



## Window Space

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Maddy Mathews

### **Do I Have to Lie to my Diary?**

March 1- April 6, 2019

*Do I Have to Lie to my Diary?*, Maddy Mathews' large format drawing and accompanying sculptural work, on view in Xpace Cultural Centre's Window Space, is at first eye-catching and then jarring. The composition is saturated with morsels of visual information: patterns, shapes, text in all sorts of fonts, miniature scenes, swords, dolphins, chains, houses, and a slew of characters identifiable from memes, comics, and cartoons – all of which expand haphazardly beyond the edges of the page. Every detail is rendered with care and precision, almost obsessively so, despite its busy surroundings. With no stable sense of foreground or background, no clear focal point, and with so much to look at, the eye leaps restlessly from one spot to the next. We barely have time to react to what we've seen before we're pulled somewhere else. What's more, there are colours everywhere and they all demand attention: lime greens and brick reds, cough syrup purple, inflamed pink, lemon, salmon, teal, indigo, bright and obtrusive, buzzing with chromatic intensity. The surface finish is waxy, the result of the forceful scrubbing of pencil crayon on paper. Beneath the drawing sits a sculpted papier-mâché figure. She has two faces: one that turns towards the drawing, mirroring our captive gaze, and another that looks out at the viewer askingly. She assumes a childlike, huddled position on the ground. Like us, she is overwhelmed.

This installation is the artist's representation of the contemporary Internet's influence on our psychology: raucous, mesmerizing, and replete with all the interfering

emotional ripples of confusion, envy, hypnotic bliss, powerlessness, and the warmth of social relatability. Mathews wants to air out these feelings while also discussing the often deeply isolating feeling of not knowing how to feel and being unsure about the status of all the information you're presented with online, visual or otherwise. This is suggested by the title of the work and the ambivalent reaction exhibited by the sculpture. The artist is curious about the pressure we may sometimes feel to have a sophisticated, impressive, or even adequate response to current goings-on, where that pressure comes from, and the quiet but nagging sense that we will never know enough.

Mathews conveys this unease by filling her drawing with visual information, reflecting the way our time alone is so often filled by looking at online content, whether it be a newsfeed, meme account, or opinion piece. *Horror Vacui* — “the fear of empty space”<sup>1</sup> — is a term that's typically used to refer to artworks in which the whole surface is crowded with detail. It is also a useful metaphor for the way we are regularly compelled to inundate our minds with new data, in that this habit might likewise be motivated by some form of fear. Maybe anxieties about social acceptance, personal productivity, or just the vastness of the unknown are part of what drives us to consume more content, specifically in the hasty and disjointed way we do online. Mathews asks if these fears could be comparable to the fear of empty space; of emptiness in general.

Of course, fear and uncertainty are not the only feelings which characterize the emotional state of someone spending a few hours browsing online. Mathews also finds a sense of comfort in this audio-visual bombardment. She explains that there was always a radio playing in her childhood home and that an abundance of stimuli feels soothing and familiar to her.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, she notes, the constant sensory stimulation of a newsfeed can provide relief and distraction from one's thoughts: the ritual repetitive scrolling, meditative like the counting of a rosary. If we were to stare at Mathews' drawing for long enough, perhaps it would put us in a comparable state of calm.

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<sup>1</sup> “Horror Vacui.” Merriam-Webster, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/horror%20vacui](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/horror%20vacui).

<sup>2</sup> Conversation with the artist, (February 6, 2019)

Humour also plays a substantial and distinctive role in both current online vernacular and in *Do I Have to Lie to my Diary?*. We can find it in Mathews' choice of childlike medium, in the incongruity of her familiar imagery, and in the cartoonishness of her befuddled sculpture. Here it's used to connect with her audience through playfulness and to relieve some of the tension created by the chaos. Similarly, online humour functions to help establish communities and, with memes especially, express lighthearted but nihilistic attitudes towards the meaninglessness of the Internet and of contemporary life. It is this anarchic brand of comedy, specific to the Internet but echoing the sensibilities of Dada and Surrealism, that the artist's work borrows from and reflects on.

Nearly all the reference imagery in Mathews' drawing is sourced from the Web and stored in folders on her computer. Through her research, she has accrued a massive archive of memes (old-ish and new), cartoons, strikingly outdated clipart, instructional drawings, graphic design from the 70's through 90's, old-school video game graphics, and bold hard-edge and Colour Field paintings by late modernists like Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, and Mark Rothko.

Her anachronistic pastiche of forms from past eras of the Internet brings to mind how much online visual culture has developed in such a short amount of time and how the prevalence of certain software programs and websites has defined the aesthetics intrinsic to each period. I consider how these brief but pervasive cultural waves happen as the result of our collective action and yet they tend to feel so outside of our individual control. Maybe the feeling of discord between the Internet as a home and community and the Internet as a great, chaotic, self-evolving entity has had more of an impact on our personal sense of stability than we give it credit for. Portraying this discord, *Do I Have to Lie to My Diary?* challenges us to consider our own emotional relationship with our everyday online experiences, and encourages us to lighten up about not having all the answers.

- Izzy Mink