the moments when the dramatic spills into the melodramatic. Can images effectively
transfer compassion? By simultaneously creating illusionary space and displaying the means of
decception, a painting is a perfect stage to explore the tension of contradictions. A sincere, earnest
expression and saccharine, yet seductive subject, are experienced at the same moment. Do we
and Politics*, he surveys how other critics have view the use of art for therapeutic purposes:

Hickey views the therapeutic in art as authoritarian and insulting. Kuspit sees it as liberating, and McEvilley approaches it as a question of utility. Behind each of these characterizations of the therapeutic are quite different ideas about agency effect in art. And that argument is as least as old as Plato and Aristotle...But where is the evidence for the therapeutic value of art? The therapeutic value of making the work is well known, and generally accepted. But what is the therapeutic value of the work for the beholder? Can beauty heal? Can an image have a therapeutic effect? What would such a therapeutic image look like?²

HORROR

Black silhouetted window blinds are depicted in a flat red empty space in the painting *Peeping Tom* (fig. 2), emerging from the center of the visual field. High-contrast light effects that are often seen in horror films are simulated within the painting. The application of multiple thin layers of oil paint produces a smooth, soft surface texture.

My current body of work is also influenced by illustration and poster design for horror movies and books of the 1970s and 1980s. The design strategy of shining a single, dramatic light into a sea of black to silhouette the protagonist or antagonist in a movie poster, book cover, or in a film or television show itself, is ubiquitous across all mediums in the horror genre. Bright red, blue,

and green lighting, creates a dramatic atmosphere of dread, acting like a specter. In my current body of work, I channeled my teenage girl self, living in a small town in New England during late 1990s. I was dark, depressed, earnest and immersed in all things related to the horror genre: from 1970s Italian “giallo” films such as *Black Sunday, The Bird with the Crystal Plumage, Deep Red,* and *Suspiria* to more popular American classics such as *The Exorcist, Carrie,* and *The Shining,* to the work of cult French filmmaker Jean Rollin. Bands such as Joy Division, Bauhaus, The Birthday Party, and Suicide were all vital to me as a young girl trying to find power in the world. In her book *Depression: A Public Feeling,* Ann Cvetkovich explores the political and psychological benefits of expressing our darker emotions through the recollection her own experience of depression:

Rather than seeing negative feelings of failure, mourning, despair, and shame as getting in the way of politics or needing to be converted to something more active in order to become politics, such work attends to felt experience as not only already political but as transforming our understandings of what counts as political. The encounter between feelings and politics is thus open for discussion of forms of activism that can address messy feelings rather than try to banish them, and that can more fully embrace the role of practices that resemble “therapy” (such as “processing”) within politics.

Horror films have been particularly influential to me as an artist because they are a reflection of the pervasive misogyny women experience in our culture. Almost always the victim is a young woman and there often lies an erotic subtext in these violent movies. By creating a work that nods to horror film posters, I am attempting to unpack how we as a culture have normalized and celebrated a genre of film dedicated to the total destruction of women.

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TEENAGE GIRLS

A pair of swans are depicted as floating in a large, gold glitter field in the painting Anguish (fig. 3). The use of glitter creates a dramatic and mysterious negative space for the swans to occupy.

I am interested in uncomfortable responses people have to the perceived romanticism and over-emotionalism teenage girls. Growing up in the capitalist, misogynist system in the US, I learned from a young age the insidious and vast influence the patriarchy has over every part of my life. These paintings acknowledge the “girly,” dramatic, romantic, earnest signs of my youth in order to recontextualize them. What would it look to simply refrain from categorizing as saccharine familiar tropes such as roses, hearts, and candles? Could they be viable as eternal symbols that connect to the masses? The illustrational style employed in the paintings is that of what painter Carrie Moyer calls “a love-sick teenage girl.” These paintings have a purposeful style of a somewhat skilled amateur. This painting style, drawn more strongly from book cover illustrations than from classical oil painting techniques, becomes an actor in the work, an underdog.

