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Double Zero

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Double Zero

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements of
Master of Fine Arts at
Virginia Commonwealth University

By
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MFA, Photography & Film
Virginia Commonwealth University
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Director: Paul Thulin,
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Abstract

DOUBLE ZERO
By Anthony Smith, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014
Major Director: Paul Thulin, Graduate Director, Photography and Film

This thesis follows the trajectory of my artistic practice over the past two years, which has led to the installation of my thesis exhibition titled, *Double Zero*. I hope to position the work among its art and cultural terms by exploring how I have expanded my research concerning Situationist and Marxist theory as well as developed a broader photographic studio practice driven by material experimentation, play, and an investigation into how we live and interact with commodities through media.

Introduction

My work in graduate school has seen a gradual shift from a practice rooted in the photographic project as a means to explore and document personal experiences rendered as narrative in my life, to one that uses the camera as a tool to create new sites of experience. My process has expanded into a studio practice driven by material experimentation, play, and an investigation into how we live and interact with commodities through media and as a person. The transition from a project driven workflow to one of creating autonomous photographic objects allows for my artistic output to center around how these objects can interact with each other in an exhibition. This thesis will trace the trajectory of this shift as well as define the conceptual context for my thesis exhibition show.

Background: Art Reproduction

Before entering graduate school, I worked as a digital retoucher and art reproductionist for a commercial art gallery that specialized in creating inkjet prints for public commercial spaces or for the hospitality market. Beyond retouching and printing stock photographs we also reproduced original works on paper like paintings or drawings. Many of the originals were physically made in less than a few minutes on boards as small as six by six inches specifically to be photographed or scanned, embellished digitally and reproduced up to sixty inches or larger in numbers ranging from one to thousands. Beyond adjusting the camera's settings there was no means for creative license in this work, my sole instructions were to reproduce the work as accurately as possible. After the work was transcribed to a digital file I was given instructions on how the piece should be altered in order to correspond with any number of design choices.

These images were often considered to be 'open' editions, or editions without a limit. Often, the artists used false names to categorize and diversify their work. According to Walter Benjamin, the authenticity of such an image would lie in the original rather than the copies that we reproduced.¹ However, the small painting is produced specifically with its ease of reproduction in mind by using, for example, matte paint that would not glare from studio lights or working

¹Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, translated by J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2008).

within the confining color gamut of a specific print process. The originals are made to be transparent, even though the ease of their reproduction not only maintains their visibility as commodities but also influences their method of production.

I believe that there is a continued tension about authenticity as reproduction becomes easier, more mobile and cheaper. In the case of the Internet, many works of art are completely free for the public to view, download and print themselves, thereby allowing access to images of art that would never have been made available to them before. In a time when everything can be commoditized, the accumulation of an object's reproductions through images characterizes its visibility as art and to characterize it as a commodity.

I am left to wonder if a lonely hotel visitor sees this art in their room and experiences the manufactured aura of it without ever considering that every room contains the same identical work? Could this simulation then overshadow the original object or become (in a sense) more real than the original, in that it is privileged by quantity, size and visibility? Does it matter?

Seemingly anticipated by Benjamin, the growing ease of reproduction today has created a system in which the art being made certainly, "becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility."² Most likely, these small source paintings scanned for printing were simply inauthentic from the beginning, made to become decoration in a corporate space to uphold and maintain the perceived

² Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, translated by J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2008).

value of the property. Invisible to the world, except as a record of their use and exchange value in relation to other commodities.

Because my artistic practice involves the creation of art objects, I came to recognize the dilemma of my inability to create a photograph that could exist without also being a commodity. I became aware that the camera itself (along with the digital software I use) is also manufactured with built-in obsolescence, evidenced in the sometimes out-fashioned gestures of the tools embedded within it. For me, the photograph as art stops being a window into another view for the audience to witness, but an object itself, a digital file ultimately ready to reproduce itself as any number of customizable commoditized objects (fig.1).



