

“The mantra in the art world seems to be “if you can’t make it good, make it grim.” And I thought how, in the current context, the most radical thing an artist can do is create art that causes people to feel good, that makes them, as Tolstoy said, “love life in all its countless, inexhaustible manifestations.” The art world seems to equate happy with sappy. And there’s a reason for this – happy art is extremely hard to make, which is why hardly anyone even attempts it.”

Carol Diehl, “Spot on, spot off”, Art Vent, February 5, 2012

Derive happiness in oneself from a good day’s work, from illuminating the fog that surrounds us.

Henri Matisse

Happiness is being on the beam with life – to feel the pull of life.

Agnes Martin

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December 10 – January 18, 2015

Kaplan Gallery, VisArts

What role does happiness

play in contemporary art? Is it hard to make artwork that is happy without getting sappy? The eight artists in this exhibition bring a mix of exuberance, independence, irreverence, and play to artwork and the practice of making art. Even when borrowing from nostalgic sources and popular mythologies, their work seems “happy”. They channel a Matisse-like attitude toward happiness; one of acceptance rather than escape from a life permeated by joy, sadness, loss and victory. Gravitating toward idiosyncratic materials and unpredictable studio practices, they open a conversation about the relationship of happiness and sappiness to contemporary art and culture.



Fabienne Lasserre, *Pitchable #12*, 2013, Linen, acrylic polymer, wire, acrylic paint on panel, 14.5x14.75x11.5 inches

FABIENNE LASSERRE

Fabienne Lasserre's “Pitchables” are small panel paintings wrapped and patched with fabrics that are soaked or brushed with paint until the colors are vivid and opaque. Looping out from the surface, circling back, and reattaching in another spot, are painted “handles”.

These suggest gestures reaching out from the

support or handholds for actually “pitching” the painting into space. The paintings are simultaneously objects and paintings, playfully and modestly communicating their hybrid state. Using meandering, unplanned processes and malleable materials, Lasserre explores states and structures that occupy a position between the known and the unknown. The pursuit of happiness maybe means committing to a journey without a map.

STEWART WATSON

Stewart Watson's "But the lit-tle ba-by man was al-so wise and wit-ty, and he called him-self "Od-dy Wad-dle," af-ter a fun-ny lit-tle fel-low that lived in the look-ing-glass" sprouts a mass of upholstery that appears to emerge from the wall and sends out a long, thin steel rod with her grandfather's hat delicately balanced on the end. The hat floats near her great great grandfather's shaving mirror balancing on another thin rod. Nestled or perhaps trapped in the strangely shaped upholstery is a photograph of her grandfather. On rollers, protected under plastic, is a coverlet made in 1841 for Watson's great great great grandfather. As viewers investigate the piece, they may catch a glimpse of the hat in the mirror and bend down so that the hat seems to rest on their own head. Watson uses physical tension and visceral materiality in her sculptural work. Things threaten to fall or spring apart. Materials are pinned down, thrust into space or hover in a state of gravitational confusion. The artist's history and nostalgic family heirlooms entangle with the reflection of the viewer. As Watson laughingly says, "I keep telling people it isn't all about them, happily seeing themselves in the mirror. It's about the stuff." The tension between the serious aspirations of Watson's keepsakes to preserve memory and the ridiculous attempts of viewers trying to line their heads up with an old hat under a bulging awkward assemblage of antiques is funny. The illusions of the past give way as strangers adjust their viewpoints in the presence of Watson's artwork.

