NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

DOCUMENTATION OF THE ONE-PERSON EXHIBITION

A DOCUMENTATION OF THE ONE-PERSON EXHIBITION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN

BY

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DEKALB, IL

MAY, 2021
CATALOG

One-Person Exhibition

By

Gretchen Schreiber

The following work is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree at Northern Illinois University. The work was produced between October 2020 and February 2021. It was presented in an exhibition from February 7th to February 13th, 2021 in the Annette and Jerry Johns Gallery, DeKalb, Illinois.

List of Works

1. Abandon hope all ye who enter here, wood and concrete, (2), 12” x 12” x 60”, 2021
2. Dandelions and Dog Leashes, Wood, artificial flowers, glass, 47” x 61” x 23”, 2020
3. Rough Waters in the Tunnel of Love, wood, wheels, 47” x 32” x 32”, 2021
4. Come to my Window, Topanga, wood, mirror, variable, 2020
5. Wet, wood, panel, pool ladder, resin, acrylic, photograph, 31” x 31” x 31”, 2020
**ill_be_waiting_in_the_wings**

**Objectives:**

*ill_be_waiting_in_the_wings* explores concepts of performativity of self, identity construction, authenticity, perceived truths and constructed realities.

I have come to the realization that my perspective of the world and consequent actions and reactions may have been molded by a digitally constructed gaze. We live in a world that is dominated by social media and the obsessive need to connect; where individuals are hyper aware of each other’s movements; where we have immediate access to the personal histories of peers and strangers; where moments are permanently catalogued as images, captions and posts; where privacy is an illusion; where reality is subjective.

The work in *ill_be_waiting_in_the_wings* exists as sculptures that are based on common tropes seen in film and television; scenes that are familiar but unlikely to have played out in our real lives. The objects present snapshots of daydreamt realities derived from screen-based suggestions of what is possible. By substituting the self as character, the sculptures shed light on the effort required to produce and maintain selves for an audience, and the incongruity between the lives we dreamt of, the lives we have, and the lives we present to assumed audiences. By presenting cropped representations of familiar scenes, I draw attention to the curatorial effort that is involved with the presentation of self and to the (mis)representation of identity that occurs in the digital world.
**Historical and Artistic Influences:**

**John Ruskin**

English art critic and scholar, John Ruskin, proposed that the viewing and making of objects contains an element of spirituality that could not be replicated by machines. In his book, *The Lamp of Memory*, Ruskin said, “that spirit which is given only by the hand and eye of the workman, never can be recalled,” meaning the making of objects contains a life-force that is encased in the object that is created, and no machine can replicate this almost mystical process (p. 160). While living in the midst of a digital revolution, Ruskin reminds us of the importance of making by hand, human connection, physical spaces, and physical objects.

**Edouard Manet’s Olympia (1863)**

Discussions of dismantling the male gaze have echoed through art school hallways for decades, yet when learning about the classics, art students are still shown artworks depicting unsuspecting nude or sexualized women who were painted or sculpted by men. Edouard Manet’s painting, *Olympia* (1863), caused outrage when it was first exhibited at Musée d’Orsay in Paris because he depicted the subject, a nude woman, confronting the male gaze by looking out at the viewer. This was a tremendous departure from usual depictions of women in art, and opened the door for new modes of representation.

The sculptures presented in my thesis exhibition were designed to look like they were constructed for a set that actors would perform within, and the show title, *ill_be_waiting_in_the_wings* is a reference the phrase often used in theater to indicate a person standing off-stage waiting to perform. Thus, the references to performance encourage the
audience to locate themselves within the work, imagining themselves as the subject rather than
objectifying another person, or specifically, without objectifying a female subject.

*Aleia Murawski and Sam Copeland*

Chicago-based artists, Aleia Murawski and Sam Copeland comment on the voyeuristic
phenomenon of Internet performativity by fabricating banal scenes such as morning breakfast or
the grocery store check-out line. The scenes, though, are miniatures that act as sets for the artists’
pet snails to be documented within for short films or photographs. The meticulously fabricated
snail scenes poke fun at the carefully staged images posted by social media users and influencers
that are meant to appear effortless, but ultimately skew perceptions of what is real or authentic.
My thesis work similarly places the viewer as both a voyeur and participant, and urges them to
question authenticity and reality.