Fig 1. Anthony Smith, *Retouched Backdrop*, Digital Print to Vinyl with Grommets, 2014

The Portrait Studio

My transition from reproductionist to an artist specifically engaging a pervasive language of commodity began in a place that allowed me to investigate a system established in the mutation of photographs to commodity, the Mall portrait studio. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the portrait studio functioned as a site for making portraits and documenting families. The act itself of having a portrait made was often in memorial of a life event and was considered a document for future generations. Sitters wore formal attire and were unaware of how to operate the camera themselves. The cost was generally high and poorer families were less likely to have portraits made, although still relatively cheaper than hiring a draughtsman. The family unit could be visually archived along with their private property or other symbolic objects.

The image of a contemporary family portrait from commercial studios does not carry the same weight today as our experiences are archived on devices at all moments. It is often used in entertainment media to parody the unnatural poses and the irony of its forced sentimentality. In a recent article, the Wall Street Journal claims, "The lights have gone off on another American tradition. The photographer that ran the portrait studios at Sears Holdings Corp., Wal-Mart Stores Incorporated and Babies 'R' Us abruptly closed its business, at least

temporarily ending a longtime retail tradition at those stores.”³ I am specifically interested in the corporate portrait studio found in shopping malls as a space to begin my work, not only for their dissipation as digital imaging technologies expand, but for my personal relationship to the imagery created through manufactured sentiment in a corporate space.

Instead of searching for subjects, I wanted to reverse the traditional documentary photography process and become the subject, photographed by someone else. The images created in the portrait studio become material for me to manipulate and re-imagine. I improvise with the props and backgrounds they have on hand to create impromptu arrangements documented by the photographer on duty as absurd relationships between objects. The absence of a visible sitter makes the objects become the subject itself. These plastic things, designed to outlive us, act as a reminder that, “this is not our world, but rather theirs. We dwell in the world of commodities imbued with their own language, interests, and will.”⁴ The pictures potentially reveal my evaporation as subject and photographer, leaving the backdrops and props to stand in as evidence of the portrait studio as a site of illusion and ultimately an artificial market construction.

Working within the software system that each studio constructs, I order digital files from them and further “enhance” the photos through the portrait

³ Karen Talley and Tom Gara, "Lasting Memories? The Sears Portrait Studio Shuts Down," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 5, 2013, accessed March 16, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323646604578405001071809788>.

⁴ Joshua Simon, *Neomaterialism* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/neo-materialism-part-one-the-commodity-and-the-exhibition>.

studio's proprietary image editing software after the shoot with help from the photographer. They are displayed as evidence of my collaboration with the photographer, and to also suggest the possibility for new experiences within the space. The desire to explore the portrait studio is my attempt to reconcile how my own memory and identity have been associated with an illusion created and maintained in a corporate environment.

In my work at the portrait studios, I tend to remove myself from the frame, not allowing the camera to capture me. Often I ask the cameraperson to back out on backdrops so that the illusion of believing the perspective in the painted scene is averted (fig.2). In the portrait studio I am able to confront the clichés and common tropes of vernacular photography without photographing the actual cliché itself, but rather an image of it, as seen in the image, Red Barn (Fig.4). While I was making Red Barn, I was interested in the scene from Don DeLillo's book, *White Noise* in which the protagonist Jack and his friend Murray go to a tourist attraction in their hometown known as the Most Photographed Barn in America. As people try to get an elevated view of the barn to photograph it, Murray says, "Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn."⁵ Much like the scene from *White Noise*, the portrait studio uses generic images as backgrounds to render them invisible, asking us to suspend our belief in the background as a real object but rather a part of a collective perception.

⁵ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking, 1985), 12-13.

I also want to suspend the event that is supposed to happen, and eventually switch the roles of photographer and subject to blur or at least complicate these distinctions. The pictures are confirmation of this performance, and I become a performer for an unknown audience rather than the cameraperson. I would argue that every customer who shows up to be photographed is aware of the audience that will view the picture, and as Walter Benjamin notes, “While facing the camera he knows he will ultimately face the public, the consumers who constitute the market...The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build up of the ‘personality’ outside of the studio.”⁶ My attempt to remove myself from the lens underlines the “inexplicable emptiness” that Luigi Pirandello encounters under the weight of commodifying himself as an actor captured and displayed on film in his 1915 novel, *Shoot!*. The camera deprives him of his own “reality, life, [and] voice in order to be changed into a mute image.”⁷ The portraits made of the photographers clarify the camera’s potential to render the likeness of a person as unmoving image or product, left perpetually presenting themselves to an unknown audience (fig.2).

