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So small, so sweet, so soon

Katherine Burling

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So Small, So Sweet, So Soon

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	iii
Abstract	iv
Introduction	1
Behind the Velvet Curtain: Reconstructions and Resurrections	2
The Lachrymal Flood: A Well of Grief	5
Calamity: Noah’s Flood, Atlantis and Divine Retribution	11
Rotten Fruit and Fake Ruins: Decay, Impotence and Fetishizing Loss	15
The ‘Metastasizing Accessory’: Wigs, Follies and Ornamental Excess	17
Taming the Untamable: Petrification, Subjugation and Animal Furniture	20
Trump’s Twitter and the Cherubic Symphony: Spectacle, Melodrama and Penis Jokes	21
Conclusion	23
Figures	25
Bibliography	41

List of Figures

Figure 1. <i>The World That Drowned</i>	25
Figure 2. <i>So Small, So Sweet, So Soon</i>	26
Figure 3. <i>So Small, So Sweet, So Soon</i>	27
Figure 4. <i>So Small, So Sweet, So Soon</i>	28
Figure 5. <i>The World That Drowned</i>	29
Figure 6. <i>The World That Drowned</i>	30
Figure 7. <i>The World That Drowned</i>	31
Figure 8. <i>The World That Drowned</i>	32
Figure 9. <i>The World That Drowned</i>	33
Figure 10. <i>The World That Drowned</i>	34
Figure 11. <i>So Small, So Sweet, So Soon</i>	35
Figure 12. <i>The World That Drowned</i>	36
Figure 13. <i>The World That Drowned</i>	37
Figure 14. <i>The World That Drowned</i>	38
Figure 15. <i>So Small, So Sweet, So Soon</i>	39
Figure 16. Installation View. <i>So Small, So Sweet, So Soon & The World That Drowned</i>	40

Abstract

This thesis provides a conceptual framework for *So Small, So Sweet, So Soon*, an MFA body of work by Katherine Burling. The document interweaves personal narrative, creative influences, historical references and political commentary that explore the work's relevance to America in the 21st century.

Introduction

Somewhere in my mind's eye there is a room, not unlike one of the Madonna Inn¹, a sort of fantastical reconstruction of a safari-themed getaway. On an end table in the corner, a porcelain lamb— just three inches tall— stands perched over a plate of week old vegetables. Their meeting is coincidental— as objects come and go, this particular pairing finds itself here before us. The plate is not haunted, nor is the lamb, but their coupling has me feeling eerie. Maybe it is the room itself. Leopard skins and faux cheetah prints mixed with colonial revival furniture and neon lights do odd things to one's sense of time and place. Look! All of a sudden, the grazing lamb is cannibalizing itself in arranged vegetable form! It is hungry, for God's sake! But struggling to satisfy its appetite; a tiny porcelain jaw is no match for a shriveled celery stalk. Oddly enough, both are dead— the lamb and the celery. Both caught in a state of limbo, asking to be brought back to life. Porcelain longs to be pliable flesh; mushy celery yearns for water to push through its veins. Black magic does exist here. So does memory. A tiny drama! A cruel tragedy! To eat oneself in vegetable form.

Through a visual language that combines kitsch sensibility, Eurocentric opulence, Victorian taxidermy and fairground art, melodrama and decay take center stage as metaphors for a nebulous American mourning. Rendered in plywood, sorrow percolates from various corners of the American psyche— or Twittersphere. Animals become pietàs or ornaments or petrified dumbwaiters. Wigs turn into altars, follies or monuments to that which has passed on. The apocalyptic divine sends a flood that will collapse empire. As a

¹ The Madonna Inn is a themed motel in San Luis Obispo, California that boasts an impressive 110 themed rooms suitable for any tourist or lover of American artifice and bad taste.

coping mechanism, the gargantuan toy theatre serves as a stunted articulation of the chaotically incomprehensible, asking how to best cope with a threatening world.

Behind the Velvet Curtain: Reconstructions and Resurrections

In its physical form, my work is a bricolage of disparate images. In their flattened mass, they resemble “... grotesques— unfinished forms, developing ‘out of control,’ disrupting encasing boundaries of ‘explanation’” (figure 1).² Amidst the profusion of images is a reference to toy theatres, miniscule paper versions of Victorian amphitheatres made for children to enact dramas with paper dolls and scenery.³ In these dioramas, a red curtain frames layers of paper cut-outs creating a miniature world of fantasy and play. As a sort of forerunner to the television, the toy theatre became a place to reenact stories and myths, to control and manipulate characters and narratives. My work also contains elements of fairground and carnival art, designed to attract audiences with elaborate decoration, color, scenery and make-believe. The stage recalls the design of turn-of-the-century fairground stage fronts and the wigs function like carnival cutouts.⁴

These interests echo the work of a handful of artists who create expansive fictional worlds imbued with nostalgia. My work is akin to that of Alex O’Neal whose dream-like images spill into and crawl out of one another. His flattening and compression of space bursts at the seams with images and color that contain references to death, shrines, and a lost American culture. This work is also influenced by the cinematic work of Terry Gilliam, as both filmmaker and animator, who uses fragmented images from various historical

² Kathleen Stewart. "Nostalgia-- A Polemic." *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 3 (August 1988): 238.

³ See Constance Eileen King. *The Encyclopedia of Toys*. (Secaucus: Chartwell, 1986): 222-227.

⁴ See Geoff Weedon and Richard Ward. *Fairground Art: The Art of Travelling Fairs, Carousels, and Carnival Midways* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981).

periods and recombines them in unexpected ways to a comedic effect. Likewise, Wes Anderson's commitment to nostalgic framing has been an influence; specifically, his use of scenery and props that transport the viewer to times gone by, as well as his ability to actualize the improbably fantastic. Traces of vernacular art are also embedded in this work, whether personal altar making, roadside attractions or outsider art, all monumental articulations of otherworldly spaces.⁵

My work is a type of three-dimensional collage, whose unfixed parts allow for continuous recombination and remixing in the process. The pieces assemble as a collection on the wall and slowly fraternize with each other, leaving space for splicing and recontextualization. Fixing paper to wood forces the drawings into space, creating a scene large enough to envelop the viewer; a space in which the fantasy and spectacle of the imagined narrative become quasi-real while wholly unreal— like they did as a kid at the fair. Flattening space and compressing chaos into a three-dimensional form allows me to create metaphors of confusion and emptiness that coexist both within myself and in our culture; representational drawing aids in narrative invention and the creation of space that is set apart from the habitual world.