*Guan Xiao*

Chinese sculptor, Guan Xiao, arranges everyday objects related to Chinese iconography against
surreal backdrops. The objects that Xiao creates act as visual cues that are both nostalgic and
referential to our modern digital society. By staging her sculptures against backdrops, Xiao
creates a vantage point that implies an audience. This compositional choice creates an aspect of
performance and also provides an entry point for viewers to place themselves within the work.
Xiao and I employ similar tactics in fabricating objects and scenes that imply performance,
adding layers of self-consciousness to the work while also including the audience in recognizing
the simulated farse in which we all willingly participate.
Structural Concepts:

Sitcoms

I grew up watching cable TV sitcoms geared towards teenagers and, upon reflecting on them, noticed many of the same scenes play out in different shows. For example, the trope of an attractive neighbor of the opposite sex becoming best friends with the show’s protagonist was a scenario that occurred in most of the sitcoms that I watched. Almost as common was said hot teenager having unregulated access to the neighbor’s bedroom via an outdoor ladder leaned up against their window (see: Clarissa Explains it All, Dawson’s Creek, Boy Meets World, etc.). Storylines like these created homes in my subconscious, and I began to develop unrealistic ideas of what my life would someday be like. I now realize that this storyline was devised to entice heterosexual audience members and play into hopes that an attractive member of the opposite sex would one day appear to save them from agonizing adolescence.

As an adult, I again act as a voyeur as I did when I watched sitcoms, and I watch others present versions of their lives, or the lives they wish they had, on social media. Through carefully curated squares, users project images as truth, presenting themselves in a light in which they’d like to be seen. Rather than longing for a life that may never come to us, social media users can design ideal scenes and perform in them in front of an audience. These notions of performativity and voyeurism inspired me to revisit the television tropes that I grew up watching and manifest them into physical objects. The sculptures that I make are based on these tropes and encourage viewers to imagine themselves in the role of the protagonist, thus activating the daydream.
**Color Scheme**

The pastel pink and teal color schemes within my work are pulled from the exteriors of roadside or desert motels. I look at these places as staged oases and temporary escapes from everyday life, similar to the bottled paradise that social media users attempt to capture and present. Neon lights and fake palm trees convey tropical utopias, while they are mere facades for itchy sheets and bland continental breakfasts. Both roadside motels and staged social media content attempt to portray a kind of paradise, but both are cheap facades concealing banal realities.

**Lighting**

The soft, pink lighting in my exhibition was achieved using photo gels used in theater lighting. The use of the material itself was meaningful because the gels reference performance, which ties into the philosophical concepts of performativity and voyeurism that are referenced in my work. Upon reading David Foster Wallace’s collection of short stories, *Both Flesh and Not*, I discovered the word “crepuscular,” which means, “of or resembling twilight.” He again uses this word in his book, *Infinite Jest*, describing crepuscular as, “Ground floors’ lit windows laying little rugs of light out into their lawns. Porch lights that go on automatically when you stroll by. A threnody of sirens somewhere north of the Charles. Bare trees creaking in the wind” (Wallace, p. 556). I thought this description was beautiful, and it was a perfect adjective to describe the feeling of a daydream that I attempted to capture in my work: an in-between veil dividing fantasy and reality. I also think that twilight aptly describes a time of change or realization, much like the realization that a child comes to when they realize that myths and televisual fantasies that have presented to them are not realistic expectations of their lives to come.
Philosophical and Aesthetic Concepts:

Scopophilia in Sitcoms, Fables, and Mythology

Scopophilia is a Freudian term describing the love of looking at a person or an object. I realize, now, that male, heterosexual, scopophiliac relationships are inherent in many of the recurring plot devices and storylines of the sitcoms referenced in my work, and in much of the folklore and mythology that those tropes were originally based upon. For example, my sculpture, *Dandelions and Dog Leashes* (#2), is based on the trope of a character sneaking out or escaping from their bedroom window by tying bedsheets together to form a rope. My research indicated that this trope is likely rooted in the fable of Rapunzel, the princess who was locked away in a tower and needed to be rescued by a man in order to be freed. By reimagining this scene without an active character, I attempt to dismantle the traditional roles of damsel in distress and knight in shining armor. I encourage the viewer to activate the sculpture by imagining themselves in the role of the protagonist, allowing them to apply agency and choose whether the sculpture is a device to escape, or to be rescued with.

