

COOL KOOL SHIRTS PRESENTS: THOT COLLECTION SERIES 1 BY DANA JONES BY KHARI SAFFO

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By

Khari Saffo

Thesis Committee:

Gaye Chan Chairperson
Scott Groeniger
Jaimey Hamilton Faris

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Introduction

My thesis project is one section of a larger project that I have been working on since 2014. In this ongoing project, I create artwork based on a fictional narrative involving a popular shirt brand Cool Kool Shirts and its sponsored artist and spokesperson, a character named Dana Jones (see figures 1-2). While both Cool Kool Shirts and Dana Jones are fictional, I have actualized their work into the real world. I produce and sell real t-shirts in stores under the brand name Cool Kool Shirts. I perform as Dana Jones by donning a cardboard character head in a series of live performances and videos. Also, I create artwork as Dana Jones, an artist who forms sculptures made from melted vinyl records called *Thots* (Figure 3). I started Cool Kool Shirts in 2014 so that I can commercialize my conceptual projects. The main reason I wanted to commercialize my conceptual projects was so my projects could fund themselves. As an artist, I have some experience working under a backing system such as a commercial and academic system while trying to hold onto my artistic integrity. To further explore this relationship between an artist and their artistic integrity within a backing system, I place my alter-ego Dana Jones as an artist backed by the commercial system Cool Kool Shirts. I dive into each step of Dana's experience working under Cool Kool Shirts in my thesis project titled *Cool Kool Shirts Presents: Thot Collection Series 1 by Dana Jones*. In the remainder of my paper I will go through how I (Khari Saffo), Cool Kool Shirts (commercial shirt brand), and Dana Jones (Cool Kool Shirt's sponsored artist and spokesperson), interact while relating to the themes of how commercialization effects artistic integrity and how exploitation plays a role.

My thesis project is titled *Cool Kool Shirts Presents: That Collection Series 1 by Dana Jones*. The title itself connects and lays out the various layers of my thesis project. In the fictional narrative, Cool Kool Shirts is allowing Dana Jones to put on an exhibition of the work he has created while being its sponsored artist. *Cool Kool Shirts presents: That Collection Series 1 by Dana Jones* is the fictional world where my real art exists. In reality, the fictional narrative that crafted the art show and the art in it, is my actual artwork. The reason I have gone to such extensive lengths to create a simultaneously real/fictional business as well as an alter-ego is because it reflects on my difficulty to work on personal art projects while working at non-art related jobs to fund my projects due to time constraints that impede on my process and autonomy as an artist. I initially developed this multi-layered project with the assumption that I can create work I am passionate about and have it fund itself.

My thesis project consists of five wall sculptures entitled *Thots Collection Series 1* by Dana Jones. Each sculpture has a screen embedded within it playing a looped animation that display one of five stages outlining the business relationship between Dana Jones and Cool Kool Shirts. For Dana Jones however, Cool Kool Shirts has sponsored his exhibition that features five of his *Thots* sculptures. When you dive deeper into the Dana's *Thots* sculptures, the work itself is a reflection of his relationship with Cool Kool Shirts. In particular how the company has exploited Dana and his art practice to promote the sale of t-shirts. Symbolically, Dana's exploitation by the shirt brand is in direct parallel with my effort in make a living while maintaining personal integrity as a fine artist within the commercial art market. As a result, I

focused my art practice on attempting to make commercially viable work with conceptual depth, a quality that is more present in fine art.

Cool Kool Shirts/Dana Jones

In 2014 I started the t-shirt brand label Cool Kool Shirts in which I design and sell shirts for profit. The brand image is very whimsical, with most of the shirt designs based on my sketchbook doodles (figure 4-5). Like all brands I used various marketing strategies to gain brand loyalty, brand persona, and tactics that impacts and exploits its target market. In this regard, I have marketed Cool Kool Shirts through the production of videos, comics, and sculptures. Forming Cool Kool Shirts has been a way for me to come to terms with what is needed to financially survive in the art world. Fine artists are often exploited by the art market or work at jobs that take time away from making meaningful conceptual artwork. Consequently, I turned my conundrum into the conceptual anchor of my project by inventing a commercial brand (Cool Kool Shirts) who exploits the artist Dana Jones (my alter-ego) for its own success.

I actualize Dana Jones as a character/persona in several ways. I perform him by donning a cardboard head. He is featured in videos and comics that I produce, and I create artwork by Dana Jones. I conceived Dana Jones to embody the Cool Kool Shirts brand image. He is a free spirit obsessed with the idea of being “self-made.” When Cool Kool Shirts sees Dana they see a “trendy self-made” individual. Cool Kool wants to use the image of being self-made to promote their brand, and offers to fund Dana’s art practice and in return Dana will become the spokesperson for the company for branding and marketing purposes. The Cool Kool marketing

content I created foreground a feedback loop between Dana and Cool Kool Shirts. Dana Jones expresses his personal relationship with the brand and how it affects him.

The aforementioned parallels my relationship with commercial art practices. Dana Jones obsessively wants to create work that shows how “original” and “self-made” he is - a completely autonomous free agent without any outside influence. In reality, Dana Jones is my desire in wanting to freely work on personal art projects. Since high school I have had to work in food service, retail, and factory jobs to support myself and my art projects. Working 8 to 12 hour shifts left me little time to work on the art projects I was working to fund. In response, I decided to turn my personal art projects into a self-funding business. I formed Cool Kool Shirts to sell t-shirts of my own design. Advertisements for the Cool Kool Shirts were actually my subversive way of exploring personal art projects in film and animation.

