

My Hands Are My Bite
Curatorial statement by Dan Gunn

*Time may enhance what seems simply dogged or lacking in fantasy now because we are too close to it, because it resembles too closely our own everyday fantasies, the fantastic nature of which we don't perceive. We are better able to enjoy a fantasy as fantasy when it is not our own.*¹

The title "My Hands are My Bite" comes from a work by Laura Davis that references a Gabriel Orozco terra-cotta work from 1991 *My Hands Are My Heart* with which Davis has a "complicated love / hate relationship".² The hands in the title are same hands of the handled, the hand-picked, even the man-handled.³ These are the haptics of consumerism: To bite or not to bite. The very metaphor of consumption is aggressive, implying not only the ingestion of products into one's life but the determination of the consumer to either rescue or relegate objects to obscurity. These are the hands of taste –the consumer palette.

The four artists in this exhibition, Diane Simpson, Lilli Carré, Laura Davis, and Carol Jackson, use various historical aesthetics. From Art Deco flourishes of the Gilded Age seen in the work of Diane Simpson to the materials of the American frontier that Carol Jackson employs in her worked leather and sculptural forms, to International Style modernism seen in Laura Davis' vitrine sculpture and Lilli Carré's blend of folk Americana each artist exhibits a formal poly-temporality and purposeful engagement with vintage decorative styles.

In Diane Simpson's work, a meditation on structure emerges as the content, considering the meaning and history of decorative forms. Moving through an analysis (in the psychoanalytic sense) of design tropes of display, representing and modifying bodies through fashion, and commercial display it becomes a form of analysis of the ideology of style. In her hands these discarded forms of life in Art Deco become models for androgynous new primary forms. With Carol Jackson the aesthetics hail from early American industrialization and its mythic Western frontier. In Jacksons recent sculpture anachronistic sculptural forms drawn out of celebratory Americana sheet music collide with digital

¹ Sontag, Susan. "Notes on Camp," *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. (New York: Picador, 1990), p 285.

² Davis, Laura. Interview with the author, 2/23/14

³ In this context, man-handled refers to thrift store shopping and the repeated use of materials

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webcam imagery. Taken from national park archives, the camera footage catalogs a patch of sky or records a forest fires' progress. The graphic forms from the sheet music retain their remote and festive feeling, even as they twist outward. Like a webcam of nothing, the sculptures drain the entertainment medium of actual entertainment and unveil it as ruthless, unresponsive and banal.

The aesthetics of Mod become a theater of small scale objects and inscribed intricacies in Laura Davis' work. Davis combines the structures of store display and the corporeal bodies of fashion mannequins into tableaux of historical association. In the collision of the handmade and the found, the reality of before and after, the old and the new dissolve leaving a distilled and vulnerable form of style for consideration. For Lilli Carré, the individual is always under construction. In books, animations, sequential drawings, and porcelain ceramic figures the person is always a fragile body; a little too pliable, in need of constant catharsis. Mixing the aesthetics of Modernism with American folk forms the work takes on a provisional character as if social progress needs continual gentle reinforcement and reevaluation.

Poly-temporality is the experience of multiple registers of time within the present; where the past is never really gone and the future is already passé. This is easy to experience in fashion where certain articles re-occur ad infinitum or whole subcultures form around fusions of the future and the past like steampunk or others. In Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp* she reflects on the relationship between the perception of time and the camp aesthetic. Thinking through past times shifts the experience of the consumer-driven moment and makes its values look arbitrary, overblown and strange. Camp revels in this feeling of strangeness and proudly wears the results in a form of playfulness. While the stylistic forms in this exhibition are arguably outmoded, they eschew camp's outrageousness and detachment, while maintaining the focus on style. In *My Hands are My Bite* styles are under serious consideration, interrogated for their latent properties, chastised for their relationship to oppressive current practices and mined for their potential as possible new forms of life.

This vintage archaeology also represents skepticism of progress as an essential part of the contemporary. Outmoded aesthetics are also *useless, archaic, or primitive* when viewed from a Modernist historical lens. Here the charge of nostalgia reads as a modernist epithet for skepticism of progress. Past styles are also passed-over styles. Mass cultural style is the product of corporate marketing and relentlessly broadcast through every avenue. This breeds a kind of reactionary fatigue or cultivated skepticism in media consumers. In *Concrete Comedy* David Robbins describes this fatigue with entertainment's industrial culture in a passage on the pleasures of "so-bad-its-good" comedy.

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We resent the shrill tone and [entertainment's] deafening volume. We've discovered first-hand how inhuman, and inhumane, and just plain boring a seamlessly managed parade of winners can be. [...] We've seen, in sum, that the particular way that our culture "does" winning too often has something smug and arrogant and kill-joy about it. Cumulatively these observations incline us to admit that a culture of winners fundamentally distorts some fundamental aspect of human existence. ⁴

What is the experience of the thrift store, antique mall or junk yard if not a perusal of the remainders of culture post-hype, post-fashion? The antique is not automatically better than the contemporary, but rather remote in time and present in body. Present perhaps, in a way that allows all of their aspects to be seen more clearly than the objects of more current marketing campaigns. In each of their ways Simpson, Jackson, Davis, and Carré work to revive overlooked aspects of human existence in their objects. Their coordinates are our coordinates, the consumer landscape of commerce, fashion, decor, architecture and style.

⁴ David Robbins, *Concrete Comedy: An Alternative History of Twentieth-Century Comedy*, (Denmark: Pork Salad Press, 2011).

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