Stewart Watson

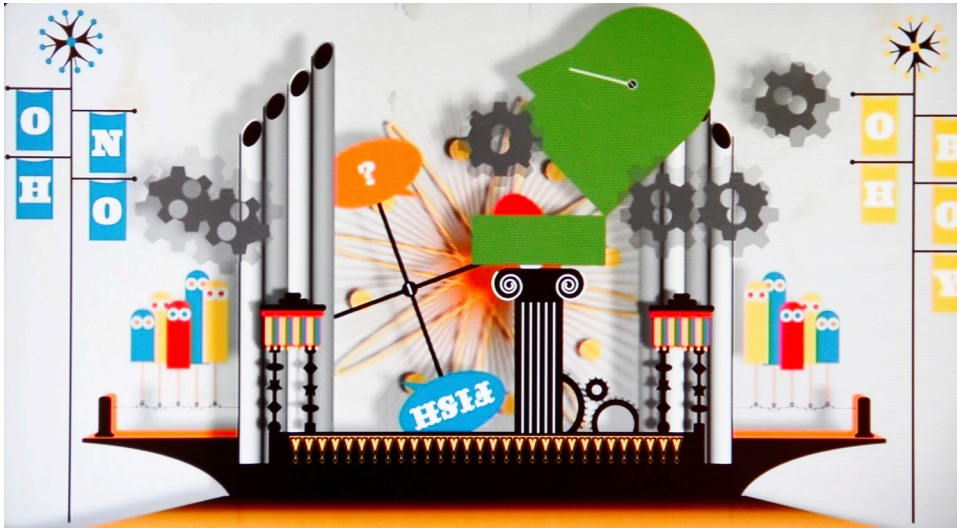
But the lit-tle ba-by man was al-so wise and wit-ty,
and he called him-self "Od-dy Wad-dle," af-ter a fun-ny
lit-tle fel-low that lived in the look-ing-glass. 2014
Framed photograph of grandfather Bruce Bastress
Watson circa 1903, his suede hat, great great
grandfather Watson's shaving mirror circa 1860, great
great great grandfather Nagle's coverlet 1841, dyed
upholstery fabric, polyfil, jute strapping, gimp, vinyl,
steel, casters, hardware, magic glue, thread, pins



KELLEY BELL

Kelley Bell's animations mediate serious themes with humor and spunk. With a kooky, kitschy blend of old fashioned imagery, children's games and new fangled technology, Bell's work offers a playful invitation to explore life's gambles and difficult truths. In "The Kübler-Ross Device" the dead are converted into cute little ghosts through a squeaky Rube Goldberg contraption. "The Oracle" responds to life's most persistent questions. Only the answers are available. The questions are merely implied and invented in the mind of the viewer. Bell's pocket deity, "Lares et Penates: Plenty" guards the doorway to the gallery. The ephemeral projection blinks like a Vegas slot machine graphic with a bouncing, chubby, Buddha-like character at its center surrounded by tumbling coins. Happiness resides in what is known and accepted about life and death.