Mod Podged plywood cutouts remind me of DIY vacation bible school plays in which cheap sentiment co-mingles with shoddy construction. In its three-dimensional form, the work is able to come alive, giving the viewer a chance to physically engage with it. Crawling

⁵ See Kay Turner. *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars*. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999); Colleen McDannell. *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Claude Arthaud. *Dream Palaces: Fantastic Houses and Their Treasures*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973); Walker Art Center, et al. *Naives and Visionaries*. (New York: E. P. Dutton &, 1974); Leslie Umberger and Erika Doss. *Sublime Spaces and Visionary Worlds: The Built Environments of Vernacular Artists*. (New York: Papress, 2007).

in between the layers of plywood and sticking one's head in the face cutouts of the wigs open the work up for performative potential. How does the viewer physically engage with the narrative of the work? Where do they position themselves within the drama?

Historical references abound, providing an anachronistic mashup of characters, events, places and periods. The import of their inclusion is to mirror America's own understanding of history, facts, amusement and myth; a space which increasingly fails to delineate any differences between the four categories.⁶ It's a Disney-like strategy, the product of a hyperreal American sensibility that prefers to disengage from the present rather than process the past. In so doing, it pairs Mark Twain with Benjamin Franklin as starry-eyed contemporaries who narrate American history at Walt Disney World.⁷ What do they ask of history? And what do they ask of myth?

Describing how nostalgia fill voids in American culture, cultural anthropologist Kathleen Stewart analyzes the function of kitsch in home décor. She elaborates on the ways in which the inhabitants of forsaken Appalachian towns make sense of their lives by reinscribing meaning onto place by way of stuff. She describes the hodgepodge accumulation as being related to loss and ruin, both personal and ecological: "Postmodern modes of representation— story, fragmentation, montage, juxtaposition— are necessary... because built into their surfaces are the layers of history as they have been frozen there and the ruins of contemporary social relations as they lay in waste."⁸ My use of images

⁶ I owe my interest in these ideas to Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998); Umberto Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1986); Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations* in Mark Poster's *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988); and Stephen Fjellman's *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁷ See Stephen M. Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves*, 31.

⁸ Stewart, *Nostalgia-- A Polemic*, 239.

functions in this way: to bring into consideration the things lost, the things threatened and the things cherished. One gesture is never enough; the reinscription is continuous and incessant, a recurring attempt to make sense of the indigestible; to carve out space for myself. Ultimately, my work—in its derivation, purpose and form—has much in common with the words of Celeste Olalquiaga, a cultural historian who posits as a definition of kitsch: “Kitsch is the ability to surpass essential belongings and rest in more superficial ones, to create an imaginary landscape through accumulation and camouflage, and to crystallize the continuous movement of life in the permeable disguise of fantasy.”⁹

The Lachrymal Flood: A Well of Grief

“Every now and then Superman feels a need to be alone with his memories, and he flies off to an inaccessible mountain range where, in the heart of the rock, protected by a huge steel door, is the Fortress of Solitude. Here Superman keeps his robots, completely faithful copies of himself, miracles of electronic technology, which from time to time he sends out into the world to fulfill a pardonable desire for ubiquity. And the robots are incredible, because their resemblance to reality is absolute; they are not mechanical men, all cogs and beeps, but perfect “copies” of human beings, with skin, voice, movements, and the ability to make decisions. For Superman the fortress is a museum of memories: Everything that has happened in his adventurous life is recorded here in perfect copies or preserved in miniature form of the original.”¹⁰

- **Umberto Eco**, *Travels in Hyperreality*

My interest in the great mother archetype stems from an infantile need for comfort and security that constantly reasserts itself as I come to grips with the economic, political and technological advancements of American culture. The melodrama of the Spanish Baroque Madonna strikes a particularly dramatic existential chord: I see her in myself, I want her for myself but I know that she is all of ours; Our Lady of Sorrows weeps for our

⁹ Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1998), 174.

¹⁰ Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 4-5.

collective loss (figures 2-3). Cradling her rotten banana, she mourns a loss that is both contemporary and age-old: biological devastation and the vanity of human life.

In my original conception of this work, I envisioned it as a manifestation of my own dread about the threats we face in an increasingly unpredictable world: about the catastrophic consequences of environmental devastation; the increasing wealth gap and power of corporate interests; the dangers of an incompetent executive branch; the moral bankruptcy of elected officials; failed states and refugees; and the growing nuclear arsenals across the globe. I also conceived of this work as a sort of nature versus culture epic in which the hidden externalities of our Western way of life have finally caught up with us and begin to assert their own agenda.¹¹ But as I watch our nation struggle to find a shared identity, a mutually agreed-upon set of political priorities, and a *détente* in the culture wars, the work opens up to encompass manifold interpretations of grief, fear and loss. My work becomes a nebulous portrait of American politics, itself stuck in a hazy echo-chamber of fiction, dread, hopelessness and decay.

Much thought has been made since the election of Donald Trump about ruin; not in those terms per se, but the metaphor lurks below the surface of many conversations. There is of course, impending ecological doom; the ruin of the white working class; the loss of the American Dream; the broken promise of inalienable rights; the death of American manufacturing; the loss of religion; the disappearance of the American middle class; the disintegration of American democracy; the collapse of empire; the deficiency of facts; the displacement of home; the loss of tradition. If America is the land of belief, where tree

¹¹ These ideas stem from William Irwin Thompson's *The American Replacement of Nature: Everyday Acts and Outrageous Evolution of Economic Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

whisperers and Freddy Krueger can coexist with the Rhinestone Cowboy, an 80-year-old Elvis, and Alex Jones, what do we do with the hollow receptacle of noise from failed experiments, anxiety and paranoia?^{12 13}

In this jungle of a home, Americans are reduced to a sort of inbred cannibalism: in an effort to regain and reorient, we draw lines to delineate between Self and Other to secure our spot in line for the American Dream.¹⁴ Fault lines continually expand between liberal and conservative; man and woman; religious and secular; white and non-white; domestic and foreign; blue-collar and white collar; urban and rural; educated and uneducated; rich and poor. The crucible is a site of pseudo-religious mania from all sides.