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, translated by J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2008).

⁷ Luigi Pirandello and C. K. Moncrieff, *Shoot!: The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1926), 56.



Fig 2. Anthony Smith, *Rabbit Hole*, 2013



Fig 3. Anthony Smith, *Tiffany*, 2013



Fig. 4. Anthony Smith, *Red Barn*, 2013

Playtime

I am still curious about the value held in the traditional portrait sitter to photographer collaboration, and what it means to lose it in a culture that is becoming highly automated. These images are designed for digital transmission over the Internet and are printed no larger than eight by ten inches, around the paper size capacity of most consumer desktop inkjet printers. The image from the portrait studio is a product carefully situated between quality and the speed at which the information can be moved and stored easily on corporate servers with limited capacity. The file is mutable, easily sent through the web, and when enlarged for mural printing contains the indication of its small file size for efficient movement through the web by its pixilation, or what filmmaker and writer Hito Steyrl describes as a “poor image” or “the debris of audiovisual production.”⁸ As camera device technology expands, I am interested in the point where collaboration between a human photographer and sitter reaches its terminus. The low resolution of these images may be an indication of this extinction.

As I worked with the staff at different portrait studios it became aware to me that these photographers use an automated system that allows for very little creative control, similar to my previous work as a reproductionist. They have been separated from the work that they are doing. Literary theorist Peter Barry defines this alienation as, “The state which comes about when the worker is

⁸ Hito Steyrl and Franco Berardi, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 31.

de-skilled and made to perform fragmented, repetitive tasks in a sequence of whose nature and purpose he or she has no overall grasp.”⁹ Often the exposure on the images was too low, and the photographer had no ability to adjust the settings. Thus, the images are grainy and full of noise fragments and dead pixels. These artifacts are a reminder of the estranged production method of the photograph and the objects it tries to capture. I would often choose, for instance, all black objects to further reveal the inability to accurately illustrate the objects under these conditions.

However, I do worry that my critique simply makes visible the misery of the Spectacle. I refer to Martin Jenkins’ “Introduction” to *Society of the Spectacle*, in which he warns that simply critiquing the “ills of modern society” can become part of the problem in that it becomes a “weightless moralism...and ends up a badge of middle class distinction that is nothing but a reflection of the symbolic capital exercised in a different set of consumer choices.” But, “if the spectacle is a social relation between people that is mediated by an accumulation of images that serve to alienate us from a genuinely lived life,”¹⁰ then I hope that the images can serve as a way to ultimately re-present another truth behind the illusion and become an impetus for relief from this alienation. I do not want the project to operate with me acting as a cultural anthropologist unearthing the remnants of the disappearing portrait studio with photo evidence of its inhabitants and

⁹ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 106.

¹⁰ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Eastbourne, United Kingdom: Soul Bay Press, 2009), 4.

artifacts, but rather an attempt to render the cameraperson as the visible creative author, and also to create a brief atmosphere of playfulness within the automated work environment.

In *The Real Experiment*, Allen Kaprow describes a history of what he calls “lifelike art,” of which “the purpose was therapeutic: to reintegrate the piecemeal reality we take for granted. Not just intellectually, but directly as experience in this moment.”¹¹ The banal experience of being photographed or looking at wallet photos of newborn babies is just one of the many cultural experiences that we might generally take part in without giving too much attentive thought. I have tried to be attentive in this act and to keep a wide imagination. Kaprow inspires me to think of art as a way of looking at all of life, and most importantly to see my work not as a statement to be made, but a dialogue to begin.