Kelley Bell
The Oracle, 2012
Animation
3m49s



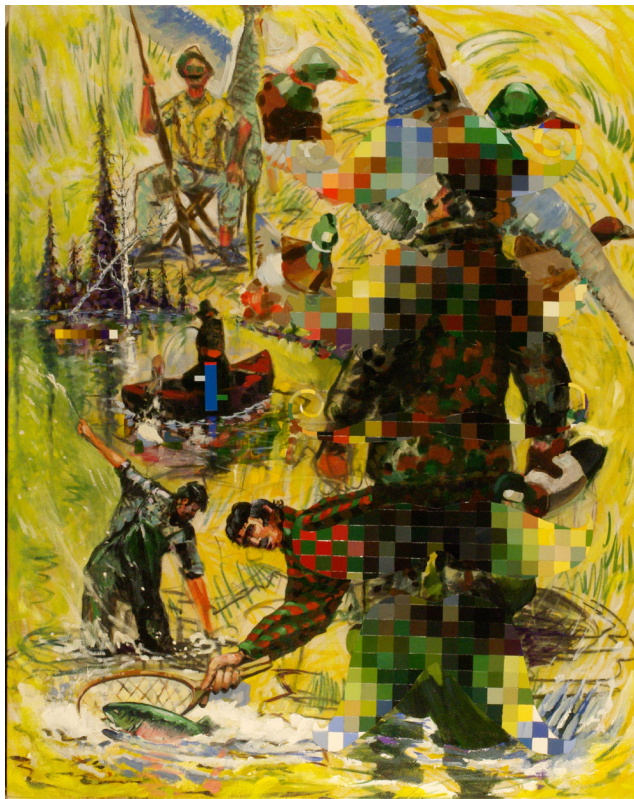
NICK PEELOR

Nick Peelor takes on the actual generation of happiness, with a sculptural installation that purportedly emits happiness-producing negative ions. His "Himalayan Pink Salt Negative Ion Generator" incorporates ready-made Himalayan pink salt lamps in an MDF laminate structure. One salt lamp is supposed to produce enough negative ion energy for 10 square feet. With 13 lamps, Peelor's sculpture should nearly cover the entire gallery. The science backing up the relationship between happiness and negative ions is inconclusive. Viewers have the opportunity to test out the sculpture's effectiveness. Peelor's interest in human relationships with architecture, food, and living things has led to strange, visceral installations built out of synthetic materials that are commonly found in commercial or institutional environments.

Nick Peelor
Himalayan Pink Salt Negative
Ion Generator, 2014
MDF, 13 pink Himalayan pink salt
lamps, laminate, adhesive
24x61x14 inches

DAVID KRUEGER

David Krueger culls images of from old "Field and Stream" magazines, as starting points for his paintings. Rugged American outdoorsmen meet in the frontier of painting and drawing. Born and raised in North Dakota, Krueger is happy to get into his studio and mess around with a collision of influences. The males in Krueger's paintings are bound to a nostalgic American mythology that equates masculine contentment and pleasure with self-reliance, strength, and the ability to navigate wild nature in leisure time. They paddle through scribbles. Their mustaches become pattern and color studies. They pose in plaid shirts, cling to their sporting accessories and navigate the wilderness of painting and drawing with ferocious tenacity. Lowbrow vintage imagery meets the highbrow formality of painting. Krueger's studio practice is a free-range pursuit that lets him seriously question what a painting can be with iconoclastic abandon. Happiness is the heart's desire.



David Krueger
Mustache, 2014
Pastel, acrylic, oil on canvas
53 x 43 inches

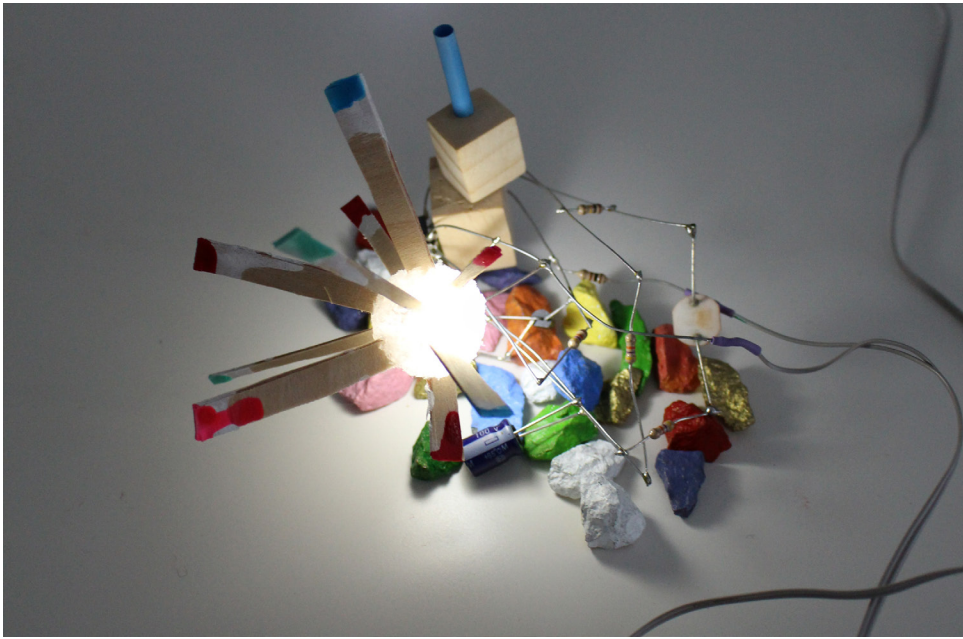


Amy Boone-McCreesh
Animal Confetti, 2014
Mixed media, collage and
inkjet print on Rives BFK
35 x 29 inches