Trump's rise to the White House has bred much speculation about how he ended up there, riding in on the wings of some kind of beheaded bald eagle, sailing above a sea of disenfranchised working class whites, rich whites and their nostalgia for a 1950s America. Of course, Trump's rise cannot be separated from racism; from white nationalism; from confederate monuments; from the birther movement; from identity politics; from victimhood; from the Second Coming; from monarchy; from wealth; from fiction; from chaos; from the very fabric of American identity. And like all populists rebranding nationalism, Trump worked the kind of resentment sewn amongst those who saw in him a glimpse of their American Dream: poor whites, old conservatives, the wealthy, corporate executives, and fringe white nationalists.

¹² See Kurt Andersen. "How American Lost Its Mind." *The Atlantic*, September, 2017.

¹³ See Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2018).

¹⁴ See Arlie Russell Hochschild. *Strangers In Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

Wading through our news-cycle culture of constant tragedies, scandals, threats and trivial nonsense has left me with an acutely irate, and often conflicted, feeling towards the white working class, and Americans in general. My focus on this particular facet of the complex cultural factors of our political environment has to do with a deep sense of failure from within communities I thought I knew and trusted and my own upbringing in a white working class family.

With the election of Trump, white rage, which to me had always been confined to under breath utterances from older relatives, came screaming in as a new face of American idiocy. Of course, that is the naïveté of a sheltered white kid who never had to discuss the legacy of American racism— or learn about it. I grew up in a Midwestern town whose newspaper was purchased in the 1920s by a regional leader of the Ku Klux Klan to disseminate racist propaganda; in the years that followed, Pekin, Illinois was known as a sundown town, and the 1940 census recorded no African Americans as permanent residents.¹⁵ All of this I learned from Wikipedia several years after having left Pekin; it had never been discussed in my 18 years living there. Looking back, all I remember about American history was that Bill Clinton was a cheating liar, that 9/11 made my mom cry as “Have You Forgotten” came on over the radio, and that America was supposed to be a Great Melting Pot concocted by Lady Liberty.¹⁶

¹⁵ This information was collected and analyzed by James W. Loewen as research for his book, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006). His online record of census information and research for Pekin, Illinois is available at http://sundown.tougaloo.edu/sundown_towns_show.php?id=1817

¹⁶ Schoolhouse Rock!’s “The Great American Melting Pot” was first aired in 1976 in the seventh episode of the third season. It was still in use in 2006, when I was in fifth grade history class. The animated jingle remains one of my few vivid memories of my middle school curriculum.

Think pieces abound from every corner of the political spectrum about what the true threats are to our most sacred liberal democracy, the greatest product of our Western heritage.¹⁷ Are they foreigners? Are they job-seekers? Refugees? Are they terrorists? Are they demagogues? Billionaires? Tweets? Rednecks? Racists? Journalists? Russians? Robots? Guns?

Likewise we might ask, Whose culture is threatened here? Unquestionably, that of immigrants, who navigate multiple identities and homelands; that of those who continue to fight for expansion of basic human rights, including minorities, women, and LGBTQ individuals; and even that of gun owners who fear a repeal of the second amendment. A myopic president and his supporters— from the racists to the evangelical right to the hopelessly uninformed— view themselves as the victims of this ever-changing, increasingly threatening world.^{18 19} Are they not?

To claim outright that the economic, social and political concerns of white Americans are invalid is to be insensitive, caustic and ignorant. But when I realize that I never learned who Emmett Till was in my 20 years spent in educational institutions, and that I never saw photographs of white people smiling in lynching photographs, or knew that Christopher Columbus was the bad guy, I am exasperated at the ways in which a culture has failed so many of its citizens; citizens who still fail to see any ironies in a blond

¹⁷ David Frum. "How to Build an Autocracy." *The Atlantic*, March 2017.

¹⁸ See Charles Matthews. "White Christianity Is In Big Trouble. And It's Its Own Biggest Threat." *The Washington Post*, December 19, 2017.

¹⁹ See also Robert P. Jones. "White Evangelicals Can't Quit Donald Trump." *The Atlantic*, April 20, 2018.

baby Jesus or recognize that Schoolhouse Rocks!'s "Elbow Room" is a euphemism for genocide.^{20 21}

My frustrations with this fragment of American experience does not preclude an understanding of the ways in which the white working class contends with strife. My family is just a hop and a skip away from the one that J.D. Vance portrays in his book *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*.²² Ours was one without tradition, without historical lineage: I do not know where I come from because ties were cut for reasons unarticulated. Tradition, spirituality and nostalgia have always captivated me for this reason. The bonds that kept us under the same roof were coated with the grime that intergenerational trauma dares you to try to erase. It always seemed to me that small towns (and dysfunctional families) had a horrible knack for punching holes in the bottom of the boat. And while the atrocities of my grandparents miraculously begot the growth of my parents, so the mistakes of my parents were an effort to pave for us a road to the American Dream. It is in this way, and for these reasons, that I understand (albeit in my own limited way) feeling rootless; coming from despondency; being of the run-down and loving those still stuck there— as someone who left.

The expression of grief and anxiety in my work is manifold. Death enters the Western imagination, taking from us our smallest and sweetest beloved. The calamity is imminent, foreshadowed by the rotting fruit-child, the lightning strike and dead flowers as

²⁰ Schoolhouse Rock!'s "Elbow Room" aired in 1976 in episode six of the third season.

²¹ James W. Loewen tackles the failure of American history textbooks and curriculum in high schools in his book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

²² J.D. Vance. *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: Harper Press, 2016).

memento mori. The altars are set, the coiffeurs are waiting. Is it a celebration, or a mourning? The flood is coming, the thunder rolling in, the deluge to set right the incorrigible wrongs of humankind. But somehow it is still a joke.

The weeping woman, the reviled other, the myopic self-pity, the cacophony of the dying, the rotting, the lost, and the child-like compete for self-expression. Anticipated tragedy and staged artifice demand mourning and contemplation alongside history and fiction. Despite the faux melodrama, this still theatre of fake grief has an earnestness that struggles to express itself.

Calamity: Noah's Flood, Atlantis and Divine Retribution

There was an island in the sea
That out of immortal chaos reared
Towers of topaz, trees of pearl
For maidens adored and warriors feared.

Long ago it sunk in the sea;
And now, a thousand fathoms deep,
Sea-worms above it whirl their lamps,
Crabs on the pale mosaic creep.²³

- **Conrad Aiken**, *Priapus and the Pool*

Into the west, unknown of man,
Ships have sailed since the world began.
Read, if you dare, what Skelos wrote,
With dead hands fumbling his silken coat;
And follow the ships through the wind-blown wrack--
Follow the ships that come not back.²⁴

- **Robert E. Howard**, *The Pool of the Black One*, in *The Sword of Conan*

²³ In L. Sprague de Camp's *Lost Continents: The Atlantis Theme in History, Science, and Literature*. (New York: The Gnome Press Inc., 1954), de Camp quotes on page 1 from Conrad Aiken, *Priapus and the Pool*.