In June of 1958, after Debord founded the Situationist International group, they issued a bulletin titled, *Internationale Situationniste #1*, in which they defined play in the chapter, “Contribution to a Situationist Definition of Play” as being, “characterized by the disappearance of any element of competition. The question of winning or losing, previously almost inseparable from ludic activity, appears linked to all other manifestations of the tension between individuals for the appropriation of goods. The feeling of the importance of winning in the game, that it is about concrete satisfactions—or, more often than not, illusions—is the wretched product of a wretched society.” Not only can play be a break from a life

¹¹ Allen Kaprow, “The Real Experiment,” *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Edited by Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 201.

of survival and production, but also should be integrated into our ordinary lives. The notion of play in the portrait studio or my studio may not be completely released from competition, however Debord and company continue that, "its goal must be at the very least to provoke conditions favorable to direct living."¹² This definition led me to begin creating my own space and objects where I could engage in play in a more direct and everyday manner.

¹² *Situationist International* (1). June 1958. "Situationist International Texts." Situationist International Online, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/si1.html>.

Creating My Own Studio

After my experiences working in the commercial portrait studios, I decided to start creating similar props in my studio as a means to participate in the same playful activity of arranging in front of the camera, which serves to cement the ephemeral acts of making and combining through documentation. The viewfinder then becomes the site of photographic activity and translation where I am performing or arranging rather than showing or injecting meaning into the materials.

For me, the most important part of being in the studio is the ability to play, or the opportunity to try multiple tasks while being open to failure. In the portrait studios, I learned quickly to accept not having control over how the photographs were composed, and instead had to rely on my ability to articulate what I wanted to the photographer. This acceptance has carried over in my studio work. The work is always situated in-between what I set out to make, and what is actually achieved, while being open to accidents and mistakes as part of the process. The photographs of these objects derive their meaning from their making and documentation, even if these objects are completed by following tasks outlined by others or by following a set of instructions. Like the DIY enthusiast, the act of making and sharing often outweighs the product being made.

The photographs of the objects act as a reminder of the accumulation and curating of objects and commodities used for function and to reinforce personal

identity indicative of our lives today. Often represented by the over abundance of utilitarian photographs of objects sold on EBay and Craigslist, or pristine product photography. My studio operates similarly with me photographing objects I have found online and or objects I have made. The object must be reproduced as image to be visible in the marketplace. Often I am interested in what lies behind the subject matter of these photographs, the indication of its own making, or its owner's attempt to instill a false sense of rarity or value to the objects through creative means. I order objects like silicone microwave trays and paddle-ball toys (fig.5) to use as props, all based on their appearance in an online photograph. Often the object I receive differs greatly visually from the photograph from which my decision to purchase is made.

I make new objects to be photographed, generally from easily accessible materials associated with Do-it-yourself culture like PVC, fabric, foam, and drywall. I am interested in the Do-it-your-selfer's quest to use cheap or inexpensive items to create these sets to stage an illusion, or to precisely re-create props from science fiction movies or other forms of popular culture. For me, the camera's limited vision acts as a second type of illusion; one of cropped depth and flattened space. In the studio I want to force a dialogue between the hand-made things, the mass-produced object and the cold, flat, and synthetic nature of photographic reproduction itself.

My practice is informed by the history of abstract painting as it correlates with the fabricated appearance indicative of commercial décor aesthetics and mass reproduction. In this sense abstract painting is not only defined by the

history of western painting and Modernism, but also more precisely with the vapid reproductions used in contemporary corporate décor as a means to emulate accepted tropes of art making. While working as a reproductionist, before printing images categorized as “Abstract”, “Minimal”, or “Contemporary”, one task was to zoom in and carefully remove dust from the images. As the digital file was magnified I noticed the strangeness of the scale shift of the brush strokes when making mural sized prints from small source paintings. Similarly, using soft directional lighting to photograph source images on a copy stand or large industrial scanners adds an illusion of depth or relief from the shadows of the raised details on the canvases.

This reproduction workflow involves interacting with the images I make in digital space as well, using such software as Photoshop and After Effects, which allow me to engage with multiple layers of imagery at one time. Not only are most of the items I photograph constructed by hand as a set, the digital process itself is just as reliant on my hand. I am reminded of Jeff Wall speaking about his use of the computer in analog picture making: “The more you use computers in picture making, the more “hand-made” the picture becomes. Oddly, then, digital technology is leading, in my work at least, toward a greater reliance on hand-making because the assembly and montage of the various parts of the picture is done very carefully by hand.”¹³ The selections I make become a way of composing, similar to cutting forms out of paper for collage. Working with analog

¹³ Thierry de Duve et al., *Jeff Wall*, 2nd ed. (London: Phaidon Press, 2002), 26.

photographic methods in tandem with imaging software allows each to influence the final form of the work.