Commercial Practice

My act of designing and selling t-shirts with conceptual depth comes from a place of self-awareness. Rather than allowing the market to exploit me, I chose to exploit myself as my art form. My career goal is to be able to make a living by constantly working on self-conceived art projects; a very common goal amongst fine artists. One obstacle associated with this career goal is that personal art projects don't necessarily generate consistent income. A strategy for many artists to overcome the “starving artist” experience is to get a job within the field of art and to work on personal art projects during their down time. However, few artists get the opportunity to make a living off of their own art projects. Additionally, navigating within the art

market is a job in itself. Success in the art market requires artists to participate in numerous consumer practices that involve marketing themselves. Sometimes artists will even change their art as dictated by market forces.

One example of an artist that has successfully merged fine art with commercial art is Takashi Murakami. Murakami creates work that perfectly blurs the line between fine art and commercial art. He is constantly creating work that is valued in the fine art environment as well as the commercial market. Under the concept *Superflat*, Murakami combines Japanese consumer culture with high art and flatten[ed] the two to the point that either side was recognizable (Schimmel). Murakami embraces the commercial quality of his work and turns the his artwork into a business. Born in postwar Japan in 1962, Murakami is influenced by the Japanese Otaku culture, which involves an obsession with collecting toy figures and watching colorful anime. As a result of growing up in this culture, Murakami's work reflects that there doesn't have to be a dichotomous distinction between commercial and fine art. He formed his own production studio Kaikai Kiki, where he creates work in a variety of mediums such as sculptures, toys, paintings, and films. Murakami had a sculpture exhibition in the United States and turned the same sculpture into mini toy figures like those that buyers get for free when they purchase a particular brand of candy in Japan. Like corporations such as Walt Disney Company who use mascot Mickey Mouse to sell t-shirts, cartoons, and toys, Takashi Murakami created a mascot/icon "Mr. DOB" that he used and reworked in numerous paintings, prints, and toys. "Mr. DOB" is a direct reference to Japanese commercial collector culture (Schimmel). Murakami uses "Mr. DOB" as a form of brand identification for his artwork and his brand. Murakami uses "Mr. DOB" to blur the line between commercial and fine art practices.

He further blurs this line in his collaborations with commercial brands and commercial icons to create work opportunities. In 2003, Murakami also collaborated with and designed a line of Luis Vuitton accessories using similar imagery from his art used in exhibitions. He later would repurpose the Luis Vuitton accessories in his 2008 retrospective at the LA Museum of Contemporary Art.

It is nearly impossible to achieve financial success within the art market without participating in commercial practices. Yet, being “commercial” is often frowned upon within the fine art world. Like Murakami, my first introduction into fine art practices was through commercial television cartoons, comics, music, and clothing brands. The influence of commercial art on me, a fine artist, would seem contradictory since there are a lot of negative notions that the fine art world associates with commercial art. These notions stem from a hierarchical belief that many commercial art lack conceptual depth because the larger focus for commercial artists is to sell products. In addition to sale, commercial art aims to hold people’s attention, by being entertaining and on trend; it is not considered high art. I see no issue with this and fully embrace creating fine art for a commercial market as a means of economic survival. Commercial art has much potential to reach a broad population outside the fine art world. On an everyday basis consumers are bombarded with and indulge in video and picture advertisements such as billboards, street posters, and video ads in-between web videos. Consumers willingly pay to serve as advertisement for commercial brands by wearing clothing with brand labels prominently displayed

My attention has always been captured by both the economic and entertaining qualities of commercial art. I enjoy how commercial art is consumed and I don’t put a hierarchy between

commercial and fine art. Consequently, I blur the line between conceptual depth in fine art and the trendy and entertaining qualities of commercial art, through the creation of sculptures I call “Thots”.

Thots

The fictive character Dana Jones forms sculptures made from melted vinyl records that he calls *Thots*. The majority of the *Thots* are long squiggle forms (Figure 6). According to Dana, he creates without focusing on the form at all. Each *Thot* physically captures an unfiltered piece of his stream of consciousness. In the temporal or real world, I as an artist, decided to form the *Thots* to mimic the idea of neurons and brain synapses. A neuron carries and transmits information to the brain and body. Neurons are shaped like thin line squiggles and collect together like a tangled web of thoughts inside the human brain. For my perspective, the five *Thot* sculptures represent the framework of Dana’s mind. Dana’s *Thots Collection Series 1* is a collection of his captured consciousness combined together into a tangled web of *Thots* similar to a web of neurons inside of a brain transmitting information. The sculptures together represents Dana Jones’ whole subconscious.

In addition to creating *Thots* as Dana Jones, I also have developed a fictive narrative that gives context to the name *Thot* as well as to the process of making these sculptures. The name *Thot* is symbolic of commercial exploitation and it has two suggestive meanings. The first meaning is actually a play on the word “thoughts” and I use it to suggest that the sculptures represent thoughts from the mind. The second meaning of the word *Thot* comes from a slang acronym in rap culture standing for “That Ho Over There”. The word Ho is generally used

misogynistically to disparage women and to police women's sexuality. My usage refers to Dana breaking down the exploitation of commercial art, an experience I liken to being pimped. Dana finds a sense of agency by turning his experience of being exploited into a self-made practice. I chose for Dana to use vinyl records as a medium to further characterize his cool hipster dude persona; and vinyl records are currently growing in popularity with millennial music lovers like Dana and myself. Conceptually, vinyl records represent the commercial industry that markets and makes profit from artists' musical art practices. Similar to the relationship Cool Kool Shirts has with Dana Jones and his art practice.