²⁴ Also quoted from L. Sprague de Camp's *Lost Continents* on page 255, Robert E. Howard, *The Pool of the Black One*, in *The Sword of Conan*.

As an ex-Catholic, my father has always carried with him a peculiar disdain for organized religion coupled with a deep sense of the spiritual. He is a man of practical, secular logic, the kind that cannot tolerate the absurdly religious. But it is paired with the only kind of logic that can tolerate such absurdity, which is a keen appreciation of the mystical. How people quilt together a portrait of morality has always been of interest to me, especially when such lattices start to defy logic and contradict themselves. My father was always caught somewhere between paranoia and sound reasoning, never without the caveat that Heaven and Hell could likely be real places (whether metaphysical or metaphorical), and that all things will eventually find their place within the two poles.

Ever my father's daughter, I inherited much of this strange cosmology; one that is deeply cynical and skeptical, prone to both fear and awe. As such, I've always had a persistent sense that the time will come when our Western debt must be repaid. The debt I am referring to is the one of privilege, of convenience, of advancement, of white-collar jobs and of progress. It is that specifically American debt that we owe to our physical environment, to our racist history, to our international economic community, to our bodies, to our moral conscience, to our poor, and to our education. As wealth gaps increase, as corporations hide money, as mortgages fail, as hurricanes hit, and refugees wait stranded, it seems that the interest is rising at an incomprehensible rate. Who will come to collect?

It is in this headspace that I was struck by the writing of Celeste Olalquiaga who proposes kitsch as a sensibility stemming from a fixation on loss— one that gets recreated in fantasy and memory through mass-produced objects.²⁵ In her historical examination of the development of kitsch sensibility, she considers a preeminent example: the lost city of

²⁵ See Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*.

Atlantis.²⁶ In her chapter “The World That Drowned”, Olalquiaga shares a peculiar Victorian obsession that lives on to this day— that of the fantastical lost city. In the late 1800s, cultural obsession with the lost city erupted. Speculative literature, scientific claims, comic books and film entered the material culture and public imagination. In its heyday, the anticipated recovery of Atlantis was more exciting than the Second Coming of Christ.²⁷

The Atlantean myth is attributed to Plato who recounts it in two Socratic dialogues, *Timaios* and *Kritias*. Plato died before completion of the *Kritias* but nonetheless, his fable was captivating enough to take root. Although many cultures have similar Atlantean myths, the central idea involves “an ancient people of divine ascendancy, the corrupting power of wealth and material progress, and one full day and night of rain culminating in earthquakes and a gigantic wave under which a magnificent city sinks forever.”²⁸ The reappearance of the Atlantis myth in the late 19th century came at a time ripe for exotic discovery, allegorical representation and tortured paranoia.

However, it wasn’t Atlantis as utopia that captured the imagination of 19th century fanatics. Olalquiaga explains, “...What really mattered for modern times about Atlantis was the disaster, not the golden age— apocalypse, not utopia. Rather than spending time nostalgically glossing over the legendary beauties and riches of the famous empire, these tales went straight to the catastrophe and its ensuing debris, giving free reign to a fantasy of global destruction.”²⁹ As anxieties about a changing world beset the Victorian psyche, so

²⁶ With this example, Olalquiaga theorizes that kitsch as a sensibility which has its roots in the unconscious. The reconceptualization underlies her analysis of kitsch as an expression of loss recreated through physical objects.

²⁷ De Camp, *Lost Continents*, 1-20.

²⁸ Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, 106.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

too did fantasies and fears of catastrophe. As Victorians struggled to reconcile a burgeoning industrial economy, increasing destruction of and removal from nature, unsettling scientific advancements and a gradual loss of the spiritual, they became obsessed with a fantasy in which their greed was punished with divine retribution. Olalquiaga explains Atlantis as a symbol of displaced grief and an impending sense of dread: “Atlantis’ enveloping ocean is a body of tears where the infinite sadness of the nineteenth century was ready to drown, as if with its density the liquid element could replenish the enormous emptiness left by the crumbling of tradition.”³⁰

Atlantis is hardly the sole example of havoc wrought by a divine judge. Noah’s Flood was an act of cleansing; a precipitous calamity to wipe the earth of humankind’s filth, greed and debauchery.³¹ In fact, numerous cultures— ranging from the ancient Sumerians to the medieval Europeans— have their own flood myths related to ideas of supernatural punishment; the flood becomes a projection of the human conscience. A current parallel lives on amongst fundamental Christian Americans, too. In a strange nexus of fear and belief lies a devout commitment to End Times prophecy as the ultimate arbiter and settler of debts.³²

Paranoid about a sort of divine retribution, flood mythology enters my work as a joke— an empty plywood threat of two-foot-tall waves (figure 4). As far as our national

³⁰ Ibid., 114.

³¹ Norman Cohn. *Noah’s Flood: The Genesis Story in Western Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

³² Especially vexing to me is the commitment to the prophecies of the book of Revelations described by Arlie Russell Hochschild in her book, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. She describes how this concept of religious salvation has taken the place of political action and agency amongst Tea Party voters who act and vote against their own self-interests. Even as family members die from toxic petrochemical exposure, these Republican voters believe that God will be their savior, not environmental regulation.

priorities go, we seem to have tamed ecological decay and the threats posed by global warming, as the EPA plans a rollback of automobile emission standards; FEMA removes the words “climate change” from its strategic plan just after floods wreck the southern United States and Puerto Rico; Trump proposes to cut funding for clean energy research; and government websites are scrubbed of climate change verbiage.³³ All that’s left is to print monsoon cartoons and starving children on bedspreads and pillow shams and sell millions of Ebola shaped stuffed animals at Target.

Rotten Fruit and Fake Ruins: Decay, Impotence and Fetishizing Loss

Kitsch was arguably invented by the Victorians as a sort of valve to release the existential angst engendered by the era in which they lived. Societal shifts from pastoral to urban, the burgeoning industrial revolution, the development of the middle class, new developments in science, and encoding of gender roles made a once simple world increasingly indigestible. If kitsch is a crystallization of an imagined experience and a cultural sensibility stemming from a fixation on loss, then the Victorians found apt metaphors for their fears: DIY taxidermy and parlour fish-fighting shared space with hair jewelry and post-mortem photography in the living room.³⁴ Wax fruit forestalled loss by preventing it altogether: the fake cannot die. Frozen under glass in a perfect state of non-existence, wax fruit symbolized bounty, fecundity and physical perfection. In my work, the frailty of these values are turned on their heads as fruit browns and molds, highly

³³ Michael Greshko, Brian Clark Howard and Laura Parker. "A Running List of How Trump Is Changing the Environment." National Geographic. April 6, 2018.