In my thesis exhibition, the images I took in the studio are then fabricated into art objects with the same materials used in commercial hotel art production. I want to create an object that situates itself as a window into another viewpoint and opposingly, one that is constantly reminding you of its own objecthood. I am interested in the fundamental strength of a photograph's ability to render extreme detail of one space onto another flat object's surface.

In the three traditionally framed prints I am exhibiting in my thesis exhibition, I make the walls of my studio the main subject. In one piece titled, *Master Splinter* (fig.6) the wall itself is carved away to reveal the faux brick backdrop behind it. A piece of wood props up the wall in which a green slime oozes from the top. The frame is installed by leaning it against the gallery wall to create space behind the frame. By mounting my print to a stretcher bar and floating the image flush with the frame I can gain the depth of a stretched painting to question the interior space inside and behind the box of the frame. However, the flatness of the photographic print itself and the sliver of studio floor left in the picture make the photograph's inherent illusion apparent and comical.

In the most minimal image in the show titled, *Portable Hole* (fig.7) drywall is painted and carved away and lit with harsh studio lights to underline it's recession into space and mimicking the overhead lighting present in most gallery spaces. In this case, the print is recessed all the way to the back of the frame, implying that space is extending back into the wall, emphasizing our natural

position of looking at photographic images as windows into a false perspective.
The frame reinforces the two dimensionality of the print itself as a flat
photographic reproduction.



Fig 7. Anthony Smith, *Portable Hole*, 2014.

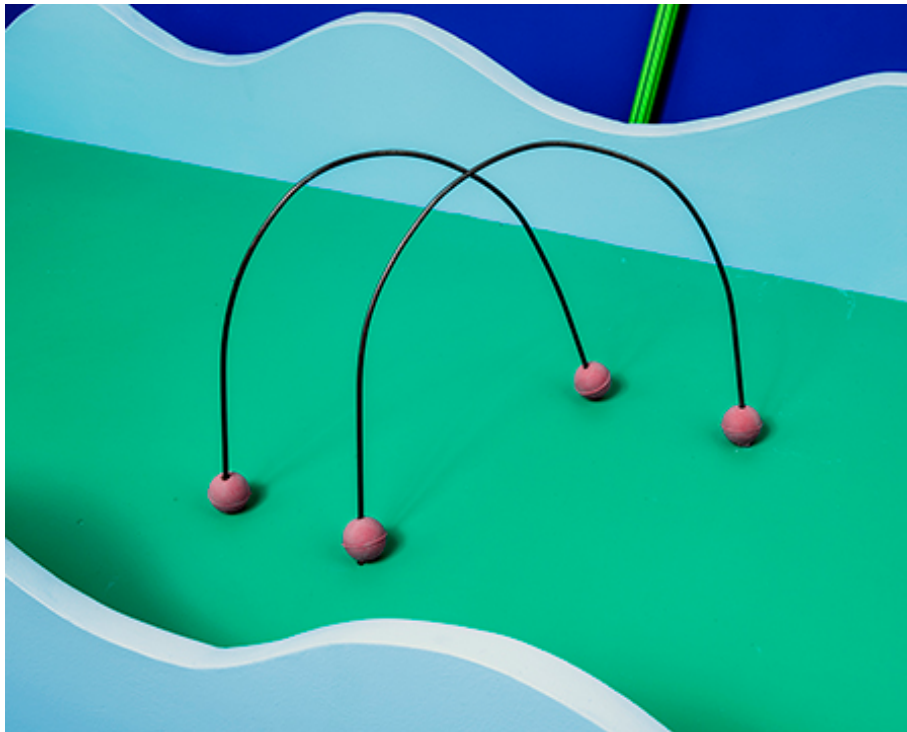


Fig.5. Anthony Smith. *Double Dare*, 2014.



Fig 6. Anthony Smith, *Master Splinter*, 2014.

