

*“What was banal can, with the passage of time,  
become fantastic.” – Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’”*

My work revels in the beauty and humor of absurd situations. I have a soft spot, even a passion, for things that are theatrical and ridiculously over-the-top. There is something about the popular design of the late 60’s and early 70’s which has always embodied these formal qualities in my mind. I vividly remember noticing them, even as a kid, riding in the back seat of my grandparents’ car, looking at the signs and billboards on the side of the road in our rural Tennessee town. I thought about how they looked so much more interesting than the ones we passed in the city. The difference was clearly that these were older. No one had updated them in 30-40 years. The paint was peeling, the color was faded, but most importantly, although they were weathered, the colors were *better*. They were bolder and more exaggerated: browns, pinks, oranges and bright kelly greens. I could not help gravitating towards this, instead of the more streamlined, muted and photographic palette on newer signs.

I don’t know whether my love for the popular taste of a time 25 years before I was born, began because it reminds me of my childhood home, or if I just happened to discover it there. Either way, my interest in outdated materials extends directly into my studio practice. Using the language of painting and printmaking, I combine outdated materials to create situations that are illogical, ambiguous, and absurd, but that also mine a nostalgia for home. Through building

illogical images, I hope to question our idea of a perfect past. In a way, I am idealizing the past through appropriating the style of another time. However, the narratives I create are consciously fabricated and false. Through recontextualizing these materials, I am investigating the tendency of nostalgia to be untrue in the first place, and by constructing situations that are at once formally satisfying yet situationally uncomfortable, I am beginning to explore the inclination of myself and others to idealize the past. Overall, I see my work as an exploration of the duality of my source material: of the fine line between good and bad taste, fact and fetish, nostalgia and the unfamiliar, the meaningful and the meaningless

The lithograph, “Watermelon Room No. 2,” synthesizes the most source material of any of the pieces in my BFA exhibition, and several of my other pieces are based off of this scene. This piece was inspired by the second floor women’s bathroom in MTSU’s student center that had not been renovated since the building was finished in 1973. The bathroom’s décor is garishly wonderful with bright yellow tile on the walls, pink on the floor, wrap around mirrors, and orange and brown faux leather couches.



"Watermelon Room #2", lithograph on paper, 18 x 20 in., 2015

I staged a scene there, taking both photographs and video, using the formal qualities of the room to determine the props and costumes that went inside. I chose items from a similar era and color palette, but that otherwise seemed completely out of place in an institutional toilet. I wore a costume made out of plastic lawn chair webbing and white sensible heels while cradling a watermelon. The result was a scene that seemed visually cohesive yet disparate. Although the color is absent from the resulting image, the absurdity and artifice of the scene is still apparent.

In many ways, this scene draws on the sensibilities of camp. The “essence” of which Susan Sontag defines as “artifice and exaggeration.”<sup>1</sup> She calls it “a love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not.”<sup>2</sup> The scene in “Watermelon No. 2” is built around cohesion, disruption, and the feeling that something is “off.” For example, it is totally socially unacceptable to eat fruit in what is clearly a bathroom, and the camera angle is uncomfortably voyeuristic. The piece is also full of things-being-what-they-are-not. The lawn chair dress is clothing built out of a chair—which becomes a chair sitting on a couch in the image, but at the same time still functioning as clothing. The figure is me, but it is not a self-portrait. The print is a lithograph, an antique process used for mass production, but this piece is a small edition of contemporary work.

Sontag paints the artifice of camp art as a kind of escapism, calling it an “urban pastoral,”<sup>3</sup> idealizing artifice the way pastoral literature idealizes nature. However, she also acknowledges that there can be a split meaning in things that are “camp.” She states it is “the

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, (New York: Picador USA, 2001), 274.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

difference...between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice.”<sup>4</sup> Like camp art, “Watermelon Room #2” has a split meaning. It exists on one level as an idealized, artificial, and otherwise meaningless portrayal of the style of another era, and on another, it questions the practice of idealizing the past. Because the scene is “off” and uncomfortable in many ways, it starts to break up the idea of a perfect past. Much like our ideal versions of anything, it is aesthetically coherent, but logically unstable, a mix of fact and fetish.

The collagraph print, “The Lawn Chair Dress,” continues this theme of artificiality. The print is made from the dress in the Watermelon Room scene printed intaglio style to achieve a somewhat photographic and low relief reproduction, or artificial version, of the costume. The dress was made out of yellow, green and white polypropylene lawn chair webbing, the same colors as the resulting print. The dress further shows how the scene functions as an aestheticized version of the past, because it is made of the same colors as the bathroom, the watermelon, and the surrounding Astroturf in the installation, helping to form a scene that “matches” visually. It is also a thing-being-what-it-is not as I mentioned earlier, but with another level of artificiality. It is not simply a chair pretending to be an article of clothing anymore. It is no longer either of those two things, but instead a realistic reproduction of them, an impression lifted from the real thing.