³⁴ For an extended discussion of anxieties transferred onto parlour objects, see Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

susceptible to decay and catastrophe. The Virgin's banana is a play on the perfectly ripe fake fruits under the Victorian bell jar. The metaphor puts a contemporary spin on traditional vanitas painting and memento mori: genetically engineered to be the perfect fruit, bananas themselves are soon to be extinct due a mismanagement of biodiversity in the face of profit margins and disease.³⁵

Ruins occupy a similar space in my work. First appearing in the 18th century as a landscaping craze in romantic French and English gardens, fake ruins quickly grew to symbolize a nostalgia for Western culture and an obsession with its demise. To quote Olalquiaga:

Despite their deteriorated state... classical ruins can easily forgo their implication as memento mori. In their nostalgic allusion to an antiquity whose ability to survive supersedes its temporal transitoriness, classical ruins transform their decrepitude into a statement of endurance, making of their resilience a form of transcendence. Watch how we still stand despite the ravages of time, they seem to claim. Exuding cultural authority, classical ruins appear to be not so much leftovers of bygone eras as their testimony. In looking at classical ruins, we see past them into the tradition they stood for, ignoring their present state for the sake of the symbolic glory and universal value attributed to them.³⁶

Atop Marie Antoinette's wigs, fake ruins and rotting fruits take center stage as the mourning paraphernalia of a culture in crisis (figure 5-6). The shadow of decay lurks throughout. So too does impotence. How might we ward off the ravages of time? How can we placate the divine element? As wig ornaments, ruins and bananas appear as offerings of some sort, not just nostalgic reconstructions. These are the sacred relics of our Western heritage: wealth, imported rotten fruit, classical ruins, frivolity, and the flaxen-haired Christ child Made in China (figures 6-7). Whether classical or metaphorical, these objects become sites of imaginary exultation, implicated in the feat of reconstruction. They function just as

³⁵ See Rob Dunn. "Humans Made the Banana Perfect-- But Soon It'll Be Gone." *Wired Magazine*, March 12, 2017.

³⁶ Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, 145-46.

Olalquiaga imagines the real ones do, "... nostalgically evok[ing] a past in which their creators still ardently believe."³⁷ Once lost, images become fetishes, wig becomes altar site, and the coiffeur becomes priest (figure 7). Are they mourning their culture or recreating it?

As wigs become commemorative monuments, they reach toward broader questions of how nostalgia operates within a given culture. As Americans specifically, consideration of how and when nostalgia becomes problematic is apt at a time when it has become a warm bottle for cultures that are dying. A foremost example can be found in the rhetoric of the Republican Party, whose recycling of campaign promises and slogans such as "Make America Great Again" appeal to a shrinking constituency of the American electorate; a culture in decline.³⁸ Another problematic instance of nostalgia is confederate monuments, erected in the 1970s as the development of progressive values threatened white hegemony in American politics. The visible defense and celebration of white supremacy under the veil of nostalgia raises crucial questions about the ways in which culture is mourned, celebrated and resuscitated.³⁹

The 'Metastasizing Accessory'⁴⁰: Wigs, Follies and Ornamental Excess

Poor Marie Antoinette was desperately out of touch with her fellow countrymen and women. Entering the life of the French aristocracy as a young teenager, she grew weary of the pomp and formality of court life quickly. To escape the rigors of her acquired life, Marie had an idyllic pastoral fantasy nostalgically recreated for her at Rambouillet. With thatched

³⁷ Ibid., 143.

³⁸ Levitsky & Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 173-175.

³⁹ See Garrett Epps. "The True History of the South Is Not Being Erased." *The Atlantic*, June 11, 2017.

⁴⁰ I owe this phrase to Powell, Margaret K. and Joseph R. Roach. "Big Hair." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 80.

cottages, a dairy, chickens, lambs and pastures, the cottage was an ideal place for the queen to play at the pauper's life. In the words of Olalquiaga, it was this "... detachment from reality that would soon cost [Marie her] head."⁴¹

While queen of France, Marie famously delighted in the frivolities that her acquired wealth bestowed upon her. As a site of wealth embodied, her hair was paid considerable attention. Marie-France Boyer, in her work *The Private Realm of Marie Antoinette*, writes, "During the time of Marie-Antoinette, the ladies of the court wore extraordinary constructions on their heads, remarkable for both their inventiveness and their size. After the death of Louis XV, forests of cypresses were the rage, followed by English gardens and ships in full sail."⁴² Eighteenth century satirical illustrations of these fabrications depict hair six times as large as the head upon which it rests. Many move into the space of pure fantasy, detached entirely from the laws of gravity: pineapples, flowers, feathers, brooms, animals, armies, carrots, hearths and vanities reach new heights piled atop aristocratic heads. When wig illustrations include ladders, pulleys, and surveyors participating in a construction site, the metaphor of fabricating culture is in full effect (figure 7).

The metaphor extends further: "At work and at play, big hair became one of the most visible ways of marking different social roles, occupations, aspirations, and conditions."⁴³ Its relevance to the work lies in its relegation to the most aristocratic members of society: the French court. As such, it participates in an act of fakery,

⁴¹ Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, 143.

⁴² In *The Artificial Kingdom*, Olalquiaga cites on page 148 Marie-France Boyer, *The Private Realm of Marie Antoinette*.

⁴³ Powell and Roach, "Big Hair," 80.

grandiosity, and pomposity; one that “stakes a claim to social space”⁴⁴ i.e., the space of the wealthy white Westerner.