TV Memory

The camera's vision is impartial and direct, but through different methods of documentation, the image created can vary drastically from the art object itself. The objects then are comparable to television and movie sets, rendered most acceptable for the camera's vision. Often this means disregarding the visual perspective of the contestants or studio audience and certainly the actors or host. In most cases the camera is not normally allowed to look 'behind the scenes'. Further, these images can be manipulated through image-editing software to enhance and distort the original image to reinforce this cropped perspective.

To explore memory aside from the portrait studio that I frequented as a child, my focus shifted to mining archives of found VHS tapes and old television shows on YouTube that pre-date the Internet. Rather than a sentimental yearning for the images from the past, the source images become abstract material rooted in both the past and present from which new work can be created. For example, the cliché images of red roses made popular in stock photography become a historical texture to recombine with other imagery in *A Kiss from A Rose* (fig.9). After I find images that I want to remake, I begin by making a drawing of the image. After the image is drawn I recreate the image in physical space to be documented by the camera as close to the perspective and architecture of the initial drawing as possible.

For my thesis exhibition, I am concerned with the same desire that led me to the portrait studio. I am interested in the way my memory is tangled up within the popular culture of my own experiences. In a *Pitchfork* review of the album, *Let's do pushups and cry at the same time*, by Torn Hawk, Sam Hockley-Smith asks, "What are we actually talking about when we talk about nostalgia? Taylor Swift's Polaroid album cover for *1989*? *Ghostbusters*? The Beatles? Nirvana? Limp Bizkit? *Illmatic*?" He asserts, "Nostalgia is fascinating and infuriating because of how specific it is: my nostalgia is not your nostalgia. But when it's used correctly and on the right person, it's an emotional weapon, able to warp hazy memories into strong feelings."¹⁴ I am left the task of interpreting images related to my own memory of popular culture in an attempt to create new meaning from them through re-articulation.

I became specifically intrigued by the game show, a program that works like a small model of capitalism. Contestants compete with each other for commodities or cash in games and puzzles that generally test knowledge, chance and/or athletic skill. In shows like *The Price is Right*, the knowledge often tested is the contestant's ability to guess product prices. In effect, the 'best' consumer ultimately is awarded the prize. Further, the seemingly vast amount of contestant pools pictured as the studio audience, who typically shout encouragement and aid in a contestant's effort to guess the right price, implies

¹⁴ Sam Hockley-Smith, "Torn Hawk: *Let's Cry and Do Pushups at the Same Time*," *Pitchfork*, November 12, 2014, accessed January 5, 2015. <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/19912-luke-wyatt-lets-cry-and-do-pushups-at-the-same-time>.

that everyone has the chance to participate in the game, even if this is achieved by simply playing along at home.

Like many of my peers growing up in the late 1980s and early '90s I was raised by the television, and because home videos were limited or cost prohibitive, I often watched the same VHS tapes over and over again. By this time however, cable TV allowed for channels and programming to become more specific to niche markets. Networks like MTV spawned MTV2 and Nickelodeon that specifically marketed directly to children through advertising and programming. In 1987, *Double Dare* became the first game show for kids and aired on the Nickelodeon channel. The show received high ratings. According to Peggy Charren, president of Action for Children's Television, an advocacy group based in Massachusetts writing for *The New York Times*, *Double Dare* "average[d] a 3.0 Nielsen rating for the first six months of 1987, meaning that on average 1,053,000 households are tuned in. The show has one of the highest ratings for an original program airing on basic cable services." But, she warns, "there is always the potential for misuse in any format, and wouldn't you know that the commercial broadcasters would find out how to do that right away."¹⁵ The show seemed to garner little criticism for implicating children into commodity culture through product placement and brand advertising.

Similar to the illusion of space created by the portrait studio, these shows use sets to create dynamic visuals to stage an arena. The arena becomes a site

¹⁵ Glenn Collins, "Children's Game Show Captures Audiences," *The New York Times*, July 25, 1987, accessed May 1, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/07/25/style/children-s-game-show-captures-audiences.html>.

of play while also becoming a site of division over the competition for stylized products. According to Guy Debord, “Every single product represents the hope for a dazzling shortcut to the promised land of total consumption and is ceremoniously presented as the decisive entity.”¹⁶ The arena itself becomes a stage to highlight the appeal of the products as a necessary component for play while reinforcing the independent ownership of the commodity through imaging oneself as sole possessor for reproducible broadcast.