Cool Kool Shirts funds Dana's art career and in return he allows the brand to use his image to push the brand image. As this reciprocal relationship continues, Cool Kool Shirts begins to exploit Dana's image to focus more on selling t-shirts rather than spreading the concept of his art practice. From this experience, Dana Jones has a realization that the brand is overshadowing the original message behind his personal art making and using his art practice to solely sell their products. He becomes trapped in an endless cycle of being exploited by Cool Kool Shirts. Dana comes to the conclusion that to be completely self-sustained by his own art practice is not feasible. As a means of coping with Cool Kool Shirts' exploitation, Dana shifts his focus to figure out how to make his art practice survive within Cool Kool Shirts' exploitative platform. As a result, Dana get Cool Kool Shirts to agree to sponsor a solo exhibition of his first collection of *Thots*, sculptures, as stated earlier in the paper, that capture Dana's unfiltered consciousness, made with complete freedom and autonomy without evidence of influences.

In reality, *Thots Collection Series 1* details the experience Dana Jones has had working as Cool Kool Shirts sponsored artist. The five *Thots* are embedded with screens showing looped

animation displaying the experience of Dana making his *Thots* while being exploited by Cool Kool Shirts. The screens are placed within each *Thot*, similar to cables coming from a TV monitor and much like neurons transmitting information to the mind. The screens are visually relaying the information, history and memory captured in the *Thots*.

From my perspective, the *Thots* hold the weight of Dana's art making experience and the screens show that experience. The *Thots* and screens read as a chronological narrative with five parts. The animations on the screens are black and white to match the aesthetic of the *Thots*, both also full of movement. The black lines of the animation shake and are full of life. Additionally, since black and white is often used to relate to the past, the animations is an identifier that events that have already happen; Dana's memories. The animations are short loops that replay constantly throughout the exhibition. After watching the first time, the animations also become memories of the viewing audience. The animations are deliberately short so people will get familiar with the sequence of the memories. The repeated loops enforce Dana's experience of inescapable exploitation. The loops also connect to the idea of scratched record skipping or repeating the same part of a song. Broken records that are stuck replaying the same experience over and over again. By forming the *Thots*, Dana Jones is scratching them with his exploited production experience.

Using vinyl records as a medium connects both Dana and my own experience with the exploitative commercial art world. Vinyl records capture artworks by music artists into its grooves, and sold to people who replay the musicians' work. In making the *Thots*, Dana Jones is destroying these creations from other artists/musicians and is turning them into new forms. Conceptually Dana Jones is forcing the vinyl records to record a new piece of work, his

unfiltered consciousness, similarly to how vinyl records capture music. Music is an art form that can transmit an emotion, through a story, sounds, and personality. Dana is reusing these same aspects of music captured on vinyl with his *Thots* but wants all these aspects to come straight from his own being. As much as Dana is seeking to transform the ideas of commercial art products he is ironically using the vinyl records for their intended purpose.

The vinyl records used to make the *Thot* installation were mainly Christmas albums, religious music, greatest hits albums, and international music. I bought all the records from goodwill and savers thrift store. These types of records were produced by big record labels and purchased from second hand stores. My process of procuring art materials (eg. vinyl records) runs parallel with Dana Jones reforming cheapened commercial products into a high-valued *Thot*. Each animation has a separate soundtrack made by sampling the different songs from the vinyl records used in the making of the *Thots*. I distorted various choruses and melodies almost to unintelligible sounds. Much like the animations, the sound piece is not a part of Dana Jones' *Thots* but a part of his psyche that are residues from the making experience. Also, since melting down another artist's work (vinyl records) and twisting it into a new form is an aggressive act, the distorted sounds playing throughout the installation as the voices of past creations. The faint melodies comprised of ghosts of commercial art products haunting Dana Jones's subconscious.

Dana Jones: Cool Kool Shirts Spokesperson

The cycle of Dana Jones' exploitation by Cool Kool Shirts are presented in five stages, sequentially: *Ideology, Patronage, Rise To Fame, Realization, and Acceptance/Embrace*. Each of

these stages is presented through the animated sequences on five screens placed in the five *Thot* sculptures (Figure 7). The stages will interpret the main concept behind the giant *Thot* sculptures and the connection between the screens and the sculptures. One of the main ideas I want communicated to viewers is to rekindle a desire for personal art project concepts and practices over exploited platforms.

For influence I looked towards two musical projects, *To Pimp A Butterfly* by Kendrick Lamar and *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* by Kanye West. Both of these projects are popular commercial albums that are conceptually layered despite their exploited platforms having a heavy focus on sales. Also, both albums weave a narrative about the effects of commercialized fame on the personal concepts they want to be seen in their art and how they survive in an exploitive industry. The opening track on Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly* titled "Wesley's Theory" presents the main topic of the album and focuses on Kendrick questioning his relationship with the music industry. To put it simply, he is wondering if the industry that is funding his music practice is just exploiting his creativity and beliefs just for the sales and doesn't have actual interest in the messages he wants to display (Cucha).