Hair becomes performative as a site for the staging of the self. Powell and Roach write in their essay *Big Hair* that “... Hair is a performance, one that happens at the boundary of self-expression and social identity, of creativity and conformity, and of production and consumption. Hair lends itself particularly well to self-fashioning performance because it is liminal, on the threshold, ‘betwixt and between,’ not only of nature and culture, but also of life and death.”⁴⁵

Plywood wigs allow space to indulge nostalgia. As a site of staging of the self, the viewer collaborates in the staging of culture wherein the sacred relics of western heritage become commemorative monuments. The carnivalesque cutouts allow the viewer to position themselves as an accomplice, delighting in the attraction as a photo-op often to the exclusion of a deeper consideration of the imagery within. As a tourist, the viewer implicates herself in conversations about wealth, monarchy, ruin and commemoration via the symbols of the American eagle, classical ruins, kitschy TV lamps, and Caravaggio’s Medusa. Ambiguity in imagery here is essential; the sorting of ideas and values and fictions and symbols echoes the confusion and lack of clarity in national discourse. Eco’s quote is resonant here, in this space where “... A psychedelic effect and a kitsch result not because the Past is not distinguished from the Present... but because what offends is the voracity of the selection, and what distresses is the fear of being caught up by this jungle of veritable

⁴⁴ Rosenthal, Angela. "Raising Hair." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 10.

⁴⁵ Powell and Roach, “Big Hair”, 83.

beauties, which unquestionably has its own wild flavor, its own pathetic sadness, barbarian grandeur, and sensual perversity, redolent of contamination, blasphemy, the Black Mass."⁴⁶

Taming the Untamable: Petrification, Subjugation and Animal Furniture

"The very drama of nature lashing out against man, like the choreographed attacks in American televised wrestling, only serves to heighten the cinematic moment when the Hulk awakens his feinted daze, sees the savage mass hurtling through the air toward him, rises, and deflects all the fury of the attack back on the tough beast to flatten him out on the mat."⁴⁷

- **William Irwin Thompson**, *The American Replacement of Nature*

Animals are subject to a special kind of humiliation in this work. Forced into roles of servitude and subordination, the once living has become a trophy of subjugation (figure 8). 'Otherness' has been tamed, petrified and stuck in the corner, so the mourning of the wig-wearers can take center stage. An indispensable part of the colonial endeavor, it is not enough to escape a brawl and live to tell the tale. Threats must be subdued, petrified and humiliated if we are to gain any sense of control.

These animals are drawn from Victorian furniture, taken from the pages of *Strand Magazine's* article '*Animal' Furniture* by William Fitzgerald.⁴⁸ As animal-furniture hybrids, they occupy a unique space in the taxonomy of kitsch: while alive, these animals once posed a bodily menace to the very owners who petrified them. As household ornaments, they stand as relics of anthropocentrism and the colonial endeavor. Spread throughout the work-- whether as free-standing furnishings or tucked into larger collages-- the animals bear unexpected witness to the hierarchy of Western civilization (figure 9).

⁴⁶ Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 23.

⁴⁷ Thompson, *The American Replacement of Nature*, 1.

⁴⁸ See William G. Fitzgerald. "'Animal' Furniture." *The Strand Magazine*, 1896, 273-80.

A concoction of anxiety, grief and fear is what shoved these fellows in the margins of this little drama. That fear— the fear of our Victorian forebears— is still at play as we negotiate (and steal) boundaries, rights and privilege from one another. It is the same fear of our American compatriots and that of Western European nativists, who attempt to exert control over tides of newcomers who seem to threaten their way of life and, therefore, their claim to authority, privilege and access. The metaphor here recalls anti-Islamic sentiment sweeping America and Europe; a sentiment that, in its darkest iterations, takes the form of hate crimes, widespread suspicion and silencing campaigns. In the United States, hatred of others contends with freedom of speech and freedom of religion; nonetheless, anti-Hispanic, anti-Islamic and anti-Black xenophobia and brutality are a codified part of American culture.^{49 50} Once kept in the margins themselves, these forms of subjugation are now free to roam, seeping into national discourse and presidential Tweets. Stripped of rights, dignity, opportunity and self-expression, these people are subjected to a cruel dehumanization (figures 10-12). A calculated effort of silencing— of petrifying, of taming the untamable— is the byproduct of the threatened colonial power's attempts at self-preservation.⁵¹ It becomes another attempt at coping with a threatening world.

Trump's Twitter and the Cherubic Symphony: Spectacle, Melodrama, and Penis Jokes

“The ideology of America wants to establish reassurance through Imitation. But profit defeats ideology, because the consumers want to be thrilled not only by the guarantee of the Good but also by the shudder of the Bad. And so at Disneyland, along with Mickey Mouse and the kindly

⁴⁹ See Brian Levin, "Islamophobia in America: Rise in Hate Crimes Against Muslims Shows What Politicians Say Matters." *Newsweek*, July 21, 2017.

⁵⁰ For an extended discussion about the systemic oppression of African Americans after Reconstruction, see Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

⁵¹ For an in-depth examination of European governments' backlash against a growing Islamic population, see Sasha Polakow-Suransky, *Go Back to Where You Came From: The Backlash Against Immigration and the Fate of Western Democracy*. (New York: Nation Books, 2017).

bears, there must also be, in tactile evidence, Metaphysical Evil (the Haunted Mansion) and Historical Evil (the Pirates), and in the waxwork museums, alongside the Venuses de Milo, we must find the graverobbers, Dracula, Frankenstein, the Wolf Man, Jack the Ripper, the Phantom of the Opera. Alongside the Good Whale there is the restless, plastic form of the Bad Shark. Both at the same level of credibility, both at the same level of fakery. Thus, on entering his cathedrals of iconic reassurance, the visitor will remain uncertain whether his final destiny is hell or heaven, and so will consume new promises."⁵²

- **Umberto Eco**, *Travels in Hyperreality*

An unashamed myopic melodrama underpins this work (figures 13-15). A thousand cherubs pick up their violins. The great mourning has begun. Campy spectacle has been made of the most vulnerable of human emotions: grief. A phallic symbol has replaced the Christ child as a sort of puerile joke— the acme of American narcissism and idiocy.

This is the face of contemporary American politics: flat blabber, of which the Short Fingered Vulgarian is but the fated spawn. Is Little Rocket Man's ICBM as funny as a giant rotting banana? Can the House Investigation Committee garner as much viewership as a reality-TV-star-president being spanked by a porn star? Is Twitter an apt space for political and cultural dialogue? Where is the space for mourning in a culture that only has 140 characters to express itself? Can you be sad at Walt Disney World?

The way in which Umberto Eco has captured the essence of American experience in the above quote has struck me in both its language and imagery as inseparable from American identity; as Americans, we yearn to be seduced by the Bad and rescued by the Good not only in our entertainment, but also in our politics. What is it about amusement and American culture that has put us in this political predicament? How has our thirst for spectacle left us in such an egregious mess?

⁵² Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 57-58.