AMY BOONE-MCCREESH

Amy Boone-McCreesh accumulates bits and pieces of iconic materials that signal happy ritual celebrations, comfort, or luxury (both high and low lux). Pastel colors, balloons, straws, fake fur, leopard skin patterns, the unique

hand drawn mark along with the easily reproducible software generated mark find their way into her work. She assembles these materials into three-dimensional "paintings" and collage/drawings that exuberantly wiggle between high and low culture. "Goon" resembles a celebratory fetish object, a shaggy tribal cloak, a baroque cross between painting and tapestry and a hyper-energized elementary school project, all at the same time. In her collage/drawings, she fills the picture plane with joyous chaos- as if her elements were thrown into a "grab a dollar" game at a carnival resulting in confetti-like compositions of chance. Boone-McCreesh challenges the reductive Minimalist affirmation that "less is more" with maximal concentrations of materials, processes and references. She dares to go beyond proscribed boundaries with an attitude of cheerful adventure.



Bonnie Crawford Kotula
Light Emitting Studies, 2012-2014
Electrical circuitry and mixed media

BONNIE CRAWFORD KOTULA

Blinking out of the corner of the eye, are Bonnie Crawford Kotula's "Light Emitting Studies". In each study, Crawford Kotula combines discarded and fine art materials with a tiny sensor that responds to ambient light. Each study has a slightly different rhythmic pulse that speeds up or slows down as the surrounding light changes evoking the sense that they are sweetly and subtly communicating with the viewer. Play, experimentation and tinkering rest at the heart of Crawford Kotula's studio practice. The small assemblages reflect her ability to bring analytic thinking and sensual, poetic awareness to the qualities of simple materials and technology.

MARGO BENSON MALTER

From the dada-esque mashup of Google Search, You-tube, video games, Net simulation games, advertisements, and an Internet stream of random images, Margo Benson Malter plucks fragments, cutting and pasting them into pixilated, super abundant compositions. She prints them out as large vinyl stickers or polyester banner/table cloth/murals. Stretching 7 feet tall, "Angel Ruffle" is a vinyl sticker of a girl-like or paper doll-like being composed of a non-sensical arrangement of hairstyles, be-jeweled accessories, and a variety of other imagery pulled from video games supposedly appealing to girls. "Angel Ruffle" is printed in low resolution in opposition to the super sharp cartoonish images of the computer screen. Malter fluctuates between an unabashed love for and playful critique of American obsessions with celebrity, the cultivation of a feminine image, consumer culture's recipes for happiness, the Internet as an infinite source of images, digital technology's penchant for reproduction and fine art's high-minded aspirations for transformation and universality. She spins irreverent but authentic investigations of the technologies, stereotypes and images that promise happiness.



Margo Benson Malter
Angel Ruffle, 2014
Digital print on vinyl
7 x 5 feet

CURATED BY SUSAN MAIN

Susan Main is the Gallery Director and Curator at VisArts, an artist and educator. Recent curatorial projects include "Fieldwork", "_____scape", and "Speed and Pressure". Main co-initiated a cross-cultural art collaboration between emerging artists in the U.S. and Afghanistan that resulted in the exhibition "Crossing the Distance" presented at VisArts and traveled to Kabul, Afghanistan.

VisArts is a non-profit arts center dedicated to engaging the community in the arts through educational programming, gallery exhibitions and a resident artist program.



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