The opening track breakdowns the title of the album *To Pimp A Butterfly*, the butterfly stated in the title is Kendrick's creativity and personal beliefs and the music industry is exploiting it or in other words, "Pimping" Kendrick's artistry. Wesley's Theory opens up with George Clinton of Parliament-Funkadelic fame stating "When the four corners of this cocoon collide, You'll slip through the cracks hoping that you'll survive; Gather your wind, Are you really who they idolize? To pimp a butterfly" (Lamar). Again, Kendrick Lamar is questioning if his backing label is aligned with his art practice or just capitalizing on his marketability.

Similarly, the main focus of Kanye West's *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* is his desire to control his own persona/practice to give artistry to his commercial image. This album is a direct response to his evolving negative commercial image. As his career grew, Kanye West went from a music producer into an outspoken rap superstar. From the beginning of his career his albums have been heavily accolated where West directly discuss negative aspects of the music/rap industry. Many of his earlier albums address how commercial rappers subjectively focus on themes of killing and gang banging, [and] creating negative stereotypes about the African American community (Bailey). On Kanye West's third album *Graduation*, he raps the following lines in the song "Everything I am", "I know that people wouldn't usually rap this but I got the facts to back this Just last year, Chicago had over six hundred caskets Man, killin's some wack shit Oh, I forgot, 'cept for when niggas is rappin' Do you know what it feel like when people is passin'?"(West). Although West initially began a career that explicitly criticized the music/rap industry, over time, his view on the industry become less critical and more of a commercial spectacle.

One of Kanye's most infamous moments is cutting off Taylor Swift during her acceptance of a music video of the year award to state that Beyoncé deserved the award and not Swift. West received great backlash in the entertainment industry for his actions. So much so that he left the public eye and relocated to O'ahu, Hawai'i to focus on making his album, *My Beautiful Twisted Fantasy*, coined as a long-backhanded apology to the industry that made and deserted him (Graves). The album is a grand narrative with Kanye West's ego as the main character who goes through a journey of self-awareness that his massive ego and undisputed confidence are both the driving force of his artistry and what will destroy his career. The song

“Power” states this theme when West raps, “No one man should have all that power the clock’s ticking, I just count the hours. Stop tripping, I’m tripping off the power, 21st-Century schizoid man” (West). Here Kanye West recognizes that his ego is a major weakness and is only a matter of time before it takes him off his proverbial musical pedestal. The verse ends by West calling himself a schizoid man, realizing the conflicting and contradictory issues he has with “ego”. Kanye West exploits his contradictory relationship with the commercial music industry through an egoistic persona. In sum, I look at both Kanye West’s *My Beautiful Twisted Fantasy* and Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp A Butterfly* as examples to map out Dana Jones’s five stage cycle with the Cool Kool Shirts Brand.

Ideology

Ideology (Figure 8-Figure 9) is the first Stage of Dana Jones’s narrative with the Cool Kool Shirts brand, focused on illustrating the main concept behind Dana’s art practice. As I said earlier, I started Cool Kool Shirts so that my art projects could self-fund themselves, I wanted to be this self-made artist. Dana Jones mirrors this same obsession with being self-made, but to the extreme. The main concept behind his practice is that he wants to create a complete autonomous concept without any outside influence. When Dana Jones creates abstract *Thot* sculptures he creates each *Thot* in an improvised manner. He makes them without thinking about the shape, believing that this process represents his pure unfiltered consciousness that was mentioned earlier. Dana thinks by not preplanning his work he will outcast all outside influence and instead rely on his purely improvised instincts to guide all gestures and choices that are his individual self. One of Dana Jones biggest character traits is his need to be a unique individual. This is his driving force, so much so that he makes art about it. Dana’s fixation on

uniqueness is to parody millennial “cool hipster diy” culture, also the target market of Cool Kool Shirts. Needless to say, Dana’s goal of making art that is devoid of meaning and influence is futile; parodying conceptual art. He is making art objects that seem pointless. Yet, through analysis and contextualization all human endeavors take on meaning. Ironically, Dana’s goal runs parallel with my desire to spend the majority of my time on personal artistic practice. The animation of this stage displays Dana Jones in the process of making *Thots*. It shows how he makes them from melting the vinyl with his laser eyes and transforming them into abstract shapes (Figure 10). Also, the animation highlights Dana Jones’s thoughts. Illustrating his desire for art without influence.

The animation *Ideology* portrays Dana’s notion that his vinyl record sculptures capture his unfiltered consciousness. To visually show this I use a thought bubble filled with scribbles as a visual cue. The scribbles represent Dana’s unfiltered consciousness and mimic the shape of the *Thots* he is creating. By matching the shape of the scribbles with the *Thots* I signal to the audience that Dana is filtering his actual thoughts into the *Thot* sculptures. The scribbles inside of the thought bubble are constantly moving and shaking to show that Dana’s thoughts are living entities. In this animated cycle, Dana is shown with an intense expression with brow wrinkles and sweat dripping down his face to express how transmitting one’s consciousness into a physical form is hard work. The video’s repetition helps to amplify Dana’s effort and care he puts into his work. Dana is not concerned with each individual *Thot* but what they can become when they come together. At the end of the sequence all the *Thots* sit together on a pedestal towering over Dana in the shadow. Dana is scaled small but he has a proud look as he gazes at his accomplishment

