The Hidden Power of Images: An Allegory of Chaos and Performance in the Digital Age

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Prologue:
We Didn’t Start the Fire
As an artist born and raised in the United States, I am fascinated by the assemblage of American culture, history, and memory. I am especially taken by the idea that history is not broken down into distinct chapters like we are taught in school, but that it is more like an intricate and simultaneous web of events converging into specific perceptions of reality. My work attempts to address how this assemblage of images and events affects my thoughts, actions, and perceptions. My interests in art, sociology, and history have led me to examine American visual culture as a spectacle and analyze our complex relationships with images.

Within my large-scale painting-based installations, I investigate images of the past and present juxtaposed within surrealist landscapes. Through images in news, entertainment, advertising, or the home, I am made aware of how my reality is infused with the past. Younger generations inherit the problems of the former generation and so on. This cycle of inheritance connects us as humans regardless of time, generation, and place.

My awareness of these complex problems and events began very early in life. “Bring Your Daughter to Work Day” was a regular occurrence for me as I was growing up. My mother was a workplace trainer with a common training seminar called “Generations in the Workplace.” The program focused on American assigned generations, explaining their strengths and weaknesses in the workplace alongside events in American history that created the generations’ unique characteristics. When she got to my generation, Millennials/ Generation Z, she spoke about our need for reassurance and our anxiety-prone nature due to our post 9/11 childhoods. This was the first time I had awareness of a character trait that applied to an entire group based on one event.

Looking back on that memory, I think about how hearing this “prophecy” of my future before I had the self-awareness to comprehend it is extremely fitting. I recognized this
phenomenon as a sort of collective trauma that defines how we think and interact. Older
generations can read the signs of generational trauma because of their own experience. My
mother’s generation and her predecessors had already anticipated my generation’s shift because
of 9/11, technology advancements, media, and how, in turn, we would affect society. There was
an acceptance that generational trauma is a cycle.

My artistic interests in the societal phenomenon of performance and inherited culture led
me to the research of Sociologist Erving Goffman and his theory of dramaturgical sociology. His
use of the metaphor of theater to understand human interaction helped me to contextualize my
work around this idea of social performance. In his metaphoric lens, humans are considered
actors upon a social and global stage where they can act as individuals or a troupe where their
goal is to satisfy the audience (i.e., each other).¹ The metaphor suggests that we are born or
assumed into assigned roles, biological, social, or interpersonal, that are accompanied by the
expectations to carry out that role.² The expectations create a virtually inescapable cycle of
performance. There is little control over the stage and set in which we must act. The performance
of the generation prior determines the set design in which actors must perform.³ In their book,
Dramaturgical Analysis of Social Analysis, sociologists Paul Hare and Herbert H. Blumberg
expand, analyze, and recontextualized Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis into a more
contemporary understanding. They place historical events at the center of the scenes in which
actors must perform and react:

…The historical event consists of “an ongoing texture of multiple elaborate episodes
each leading to another, each being influenced by collateral episodes, and by the efforts
of multiple actors who preform actions in order to satisfy their needs and meet others’
expectation”…The implication is that there is constant change in the structure of the
situation and in the positions occupied by actors… it may at first appear chaotic… but the
meaning of an event arises from the social interaction around an event.⁴
I find this complex and layered outlook on historical events to be especially pertinent in a digital age. The sheer amount of information available to me within media leaves me conflicted about how to think, what to believe, and what to prioritize. Even with these complex feelings, I am still hungry to know more. In his book, *Culture, Trauma, and Conflict: Cultural Studies Perspectives on War*, Nico Carpentier, a scholar of information science and media, looks at the American interaction with media and information from the lens of how Americans think about political conflict during the digital age:

In the current U.S. information economy, ideas and intellectual property circulate at an alarming volume and rate…Revelation has lost its power in an age were cynicism trumps belief. When discussing current events, the phrases I most often hear from U.S. citizens include, “you just don’t know who to believe,” “I don’t have enough information to know for sure,” and “I don’t believe anything anymore.” …Now in the information age, the U.S. collective imagination seems afloat without a compass…5

Being born on the cusp of two generations, I place myself within both generation Z and the Millennial generation. I have always had access to technology and specifically access to the internet at a very young age. My unlimited access to social technology created an entanglement between my personal identity with my digital persona on social media. My firsthand experience of living through action started to become second to my digital presence. This allowed the world and its conflicts to sit right beneath my fingertips. Newsfeeds and political headline bombard me regardless of my intended internet searches. I wonder about how this unescapable bounty of overwhelming and contradicting information and images can shape and nurture the way I perceive the world and society.