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, (New York: Picador USA, 2001), 281.

The print of the costume is a simulation of the original, a realistic reproduction. I could call it hyperreal—what Baudrillard defines as “the meticulous reduplication of the real...”<sup>5</sup> Although it is not truly hyperreal as he describes it, as it is not a mass producible medium like photography that can make a reproductions of reproductions. It is a medium capable of producing only a few prints. However, it is still a reproduction, and a reproduction of reproducible materials (the factory-produced plastic lawn chair webbing). The final product is, like Baudrillard’s idea of the hyperreal, a simulation at least one level removed from reality. It is not the original object. This is significant because, as Walter Benjamin says in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the



"Lawn Chair Dress," collagraph on paper, 26 x 40 in., 2016

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<sup>5</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Hyper-realism of Simulation," in *Art in Theory: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 1018.

concept of authenticity<sup>6</sup>,” and the scene, most importantly, is inauthentic—an idealization, not reality.

Benjamin praises reproducibility as a “shattering of tradition.”<sup>7</sup> In contrast to this extreme, “The Lawn Chair Dress” collagraph participates in both reproducible and traditional art forms. While it is a reproduction in the sense that it is not the original, it is also, a handmade medium—something less synthetic and in some ways more authentic than the original plastic dress, because it now made of paper, a natural material. This circles back to the duality of subject matter that I mentioned earlier. The process of making the print, “The Lawn Chair Dress,” signifies a struggle between rejecting and engaging in traditional art making practices, and may also function as a metaphor for a similar struggle with tradition in a broader sense— for walking the line between participating in traditions which glorify the past and old ways, and moving on to new and different ideas.

In spite of this engagement with tradition, simulation and its inauthenticity are still important elements in the work, which may be better reflected in the installation as a whole. Some of the elements are reproductions of the items in the images (the shoes and the dress), and some of them are simulations in the sense that they are “things-being-what-they-are-not.”<sup>8</sup> For example, the flower pot is a watermelon, a type of plant, which should be in a flower pot instead, and the cheap synthetic carpet is on the wall as a framing device, which it is not supposed to be.

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, (New York: Picador USA, 2001), 274.

Also, some of the components are plastic or other types of synthetic material, a different type of artificiality, like the nylon fake plants, the spray painted shoes or the plastic astroturf carpet.



"Watermelon Room Installation," mixed media, 6 x 10 ft., 2016

I have spent a lot of time talking about the artificiality of the pieces that make up the “Watermelon Room” series and installation. As a whole, they are meant to be pieces of an artificial and illogical narrative, so I want to focus a bit more on the narrative elements in the installation: the space and the props. The first reason being that many of them are performing illogical and unsustainable functions which heighten the sense of a fragile ideal. For example, the dress can never actually be worn and neither can the shoes. The final presentation of the lawn chair dress is a low relief replica, a mostly flat image that cannot be used as clothing, and even the original was impractical at best, since the plastic lawn chair webbing is mostly immobile and

stiff. The shoes are real shoes, but covered in layers upon layers of acrylic and spray paint to make them appear pristine. If one were to actually wear them, the surface would crack and fall apart. Another example is the watermelon which will eventually rot. In fact, at the time I'm writing this, it has already filled its pedestal with sugary brown goo. Additionally, the astroturf behind the prints on the walls is about the farthest thing from an archival framing device. The prints cannot stay there safely forever.

The second reason these props and scenery are important, is that they strengthen the sense that there is a protagonist involved in the scene—someone who wore the dress and shoes, and inhabited this space. For me, this implicates myself in the narrative, and consequently in the creation of this idealized environment, because the costume is my size. Being able to step into the space implicates myself and the viewer in this artificial construction. This is significant, because most of us build equally synthetic environments in the form of our own romanticized ideas about the past, and being inside the space, with a sense that a human has been there, keeps the scene from seeming entirely detached and foreign.

Overall, the pieces in my BFA exhibition are conscious constructions, aware of their own fabrication, inauthenticity, and distance from reality. Sontag said that “What was banal can, with the passage of time, become fantastic,”<sup>9</sup> and the Watermelon Room pieces are, in a way, this kind of fantasy. They are banal objects melding into an alluring façade because of their age and camp bad taste. My goal is ultimately not to let them slip into a pure escapism, but to be conscious of the fantasy, and to be critical of the world it creates.

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, (New York: Picador USA, 2001), 283.

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