Unsustainable

Unsustainable (Figure 11) is the second stage in the Dana Jones cycle. During this stage Dana's struggle is made apparent. He is having a hard time staying away from outside influences due to his inability to fully rely on his art practice to sustain itself. Dana Jones learns that making *Thots* alone does not pay the bills. There is not a way that Dana can fully support his art practice without taking up work that will influence his *Thots*. In the animated sequence Dana Jones is attempting to purchase food, pay rent, and buy vinyl records with his *Thots*. Dana stands in line at a grocery store trying to buy food. He offers the cashier his *Thots* for the food but the cashier refuses (Figure 12). Dana attempts to pay his rent with his *Thots* but his Landlord refuses (Figure 13). Lastly Dana attempts to buy more vinyl records so he can make more *Thots* but the record store doesn't accept his *Thot* sculptures (Figure 14). Dana's art practice is so rooted in his own personal creative autonomy it's hard for other individuals to understand it's value. This stage introduces the audience to Dana Jones's main problem; his art practice is not self-sustaining. Dana clings to his plan to value his *Thot* sculptures to the level of currency. He has no interest in doing any other type of work that is not working on his personal art projects. The last shot of this sequence shows Dana sitting on a giant pile of *Thots* after others have denied its value is representing his immersion in uselessness in the eyes of the rest of the world. (Figure 15)

Rise to Fame

Dana Jones needs financial stability in order to continue his practice. In the *Rise to Fame* (Figure 16) stage Cool Kool Shirts approaches him with a deal to fund his art practice and in return, Dana's agreement to act as a spokesperson for the brand. When Cool Kool Shirts sees Dana, they see an image of a "trendy self-made individual." They want to use this image to promote and market their shirts. Cool Kool Shirts will fund Dana Jones's art practice and in return he will spread his conceptual message under the Cool Kool Shirts platform. This offer is a once in a lifetime opportunity for a struggling artist and Dana Jones jumps at the chance and accepted the offer. He is very aware of the Cool Kool Shirts brand and its alignment with the concepts of his art practice. During this stage Dana Jones rises in popularity as a brand mascot. His art practice becomes well known and Cool Kool Shirts sells more products. This stage builds up to the narrative climax. Dana is at his happiest during this stage. He is living his dream of working on his *Thots*, people are being made aware of his *Thots*, and he is being sustained by Cool Kool Shirts. At the start of the agreement, all of Cool Kool Shirts' promotion is to showcase Dana and making sure his beliefs are heard, "Hey look at what this cool dude does. He embodies what the Cool Kool Shirt brand is all about." But this soon changes.

As Dana's fame grows, Cool Kool Shirts begins to slowly insinuate more creative control into Dana Jones's art practice by having Dana produce artwork that more directly promote Cool Kool Shirts sales. Dana's art practice becomes less about making *Thots* and more about promoting Cool Kool Shirts. In the *Rise to Fame* sequence, Cool Kool Shirts is depicted as two giant hands. An ominous force that can create and destroy, the hands pop-up from the right of the screen with one hand offering cash to Dana (Figure 17). The other hand is empty and

motioning to receive his *Thot*. The next shot is one hand shaking Dana's hand agreeing to the offer and the other hand has his *Thot* in the center of the palm. Cool Kool Shirts becomes a dominating force of Dana's art practice. I animate a notable size difference between Dana's hand and Cool Kool Shirts hand while they're shaking hands in order to portray the power differential. The Cool Kool Shirt hand is so big it looks like it is crushing Dana's hand in the act of shaking hands. This imagery foreshadows how Cool Kool Shirts is going to dominate the direction of this relationship. Dana Jones is shown as an optimistic little artist. His body is being overpowered by this handshake, showing how fragile he is in the eyes of Cool Kool Shirts.

In the same shot Dana's *Thot* sculpture is resting in the Cool Kool Shirt hand. The hand is carefully balancing the sculpture trying not to crush the fragile looking *Thot*. Cool Kool Shirts now has Dana's art practice and consciousness in its hands. In the animation, Cool Kool Shirts is represented by two giant hands. The hands grab Dana after they make their deal. The hands physically push and pull Dana up the stairs towards success. Visually, I am running a parallel between how Dana Jones treats his process of making his *Thots* and how Cool Kool Shirts treats Dana by turning him into a far-reaching brand image. The act of Dana using his hand to mold his concepts into *Thots* is a forceful and somewhat violent process. After he melts the vinyl, Dana forcefully stretches and twists the material to form to his will. Metaphorically, Cool Kool Shirts sees Dana Jones as rough material with a lot of potential to form to its will similarly to how Dana sees the vinyl albums. After Dana and Cool Kool Shirts come to an agreement one of Cool Kool Shirt's hands smashes Dana, only to reappear wearing a Cool Kool Shirt and is dragged up the stairs of success. As they ascend the stairs, t-shirts and dollar signs pop up in the background to show the growth of sales while Dana makes *Thot* after *Thot*, forming a pile at the

bottom of the stairs (Figure 18). This whole sequence is to demonstrate that as the t-shirt success grows Cool Kool Shirts is less interested in supporting Dana's autonomous art practice. Cool Kool Shirts crafts Dana Jones into a spokesperson similar to how Dana crafts his *Thots* when he is pushing his ideology on his sculptures.

Realization

The fourth stage in the Dana Jones cycle is *Realization* (Figure 19) where Dana begins to understand that Cool Kool Shirts is exploiting his art practice to sell shirts. This is the lowest point of the five stages. With no way out, Dana freaks out and falls into a deep depression. He feels people sees him as a shirt promoter and not realize the weight of him trying to form autonomous concepts.