In his work *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Neil Postman foresaw this flattening of American politics some 20 years before the rise of Trump.⁵³ As a writer warning of the effects of 24/7 news coverage and reality TV mingling with politics, Postman cautioned us against the effects of entertainment saturating public affairs as the Huxleyan soma that would prove far more threatening than any form of state-sponsored control à la 1984. By his account, the greatest threat to American democracy was ease and entertainment; gone are the days in which citizens carry a copy of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* in their back pocket.⁵⁴ But his warning has been no match for the American lotus-eaters, unquenchable in their thirst for indolent diversion.⁵⁵ My work plays into America's bad habit, its addiction to the flat and digestible at the expense of larger quandaries we hope to keep at bay.

Conclusion

As artists we aim to create spaces for conversation and contemplation; it is our job to ask, *What have we forgotten? What do they want us to forget?* We make strange tools of

⁵³ See Neil Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

⁵⁴ Ibid., 34-35; also James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 45.

⁵⁵ In Greek mythology, the lotus-eaters are a race of people who consume the narcotic lotus fruit and enjoy an apathetic and lethargic existence.

flotsam and jetsam;⁵⁶ unorthodox inquiries into the umbrae of collective memory; small cavities in the composition of amnesia.⁵⁷

My thoughts oscillate between the real and the unreal; the built and the unbuildable; the spaces in between plywood sheets. At present, a rumpus dwells there demanding consolation. I am a lady of hyperreal sorrows, a lotus-eating American trying to make strange tools to see what we forgot.

⁵⁶ Alva Noë introduced the idea of strange tools in his book *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015). On page 101, he describes strange tools as 'useless technology', writing: "Artists make strange tools because tools... are critical for human beings. They organize our lives and, in part, make us who we are. Works of art put our making practices and our tendency to rely on what we make, and so also our practices of thinking and talking and making pictures, on display. Art puts us on display. Art unveils us to ourselves."

⁵⁷ I owe this idea to Arlie Russell Hochschild's discussion of "structures of amnesia" in *Strangers in Their Own Land*. She explains the idea of a malleable collective memory molded by those in power to serve their agendas at the expense of the marginalized.



Figure 1. *The World That Drowned*. 2018.



Figure 2. *So Small, So Sweet, So Soon*. 2017-2018.



Figure 3. *So Small, So Sweet, So Soon*. 2017-2018.



Figure 4. *So Small, So Sweet, So Soon*. 2017-2018.



Figure 5. *The World That Drowned*. 2018.



Figure 6. *The World That Drowned*. 2018.



Figure 7. *The World That Drowned*. 2018.



Figure 8. *The World That Drowned*. 2018.

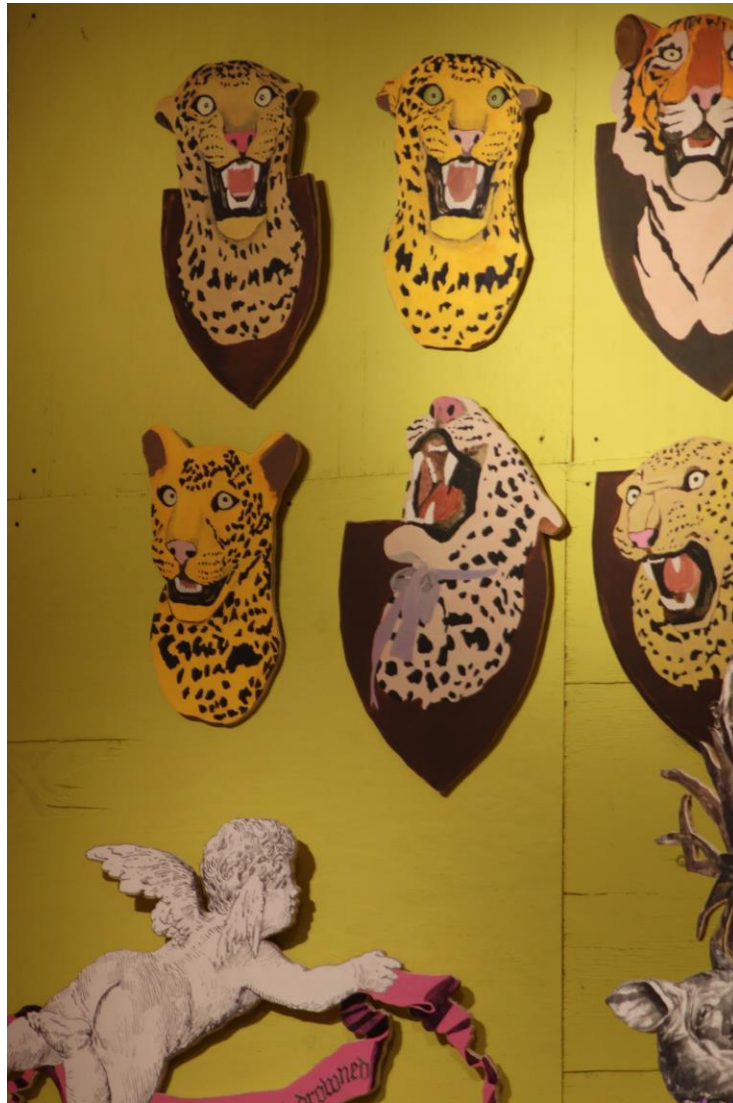


Figure 9. *The World That Drowned*. 2018.



Figure 10. *The World That Drowned*. 2018.



Figure 11. *So Small, So Sweet, So Soon.* 2017-2018.