Voyeurism, Narcissism, and Performativity

When a young person watches television, there is an assumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what is on the screen. As we mature, we begin to realize that the scenes that are presented have been carefully planned to elicit specific responses from us. Each scene has been storyboarded, each camera angle considered, and each score of music purposefully selected in order to stimulate a particular reaction from the audience. Thus, once we come to the
understanding that our televisual role models and fantasies about what life would be are not authentic, we must either accept the worlds that we were given, or build new ones.

Rather than comparing our lives to fiction, we create worlds, digitally or otherwise, where we can perform in front of others and pretend happiness, romance, success, etc. While televised fantasies of what life could be like dwindle, I create sculptures of what remains from a fantasy world. They are physical representations of adolescent phantasmagorias and homages to the lives we daydreamt about as teenagers, with ourselves cast as the leading role. The sculptures shed light on the dystopic absurdity of our performed lives and draw attention to the relationships between the voyeurism and narcissism that are inherent in performativity and identity construction.

**Technique and Process:**

The techniques used in my work and thesis exhibition are rooted in the methodological inclinations of traditional craft practices, and the processes are influenced by digital aids such as Computer Aided Design (CAD). My background is in traditional metalwork of non-ferrous metals, which requires extreme patience and attention to detail. The systematic foundations of metalwork helped me to learn the behaviors other materials and provided the technical foundation to work larger and outside of the traditional metalworking skillset that I was trained within. I now work with any material that I feel best fits the concept I am staging, choosing materials based on materiality and conceptual significance rather than whether I feel confident in my ability to manipulate them. However, the mathematic substructures of CAD provide a safety net that reinforces accuracy and curtails the risk of human error. Thus, the materials used in my
exhibition range from wood and concrete to mirrors and neon lights, and the processes involve a combination of woodwork, painting, and CAD.

Oftentimes I find technology, specifically CAD, to be the most indispensable tool that I have access to. Using CAD curbs my natural inclinations to work loosely and keeps me mathematically in bounds. Most of the art that I make involves multiple parts that connect with each other, and using CAD allows me to easily adjust how these parts interact, experiment with scale, and visualize the final object. These capabilities benefit my work in a myriad of ways, but most importantly they allow me to focus on dialing in the conceptual underpinnings of the work rather than getting hung up on engineering issues.

The reasons that I incorporate traditional craft materials and practices into my work are in many ways extensions of why craft originally caught my attention. Craft practices insist upon a slowness that is seldom seen in our modern world, and demand focus and patience. The logical, systematized steps that are inherent in craft practices provide an entry point so that I can access more complex ideas. And while I do not reject the benefits of modern society, I view machines and technology as tools to be used as extensions of rather than replacements for the human hand. By continuing to use craft practices in my work, I am honoring these offerings while also using tools and technology to maintain accuracy and efficiency.
Citations


ill be waiting in the wings

Gretchen Schreiber

Annette + Jerry Johns Gallery
February 7-13, 2021
ill__be__waiting__in__the__wings

Gretchen Schreiber

Gretchen Schreiber
MFA Exhibition
Feb 7-13, 2021
Annette & Jerry Johns Gallery
830 Gilbert Dr.
Dekalb, IL
Image List: *ill_be_waiting_in_the_wings* by Gretchen Schreiber

*Abandon hope all ye who enter here*

wood and concrete

(2), 12” x 12” x 60”

2021

*Dandelions and Dog Leashes*

Wood, artificial flowers and glass

47” x 61” x 23”

2020

*Rough Waters in the Tunnel of Love*

Wood and wheels

47” x 32” x 32”

2021
Wet

Wood, panel, pool ladder, resin, acrylic and photograph

31” x 31” x 31”

2020

Come to my Window, Topanga

Wood and mirror

Variable dimensions

2020
Left to Right: Abandon hope all ye who enter here, Dandelions and Dog Leashes
Abandon hope all ye who enter here
Dandelions and Dog Leashes
Rough Waters in the Tunnel of Love
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Certification:

In accordance with Northern Illinois University School of Art and Design and Graduate School policies, this documentation is accepted in partial fulfillment of degree requirements.

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Chair, Graduate Advisory Committee

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Date

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