Realization mirrors the action displayed in the first stage *Ideology*. *Dana is getting back to his practice of forming Thot sculptures*. In *Ideology*, a thought bubble shows Dana's unfiltered consciousness that he directs towards his *Thots*. Dana has a determined face while making his *Thots* and is proud at his creations. In the *Realization* Dana's thought bubbles scribbles start forming into the shape of a t-shirt and his face is full of frustration (Figure 20). This shows the influence of being a spokesperson for Cool Kool Shirts is having on his art practice. Working for Cool Kool Shirts has made Dana unable to make work that objectifies his pure unfiltered consciousness. As shown in the previous stage, Cool Kool Shirts dragged Dana up the "stairs of success", and while being dragged along caused him to drop his *Thots* to the bottom of the stairs. As the success of the shirts sales grow Dana's image becomes more associated with the shirts rather than his *Thot* making practice. The brand has completely

infiltrated his mind to the point that it has impacted his whole artmaking practice. Not only is his image now publicly viewed as apart of Cool Kool Shirts. His *Thot* sculptures are heavily associated with the brand. The image of the shirt in Dana's thought bubble illustrates how Dana's is pushing the Cool Kool Shirts association into his art practice because of his experience working under the brand. His *Thots* all start becoming objects to promote the Cool Kool Shirts brand. Unlike his sense of accomplishment in *Ideology*, Dana looks up at his new towering *Thot* sculpture only seeing a promotion product for Cool Kool Shirts (Figure 21). Dana comes to the *Realization* that Cool Kool Shirts has taken over his art practice to promote its brand.

Acceptance and Embrace

The fifth and final stage of the Dana Jones cycle is *Acceptance and Embrace* (Figure 22) where he is now fully aware of Cool Kool Shirts' exploitation of his art practice and image. Dana is fully aware of how the brand effects his practice. He must figure out a way to hold on to his artist integrity while in this commercial system. Without the backing of Cool Kool Shirts his practice is unsustainable. Thinking about his experience of being exploited by Cool Kool Shirts he realizes the parallels between his art practice and what the brand is doing to him. Within his practice Dana is melting down vinyl records (the creations and images of music artists) and forming it to hold his conceptual image. This is similar to Cool Kool Shirts forming Dana to fit their brand needs. He embraces this experience of being used for an image and puts those concepts behind his art practice. These concepts have been there with his use of vinyl records.

He invokes the narrative between his use of vinyl records with his experience being Cool Kool Shirts brand image into his *Thot* sculptures. This makes Dana's relationship with Cool Kool Shirts push the concepts further. Allowing Dana the ability to critique the commercial system that funds him while participating in it. In this animated sequence Dana Jones begins again the process of making *Thots* but this time the thought bubble present in this sequence contains a looped image of a t-shirt turning into scribbles and back into a t-shirt. This represents Dana taking in the experience he had being Cool Kool Shirts spokesperson to be used to conceptually push his practice further (Figure 23). As Dana is making his new *Thots* he makes a pile of them underneath himself. As the sequence goes on he builds himself higher sitting on top of a throne of his newly conceptualized *Thot* sculptures (Figure 24). Dana Jones will take a route similar to Kanye West's *My Beautiful Twisted Fantasy* and Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly* where West and Lamar make commercial albums critiquing the commercial system. Dana Jones' *Thots* will be focused on critiquing the Cool Kool Shirts platform, while working under the platform.

Conclusion

My thesis project *Cool Kool Shirts presents: Thot Collection Series 1 by Dana Jones* explores Dana Jones's journey of a five-stage cycle of his role as Cool Kool Shirts spokesperson and sponsored artist. I display this cycle by embedding five animations into *Thot* sculptures that I made as Dana Jones, conceptualizing the commercial world into an abstract entity. The main point of Dana Jones' journey is to run a parallel between my own struggle to weave through a system that backs my art practice while trying to hold onto my artistic integrity. I created this thesis project under the backing of academia. My university helped fund this project and provide advice to make the pieces I crafted reach more concepts. At the same time academia is

business that must push students forward to get through the curriculum. I started to wonder myself is this backing is more focused on helping my practice reach its full potential or more focused on having me to meet the curriculum requirements to get through the academic system and prove that the system works. I do not believe having a backing system is a negative but I want to be fully aware of the intent of the system that backs my art projects. Being fully aware of this system's various intentions gives me the opportunity to plan my practice carefully to hold on to the integrity of my artwork. I aspire to be like Dana Jones during the *Acceptance and Embrace* stage. I want the ability to critique and participate within a commercial or academic backing system.