The use of glitter as a medium and swans as a subject overtly reveals the work's relationship to what Sianne Ngai calls “minor aesthetics.” In the text “Relishing the Minor,” Adrienne Edwards examines the work of contemporary performance artist Juliana Huxtable in relationship to Ngai concepts of “cute.”

Cute, for Ngai, is reactive, an aesthetic response to a particular social position, one that presents itself as minor, subaltern, and weak. Consequently, we recognize the cute through typically amplified feminine tropes in art and culture, realized through problematic symbols of powerlessness, such as particular modes of
speech, high emotion, and seduction. In other words, cute is an expression of willed vulnerability and available submission; however, the cute performs the very desire it seeks.⁴

I am deliberating placing feminine and sentimental elements, commonly regarded as silly, in the work. However, by reclaiming and repurposing the “girly,” my aim is bring to light just how much femininity is both demeaned and commodified in mass culture. Philosopher Nina Power analyzes how capital has come to appropriate the very idea of a “young girl” both as a desired commodity fetish and as trivialized object of contempt.

_Preliminary Materials for the Theory of the Young-Girl_, a text by the collective associated with “Tiqqun,” the French philosophical journal, is comprised of hundreds of small paragraphs, some fictional, others taken from the world of advertising and media. Each of these statements describes what a “Young-Girl” is or should be under the spectacle of consumer society. Feminist philosopher Nina Power describes it as “a text that both parodies and mirrors the misogyny that resonates at the heart of a culture that celebrates youth and beauty above all else while simultaneously denigrating the bearers – young women, overwhelmingly – of these purportedly desirable characteristics.”⁵ She goes on to describe _Preliminary Materials for the Theory of the Young-Girl_ as a “relentless depiction of the fully weaponized, consumerist body of a world in

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which ‘although everyone senses that their existence has become a battleground upon which neuroses, phobias, somatization, depression, and anxiety each sound a retreat, nobody has yet really grasped what is happening or what is at stake.’

Power continues “What is left of the body, love, personality when all life resembles a cross between a spreadsheet and a horoscope? ‘Unhappiness makes people consume’ reads one aphoristic statement, and yet unhappiness appears to be all there is, even as everything shrieks of fulfilment and perkiness.’

Power examines not only objectification and fetishization of the body under the spectacle but the commodification of the very notion of the “self” of a young woman. In my current series I have played with the notion of socially-constructed signifiers of femininity. The symbol of romance is represented in the painting Anguish (fig. 3) with two swans, commonly seen on sentimental greetings cards. (By embracing stereotypes assigned to young women, I am searching to uncover the hidden power dynamics underlying our visual languages.

TENDER GENERIC

Within the smooth, carefully rendered surface of the painting Drape (fig. 4) , a blue drape is represented in a vignette. The flattened rendering connotes a generic drape, a caricature, design, or illustration. The image was sourced from stock vector illustration commonly used in greeting cards.

6 Ibid

7 Ibid
Design is often used to create accessible visual language that conveys widely understood information without the aid of text. The images of hearts, balloons, and roses are particularly popular tropes within mainstream American culture. Free printable layout elements — stock images, clipart and border templates — are designed for users at all skill levels and are often generic as a result. Symbols intended to represent deep human emotion become banal and multifunctional. I am interested in exploring how these seemingly ubiquitous design conventions operate within the language of fine art and oil painting. While such graphics can be interpreted as co-opted imagery drained of power, these same images become symbols that inspire strong emotional responses in mass culture.