While mining for images to re-create, I look for in-between moments like a set change or a camera angle in which the illusion of the set is momentarily revealed by accident. The certainty of the objects becomes abstracted by my removal of them from the show’s original context. Further, the stillness of the image, stripped from its movement, “makes invisible it’s before and after”¹⁷ further contributing to the abstraction and absurdity of my hyper-representational image.

The archive of these shows placed on the Internet by fans allows for new reimagining and remixing of content that would otherwise be inaccessible. Images from the past offer a new context for humor because the original prestige of the commodities and production value has become outdated and unfashionable. The image then, as Debord notes, “reveals its essential poverty (which naturally comes to it from the misery of its production) too late. By then another object already carries the justification of the system and demands to be

¹⁶ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 69.

¹⁷ Kerstin Stremmel and Uta Grosenick, *Realism* (Köln: Taschen, 2004), 168.

acknowledged.”¹⁸ The absurdity of the generic commodities coupled with cliché production methods and the expensive commercial fabrication of the final images contradicts the inherent qualities of the source image.

In the studio, I seek to transform the poor image from its inherent degradation into a new object that is visible, hyper-sharp, and stagnant. Unlike the original videos ripped from old VHS copies, or videotaped re-runs uploaded to the Internet for quick consumption, these new objects now command contemplation rather than being, as Steryl notes, “perfectly integrated into an information capitalism thriving on compressed attention spans, on impression rather than immersion.”¹⁹

In two images in my thesis exhibition, *Air Balance* (fig. 8) and *Kiss From A Rose* (fig. 9), the stillness of the human subjects are reduced to inanimate objects that are immobilized not only by the camera but also engulfed by the subjectivity of the commodities that represent them. For instance, in *Air Balance* I am at once representing the comedian Jerry Seinfeld and the host of *Double Dare*, Marc Summers through generic and already obsolete white sneakers. The frozen figure is unable to express any characteristic functionality to the sneakers in the scene, so the individuality of the figure is deemed useless without them. The commodity controls and defines the consumer. Once again, the tiled floor sloping back creates an illusion of undefined space, while the actual

¹⁸ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 69.

¹⁹ Steyerl and Berardi, *The Wretched of the Screen*, 42.

photographic print to Plexiglas is hung with hardware to float it forward off the wall.

The photographs themselves are unmoving representations that act as placeholders for the original commodity but at the same time awkwardly suspend the action in the scene to take place with no moment before or after to gather context. The context of the gallery allows us to see the commodities pictured as they truly are, “characterized by a suspended duration of being, allowing them an existence beyond use and exchange value.”²⁰ The generic nature of the commodities pictured implies that they could stand in for any number of other objects, indicating the absurdity of our current human-commodity interaction.

²⁰ Joshua Simon, *Neomaterialism* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/neo-materialism-part-one-the-commodity-and-the-exhibition>.



Fig 8. Anthony Smith, *Air Balance*, 2015



Fig 9. Anthony Smith, *A Kiss from A Rose*, 2015

Conclusion

During the last two years, I have transitioned from a practice that saw the photograph as an image acting as a window into another perspective, to realizing the potential of the photograph as an object in itself, thereby breaking down my traditional notion of medium specificity by exploring ideas about painting through the lens of a reproductionist. Further, I have come to see the art object as first and foremost a commodity. This leaves me to question the way we currently interact with commodities and how the entertainment media through which they are made visible effect us on a personal level. However this questioning in my work is beneath the surface, whereas my studio practice of playfulness and humor serve as both a veneer and vehicle to transmit the underlying criticality. I approach my practice like a comedian; I want to make the audience laugh while innocuously questioning our mediated society. Humor allows me to make value from the way in which commodity culture is engulfing us. In my thesis exhibition I am rendering the language of the obsolete commodity into visual form through comedy as well as the aesthetic devices and the hardware of corporate art and design.

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