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Figure 1 (Cool Kool Shirts)



Figure 2 (Dana Jones)



Figure 3 (Small Tot Sculpture 1)

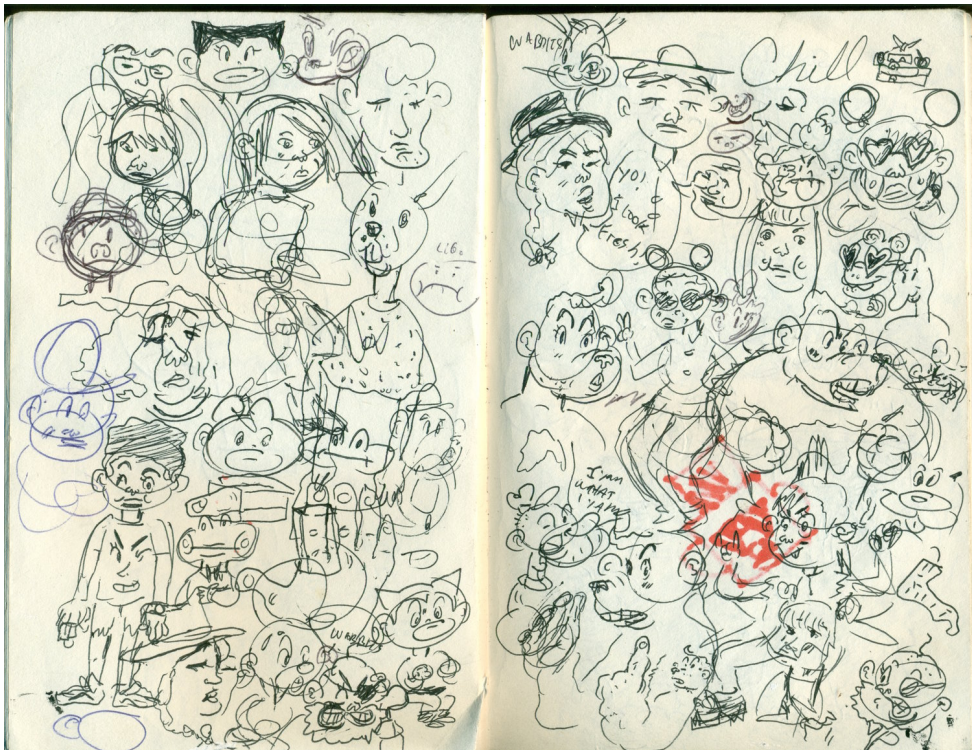


Figure 4 (Doodles)



Figure 5 (Cool Kool Shirts Pup Tee)



Figure 6 (Small Thot Sculpture 2)



Figure 7 (Thot Sculptures 1-5)



Figure 8 (Thot Sculpture 1)



Figure 9 (Thot Sculpture 1 Close-up)

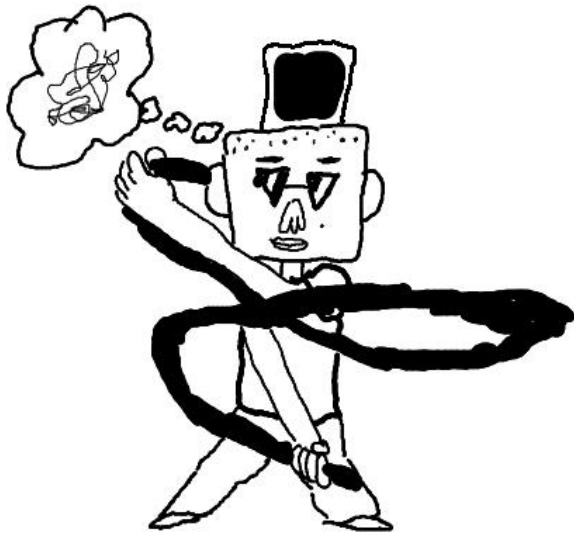


Figure 10 (Ideology animation still)

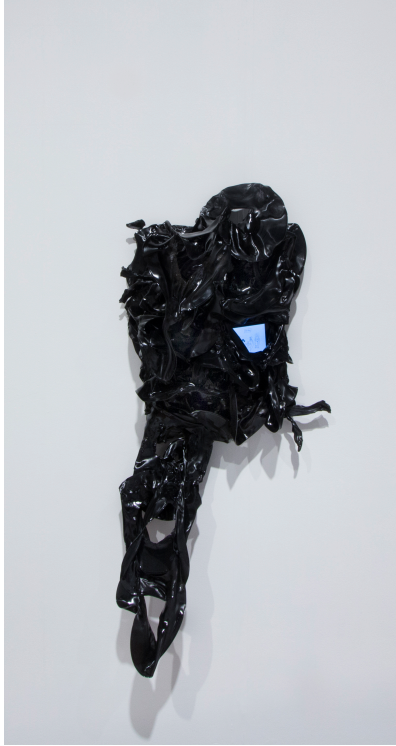


Figure 11 (Thot Sculpture 2)



Figure 12 (Unsustainable animation still 1)

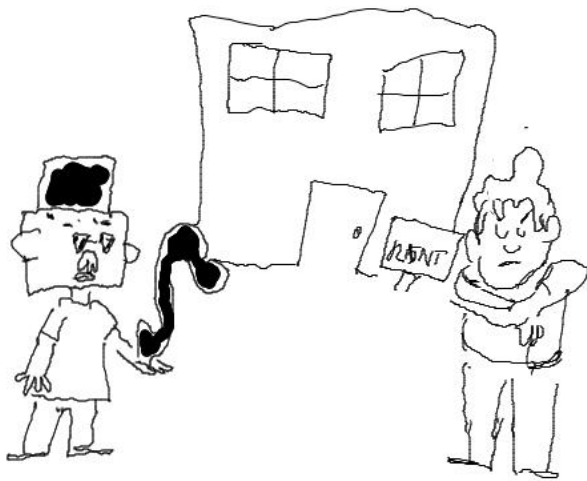


Figure 13 (Unsustainable Animation Still 2)



Figure 14 (Unsustainable animation still 3)