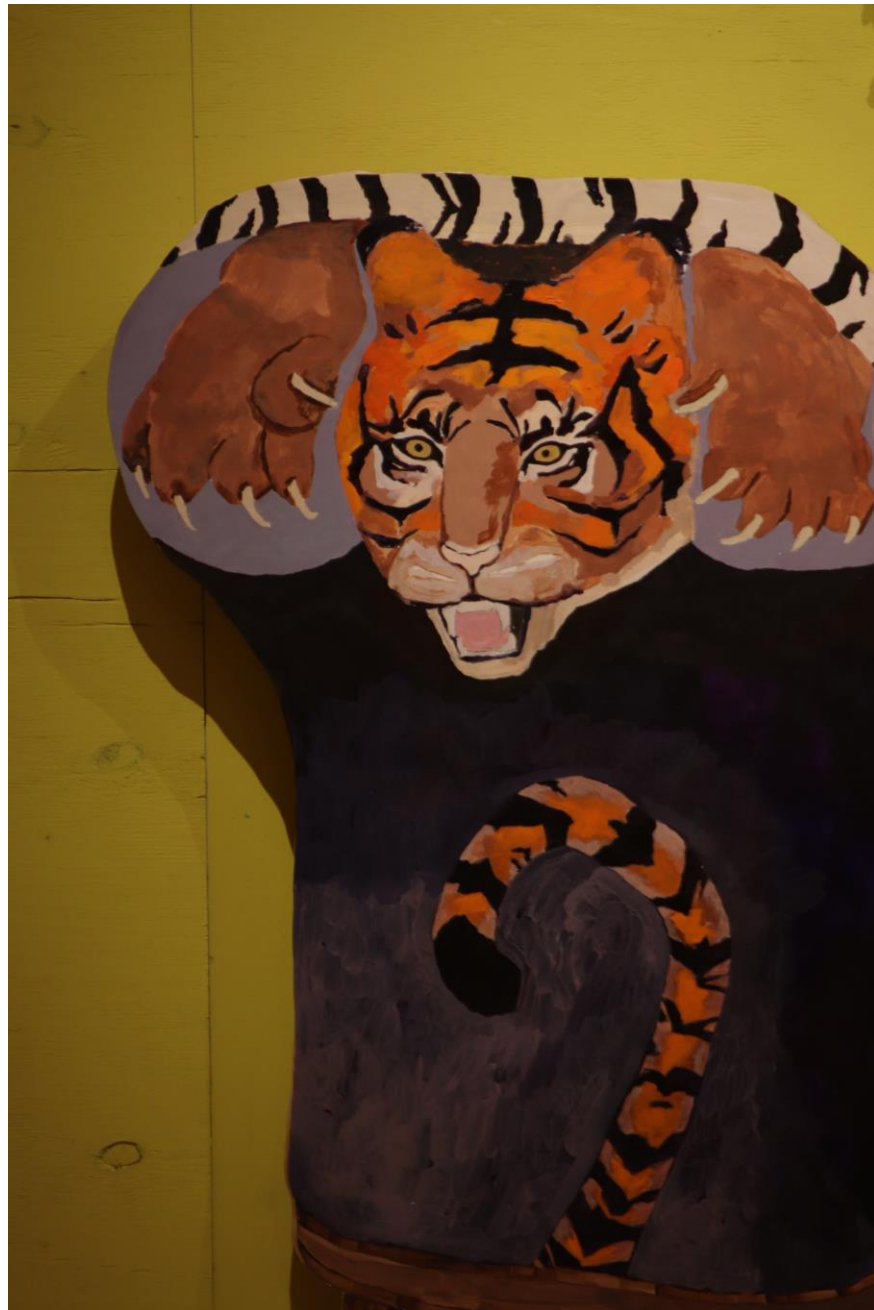


Figure 12. *The World That Drowned*. 2018.

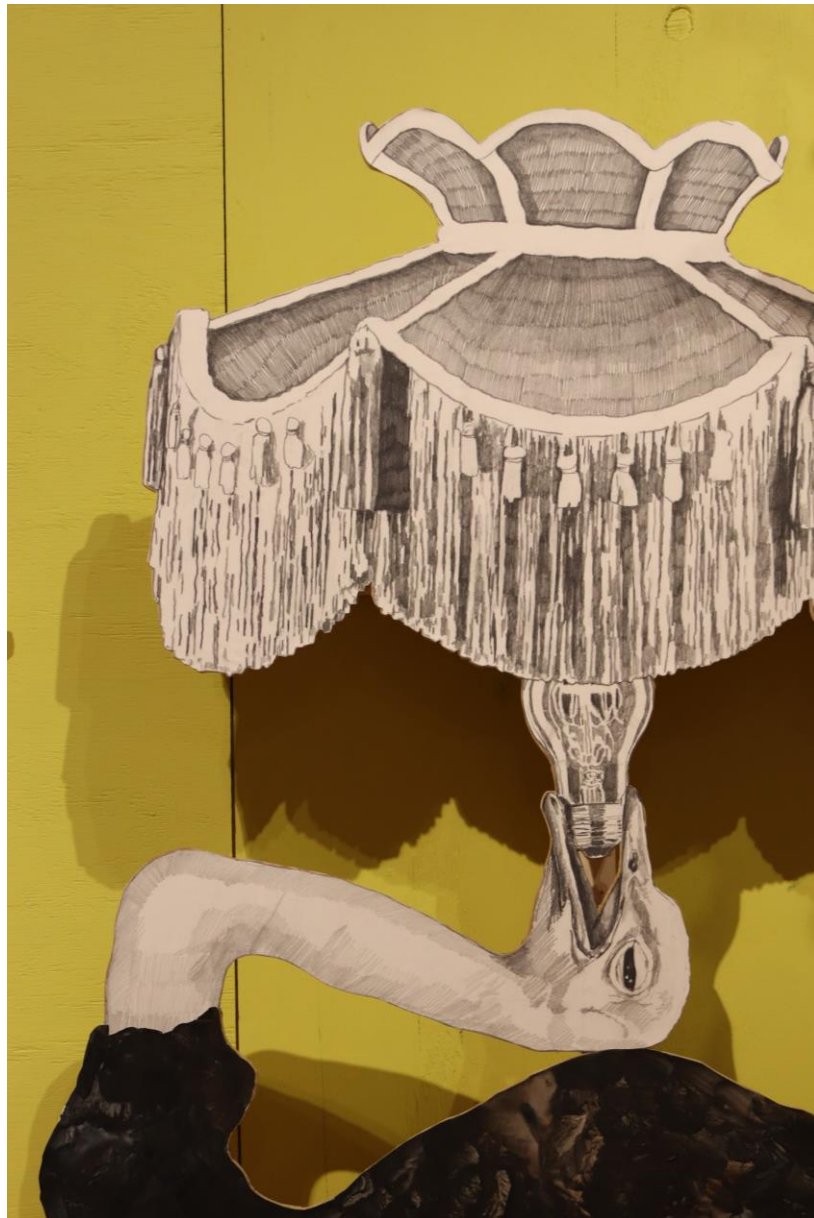


Figure 13. *The World That Drowned*. 2018.



Figure 14. *So Small, So Sweet, So Soon*. 2017-2018.



Figure 15. *So Small, So Sweet, So Soon*. 2017-2018.



Figure 16. Installation View. *So Small, So Sweet, So Soon & The World That Drowned*. 2018.

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