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Hudson Christie  
*Track and Field, Meeting*  
September 12 – October 10, 2014

Hudson Christie's *Track and Field, Meeting* (2014) is a large-scale, three-dimensional realization of the artist's illustration practice. The work, which sees a humanoid figure jumping over a track hurdle while being impaled by an errant javelin, straddles the lines of absurdity, violence, and reality. In creating *Track and Field, Meeting* Christie was interested in producing a single work that was viscerally destructive and violent, but at the same time imbued with a fantastical narrative that exists so clearly outside of reality, that it could therefore be read within a humorous, but equally dark narrative.

Christie, who had originally approached his art practice from a painterly perspective, began to take an interest in the broader characteristics of North American folk art, specifically woodcarving and other sculptural practices. As his practice continued to evolve, Christie found interest in the meeting of the vacant, uncanny, and emotive human characteristics common within the broader folk art movement. The harsh and simplistic characteristics in the work of a great deal of folk artists appealed to Christie. This interest in folk art has imbued his current illustration work with a unique aesthetic sensibility that takes its cues not only from contemporary and historical folk traditions, but also subversive animation and sculptural aesthetic trends. Rather than a direct reference, folk art became a foil for Christie's work, stating that, "instead of seeing my work as "folk art" I think that I am taking aesthetic cues from that tradition and manipulating them into something quite different."<sup>1</sup> Building on this mode of working between traditions, Christie states that:

When I am creating these sculptures, it feels like an extension of my drawing abilities. By capturing these images through the use of photography, it gives the work so much body that I would ever have the patience for as a more conventional 2-D illustrator. Working this way allows me to create work with more immediacy, but that is also highly procedural.<sup>2</sup>

Christie cites three-dimensional illustrator Chris Sickels and his Red Nose Studio as a significant influence on his current practice. Sickels employs a similar strategy of creating elaborate three-dimensional sculptures and dioramas, and then photographs each as a way of framing and flattening the illustration. This process is similar to Christie's own approach, where photography functions as an illustration tool rather than a marker of the artist's own aesthetic practice. Whereas Sickels' work is susceptible to the

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<sup>1</sup> The author in conversation with Hudson Christie, Sunday, August 10, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

variables of found material he regularly incorporates into his work, Christie employs a methodical process in the creation of his work.

Christie's process is highly controlled, with a structured, linear progression from conceptualization to completion. Each sculpture or diorama begins as a two-dimensional sketch that Christie vehemently adheres to as the project becomes more fully realized. In a cyclical way, Christie develops these sketches into three-dimensional works, before lighting and photographing them, rendering them as a two-dimensional illustration. Christie likens his approach to the construction and staging of each illustration to the work of contemporary Canadian photographer Jeff Wall. Wall's elaborately staged compositional photographs are often part of a much larger process in the creation of the still-frame of a cinematic moment. This is not to say that Christie shares any aesthetic sensibilities with Wall's photographic practice. Instead, Christie sees the planning and staging of each of Wall's elaborate photographs as akin to his own construction of complex visual narratives within his own illustrations. Wall's use of the tableaux, and the construction of elaborate scenarios rendered in a two-dimensional plane has influenced Christie's own approach to photography, but for Christie, photography is simply a means to an end within his illustration practice. Its mechanics allow for Christie's work to be approached as contrived, planned out, and staged, with heavy-handedness that is not overwrought, but rather, necessary to the artist's work.

Rather than seeing each setting as single moment of a broader narrative, Christie aims for each illustration to stand on its own, speaking to the viewer from a direct, comprehensible space. In *Work-Life Balance* (2014), Christie explored the ability for stand-alone illustrations to contribute to a larger narrative by creating a series of ten three-dimensional sculptures and maquettes out of wood, foam, oven-bake clay, and paper that were then, through the use of photography, rendered as two-dimensional illustrations. Each of the ten scenes presents jobs and hobbies that intersect in sickly dark and humorously incompatible instances. In separate scenes, a mortician moonlights as a magician, a surgeon dabbles in cross-stitching, and a dolphin trainer explores his passion for taxidermy. *Work-Life Balance* functions as a synthesis of two disparate but familiar elements of human life, captured with humorous irony in a single moment. It is this idea of contrasting tensions in the various facets of our daily occupations that informed Christie's most recent work.

The often-disturbing juxtapositions displayed in *Work-Life Balance* acted as a template for Christie's current project. While *Track and Field, Meeting* references many of the aesthetic and conceptual cues from *Work-Life Balance*, the artist sees the overall spirit and execution of the project as separate and unique from his previous bodies of work. Rather than render the final illustration through a large-scale photograph, Christie utilized the frame and shallowness of the window display as an alternative mode of "flattening" the sculptural work. *Track and Field, Meeting* was made somewhat in reaction to the artist's previous bodies of narrative work. Instead of building a story through a series of intertwined illustrations, Christie sought to create a work with considerable magnitude that could be viewed as iconic within the parameters of its exhibition. In conceptualizing *Track and Field, Meeting* Christie states that:

I just wanted to try on outright violence to see what it looked like; what it felt like. But not a violence that was discernibly real to anyone. I didn't want to cover it up or

make it metaphorical, but at the same time didn't want to depict a scene of real physical violence.<sup>3</sup>

The title of the work is an almost-shameless pun on the literal meeting of not only two events—the hurdle race and the javelin toss—but also the unfortunate meeting of the hurdler with an errant javelin. The hurdler's vacant facial expression teeters between shock and ambivalence to the horror of the javelin lodged squarely of his torso. The work strikes a balance between humor, violence, and absurdity, imbuing an understanding in the viewer that *Track and Field, Meeting* is an instance of almost incomprehensible, cartoonish violence that has become detached from reality. Christie's work recalls Susan Sontag's conception of the viewer's relationship to violence in photography and painting. Sontag states that:

...the gruesome invites us to be either spectators or cowards, unable to look. Those with the stomach to look are playing a role authorized by many glorious depictions of suffering. Torment, a canonical subject in art, is often represented in painting as a spectacle, something being watched (or ignored) by other people. The implication is: no, it cannot be stopped—and the mingling of inattentive with attentive onlookers underscores this.<sup>4</sup>

It is that detached, but equally confrontational understanding embodied in Christie's work that maintains an unsettling darkness, creating an underlying sense of tension and an inability to look away. The uncanny reality that Christie's work draws its greatest strength from becomes referential to our own societal disconnect with violence in our daily lives, and our ability (or inability) to relate to what we may see, but not necessarily experience.

- Jonathan Lockyer

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003) 42.