My current paintings can be read as stages, points of entry within which generic feelings can be meditated upon. The painting *Drape* (fig.4) holds within it contradictions, with the realistically depicted drape fading in and out of the flat black minimalist surface. In her essay “A Thing Like You and Me,” Hito Steyerl calls into question our conception of subject/object relations. Her position relates to the current philosophical field “New Materialism”, which agnologies the interrelatedness of human and non-human agents in the world. Steyerl frees up the notion of subjecthood by calling into question what it means to be a human and/or a thing. Steyerl below makes a case for “siding with the object:”

Nevertheless, generations of feminists—including myself—have strived to get rid of patriarchal objectification in order to become subjects. The feminist movement, until quite recently (and for a number of reasons), worked towards claiming autonomy and full subjecthood. But as the struggle to become a subject became mired in its own contradictions, a different possibility emerged. How about siding with the object for a change? Why not affirm it? Why not be a thing? An object without a subject? A thing among other things? “A thing that feels,” as Mario Perniola seductively phrased it. A desire to become this thing—in this case an image—is the upshot of the struggle over representation. Senses and things, abstraction and excitement, speculation and power,
desire and matter actually converge within images.\(^8\)

**IN-BETWEENNESS**

So the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity cannot rest on a distinction between psyche and soma, meaning that it cannot rest on a distinction between ideas and matter. What prohibits the assimilation of the psyche/soma, ideas/matter distinctions to the subject/object distinction is, above all, the fact of feeling and the existence of affects. The first discerns the second. Both feeling, as a process of sensing affects, and the transmission of affects, are material processes. We cannot distinguish between them, any more than we can distinguish between subject and object, by any criteria to do with materiality as opposed to ideality. The distinction can only be drawn on the basis of the nature of the feelings and affects involved. Feelings connect logically (consistently with the information provided by the flesh). The negative affects divide one person from another and then remake connections inaccurately from the subjective standpoint.\(^9\)

Realistic paintings ask the viewer to suspend disbelief. There is a moment when one gets too close to a painting, when the illusion of its realistic image breaks up into fragments and brushstrokes. Step back a few feet, and the illusion returns. This process of abstraction is also operating within the viewer's mind. I am drawn to painting because it provides a space for contradictions to coexist. A canvas is as flat plane that eludes to a three-dimensional mirage while simultaneously exposing its material as paint. I am interested in the precise moment between immersion in and the break with the image. The image is an unstable subject, a shifting parallax in a state of flux. This process of of becoming and unbecoming connects to Brennan’s theory that the “self” is far more flexible that we perceive it to be. In *The Transmission of Affect* Brennan shows how affects are shared and contagious between humans. This concept of a


loosening up of human subjectivity is an ontological concern of our time. How do we resolve the contradictions of a seemingly self contained body with the awareness of both emotional and material entanglements? This series of paintings served for me as a psychic space for mental abstraction. My concept of “abstraction” deviates from the standard art-historical definition. Within the works exists a certain flexibility of the mind where the known representational elements co-exist with the flattened “paint as material”. The tension depicted between seemingly disparate forms of expression acknowledges our relationship to contradiction, intersections and in-betweenness. Whether through an interest in design, illustration or personal psychological experiences, there exists a desire in my work to examine the distortions and abstractions of emotional expression in our time.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


LIST OF IMAGES EXHIBITED

1. Aisling Hamrogue, The Border, 2016. Oil on canvas and black velvet, 46 x 60 inches.

2. Aisling Hamrogue, Peeping Tom, 2016. Oil on canvas and black velvet, 46 x 60 inches.

3. Aisling Hamrogue, Anguish, 2017. Oil and glitter on canvas, 40 x 60 inches.

4. Aisling Hamrogue, The Drape, 2016. Oil on canvas and black velvet, 46 x 60 inches.

5. Installation view.
1. Aisling Hamrogue, *The Border*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 46 x 60 inches
2. Aisling Hamrogue, *Peeping Tom*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 46 x 60 inches
3. Aisling Hamrogue, *Anguish*, 2017. Oil and glitter on canvas, 40 x 60 inches
4. Aisling Hamrogue, *The Drape*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 46 x 60 inches
5. Installation view