



A Look at the Aesthete (after being caught in a bad romance)

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Before I begin I feel I must confess, I am a romantic. Let me re-confess, I am a *hopeless* romantic. In my studio I sit and stare, pondering the abstract thoughts that in turn enlighten my practice as an artist and curator. My relationship to these thoughts and histories is one of ambivalence. These are of course my own sensibilities as an artist and it is not my intent to self-identify with the artists participating in the exhibition *Parts of a Hole*. Contrary, I am interested in the shift within a younger generation of artists who use methods of borrowing and appropriation as a search for 'beauty'. For the purposes of my investigation I will start with the relationship between ambivalence and aesthetics in the work of Liam Crockard, Georgia Dickie, Jesse B. Harris, Abby McGuane, Tibi Tibi Neuspiel and Sara Cwynar, Aleksander Hardashnakov, Ben Schumacher, and Hugh Scott-Douglas.

In the early 20th century artists struggled with the physically changing landscape, the development of urbanism and the growth of an art-connoisseurship that appreciated the spectacle of the everyday. Enter Marcel Duchamp. I bring up Duchamp as the most influential art figure in the history of Contemporary art (arguable, but not really). His simple positioning of a urinal, shovel, bottle-rack (I could go on but I closed my wikipedia page) in the white-cubed gallery sent the art world buzzing. With this humorous, if not antagonistic gesture, an idea was planted; artists could not only represent, but re-contextualize objects. The repercussions of this idea would reverberate in the works of artists for the next hundred years. What followed were a series of movements that looked to challenge the social, political and aesthetic conditions of the time; Futurism, Surrealism, Dadaism, Constructivism, Fauvism, Minimalism, Pop-ism, Conceptualism, and Deathofpaintingism(?). In amongst contemporary art's passing *isms* was the arrival of Postmodernism. The mode of thought that followed allowed artists during the 70's, 80's and 90's to problematize their own aesthetics, out of which came works that were as cyclical, reflective, and self-referential as the popular culture that surrounded them. The after-effects of Postmodernism left artists sitting at their Gmail, YouTube, and Facebook; perhaps solemn, perhaps free, perhaps in digital hypnosis.

If there is nothing left, why bother? Is a wire rack not just a rack? A shelving unit with hair gel



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nothing but a precarious mishap from our teenage years? Found drawings, paper, stickers and book pages nothing more than misplaced recycling? Are stacks of cumbersome 2x4's doctored into a series of rudimentary tools nothing more than functionless craft? These statements are crude, however their exaggerations help point out our willingness to accept the authority of artistic *indecision*. As viewers we are trained - a mix of popular culture and institutional intervention - to understand the intricacies of these gestures, to see beauty in the work. Over time, and through many aesthetic shifts, a trust has developed between the viewer and the artist.

A humorous anecdote might help here:

In the film *Escape from L.A. (1996)* the lead character Snake is sent to stop a malicious ploy to 'kill' all the electrical signals and devices on the planet. At the end of the film we watch as he is left with a rather precarious ultimatum; does he allow the world to continue on, dependant on electronics, email, cellphones, consumerism, communism, capitalism and McDonald's, a world with "No smoking, no drinking, no drugs, no women unless you're married, no guns, no foul language"? Or, does he pull the plug on the *whole* god damn thing? As the riotous male figure he sees no difference between the authority he works for or the deviants he was sent to stop. He ponders for a moment, smokes his cigarette, and pushes the button; function is erased, all that remains is the object. This brings us back to the current exhibition. So now we have the platform for the exhibition *Parts of a Hole*. What if we were to replace the character Snake with the artist Douglas Gordon? or Pierre Huyghe? Or perhaps curator/theorist Nicolas Bourriaud? And now let us substitute the authoritative antagonist with Clement Greenberg or Marcel Duchamp and the deviants with Guy Debord or perhaps Jacques Derrida. Ideologies abound, the artists that come after the artistic apocalypse - brought on by the end of Postmodernism - treat politics, theory, philosophy, agendas, history, ideology and dreams as nothing more than formal elements, devoid of rhyme or reason. This is the space of *post-romantic* artist.

In his text *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World (2002)*, French critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud conflates current artistic practices with that of the *Deejay*. In this exchange a rotation is established between consumption and production that feeds into an endless re-identification of forms. A playground for pedagogical indifference towards materialism, formalism



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and production *Parts of a Hole* presents us with a operating table which is not cyclical but leveled - a free-for-all, where materials are not products or objects, histories or theories but rather 'stuff'; forms from which one can superimpose their aesthetic inclination.

The formal choices in the exhibition *Parts of a Hole* differ from artists-to-artist. Hugh Scott-Douglas works with utilitarian materials - bounty sheet paper towels and bubble wrap - as tools used for the application of paint. The inconsequential mark making as a result of these tools proposes a new utilitarianism for the objects, as much formal as they are functional. Here Scott-Douglas provides us beauty through the conflation of Greenbergian high-modernism and utilitarian kitsch. This is continued in the work of Jesse B. Harris. His contribution to the exhibition lends from the muscle-car-culture sub-hero Calvin - portrayed here pissing in the corner of the gallery. Although a caricature of the popular icon the work deflects the typical consistencies associated with kitsch imagery though the artists use of stencils and spray-paint which act to conflate the two strategies of delinquency. It is the placement of scribbles, stickers, found drawings, book pages, and scrap paper that we see the development of Aleksander Hardashnakov's aesthetic. Best described as conceptually arbitrary, the random and disjoint placement of materials results in narratives that expand and contract. The sensibility here is no different then that found on YouTube; take several, non-objective components and develop new formal possibilities.

The work of Liam Crockard, Georgia Dickie, Tibi Tibi Neuspiel and Sara Cwynar, and Abby McGuane all share an astute understanding of the potential beauty to be found in the assemblage of objects. Placement and composition treat objects, theory, rhetoric and histories as potential for collage, sculpture and assemblage. One's reading of the work as a traditional linear narrative with a clear purpose is follied by the artists' combined need to find beauty in the objects they appropriate. Aesthetic decisions are made through a formal indecision with subsequent works building on a rubrics cube of formal investigations. Ben Schumachers' use of hair gel in his work is not a political strategy, but rather a literal negotiation of the formal properties founded when one combines blue hair gel on wire fencing. The question is void of a response. It is beautiful, because we recognize the relationship between the artists hand and aesthetics. In their exhibition statement the artists align their practice with the artistic lineage of Duchamp and Debord. However differing from the



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subversion of the everyday they use these loaded histories as tool kits for assemblage. In their work the weight of these histories are devoid of volume, the readymade presented as a malleable and ever-changing object. The sensibilities of these artists is one of combination not contextualization, perhaps more akin to the work of early modernist painting than that of Duchamp.

I return to my initial statement: I am a romantic. If we believe this, and I most certainly do, then I would propose these artists are post-romantic. Their work is neither cynical nor sentimental. Devoid of the need to be intellectually convoluted, or aesthetically shy their works stand as beacons of an artistic methodology that celebrates the artist as aesthete. Aesthetics is how these artists roll.