Figure 15 (Unsustainable Animation Still 4)



Figure 16 (Thot Sculpture 3)

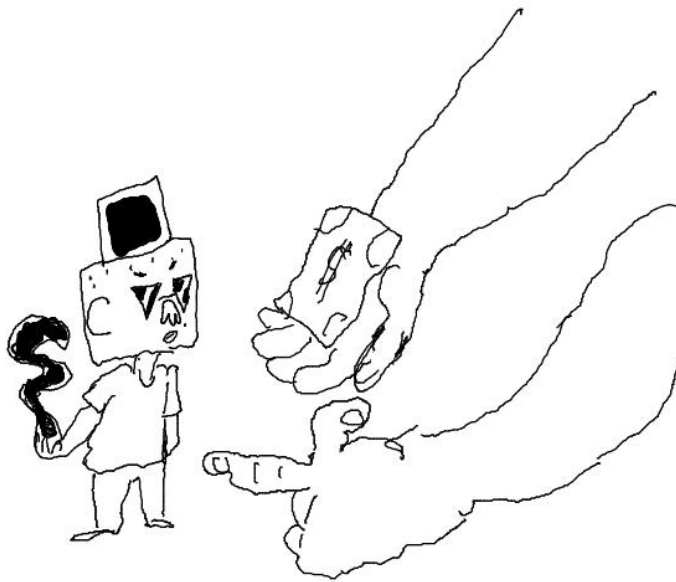


Figure 17 (Rise to Fame Animation Still 1)



Figure 18 (Rise to Fame Animation Still 2)



Figure 19 (Thot Sculpture 4)

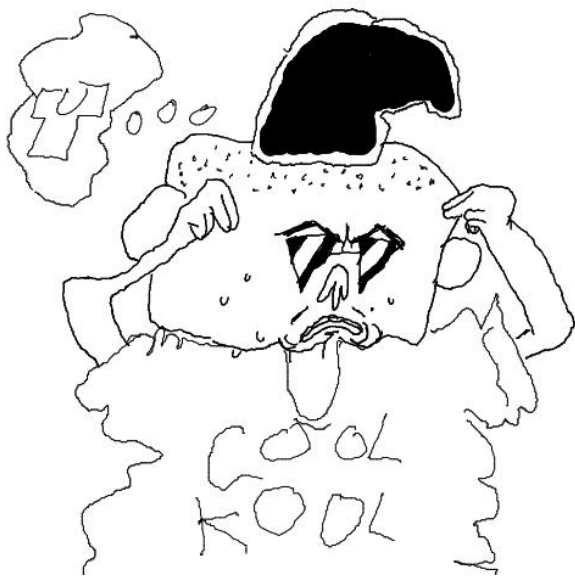


Figure 20 (Realization animation still 1)

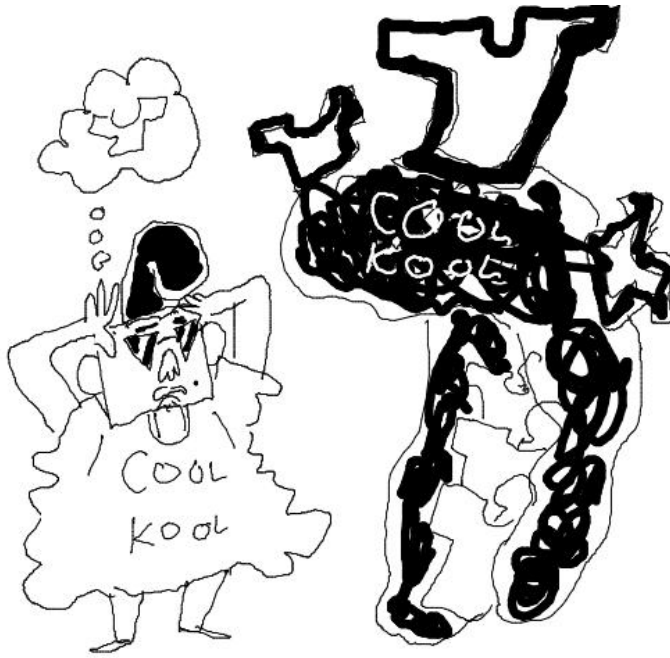


Figure 21 (Realization Animation Still 2)



Figure 22 (Thot Sculpture 5)



Figure 23 (Acceptance and Embrace Animation Still)

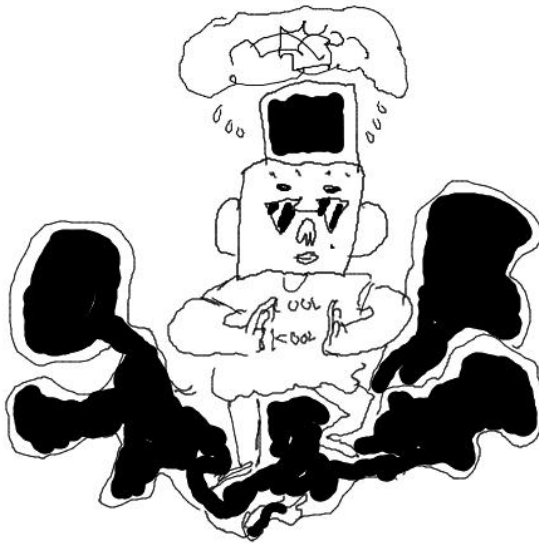


Figure 24 (Acceptance and Embrace Animation Still)