Visual information is ever-present by means of media, entertainment, advertising, etc. There are always images to be taken in. Art Education Scholars Charles R. Garoian and Yvonne
M Gaudelius coin the term “Spectacle Pedagogy” in their article *The Spectacle of Visual Culture* where they elaborate on the power of images:

…images teach us what and how to see and think and, in doing so, they mediate the ways in which we interact with one another as social beings.6

In my work, I imagine how images of personal, cultural and historical events escalate and culminate into larger and more complex realities. Especially in American culture, there is power in the images of events and collective memories that we use to define ourselves.7 Historian Daniel Boorstin speaks to this power in his book, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, where he writes:

Here, In the United States, the making of images is everyday business. The image has reached out from commerce to the worlds of education and politics and in every corner of our daily lives. Our churches, our charities, our schools, our universities, all seek favorable images... Our national politics has become a competition for images... rather than between ideals.8

This idea of powerful images especially in history, led me to visualize a plane in which all these images that affect my perceptions could coexist and interact simultaneously. I have joked that my work is an unintentional visual representation of Billy Joel’s *We Didn’t Start the Fire* (1989). I was obsessed with this song as a child even though it would send me in to a mild existential crisis once I was old enough to comprehend it. When I think about my love/hate for this song, I am surprised that even from the age of twelve I was able to sense the power of the fire that he sang about. The lyrics contain a list of historical events and pop culture icons from 1949 to 1989. He mentions Marilyn Monroe, Watergate, Disneyland, the AIDS epidemic, and Bay of Pigs invasion just to name a few, with the chorus repeating:

We didn’t start the fire  
It was always burning  
Since the world’s been turning
We didn’t start the fire
No, we didn’t light it
But we tried to fight it

My paintings revolve around the idea of this ever-present fire. What is this metaphoric fire? What does it stand for? The fire seems to be the result of pure human desire. Maybe it is the cycle of performance, always posing new sequences of events and conflicts to act and react to. Whatever the fire stands for, it gives me a formidable feeling and its ambiguity makes it evident that it cannot be stopped. This fire can be difficult to physically picture because it encompasses all that people are—nuanced entities of deep desires for power, love, fulfillment, belonging, and knowledge.
Act 1:
A Depiction of Chaos and Simultaneousness
Act 1, Scene 1: Crafting

The sheer volume of events, images, and ideas that contribute to the fire make it unquantifiable in nature. I depict the fire by creating chaotic and interwoven compositions. For example, in my work *A Comedy of Agency* (2020) the composition of this 18 feet long, unstretched oil painting on canvas is chaotic and busy with a toxically bright color scheme (Figure 1). An allegory of seemingly disconnected imagery taken from pop culture, historical events, and personal and collective memory intermingle in a physics defying landscape. Motifs of fire imagery line the bottom of the painting weaving in between images. A 9 ft long, 4 ft tall wooden prop sits out in front of the painting. The prop is cut into a stylized, fire-like shape and painted to mimic the fire-like elements in the painting.

Surrealism’s focus on the absurd juxtaposition of imagery and connection to the subconscious allows me to depict the feeling of this fire through the freedom to create the space and its own rules.\(^\text{10}\) Surrealism allows me to place visuals and images from multiple time periods in one place simultaneously as a collage. In his exploration of Surrealist collage, Finkelstein brings up Max Ernst’s definition of collage:

Collage is the… “exploitation of the chance meeting of two distinct realities on an unfamiliar plane” … Another prominent viewpoint from which the Surrealist collage was to be considered concerned the temporal and cultural dissociation of its components from their original contexts.\(^\text{11}\)

This method of collage allows me to place unlikely images next to each other to subvert their traditional contexts. When crafting my compositions, I often have some imagery preplanned, but many times, I allow myself to react to the images I paint. Sometimes when painting, a subconscious thought, memory, or comparison enters my brain. I listen to this intuition and paint the subliminal images. The subconscious accumulation of input circles back to the idea of the
hidden power of an image. By letting my subconscious play a role in the construction of my
collage, I am confirming my suspicion and depicting my own self-awareness of the power that
images have in my own perceptions of the world.

Figure 1: Livia Xandersmith, *A Comedy of Agency*, 2022, oil on unstretched canvas and wood, 208.8” x 72” x 80”. Photo Courtesy of
Richard Sprengeler.
Contemporary artists like Matt Hansel, Dorielle Ciami, Jack Shure, and Angela Fraleigh use a surrealist collage of pop culture imagery filled with references to commercial and socially layered image culture. Their work also references past and present in a single space. For instance, in Hansel’s painting, *Peaceful Termination of the Affair*, he places black and white cartoon imagery next to a digitally warped image of a painted figure from the Baroque or Neoclassical periods (Figure 2). The mixture of time periods, both in subject and treatment, is a tactic that lends itself to depicting the *fire* in my work. This manipulation of image and treatment allows me to depict history, culture, and time in a more interwoven and layered way.

Figure 2: Matt Hansel, *Peaceful Termination of the Affair*, 2016, Oil and Flashe Paint on Linen, 60” x 48” Photo courtesy of Matt Hansel.
Act 1, Scene 2: Recontextualizing

I have utilized this mixing of time and culture within *A Comedy of Agency*. The traditional images of these events are complicated by the painting style or by the context of the image. For example, in my depiction of 9/11, the twin towers are superimposed with an image of a colorful, peaceful night sky (Figure 3). The stars mimic the fluorescent lights from within a high rise at night. The white smoke from the tower’s transitions into a puffy white cloud on a bright blue sky.

My handling of the image is to complicate our feelings about these visuals and to show how our impression of an image can be changed by its context. This treatment subverts the traditional, media-curated image that is burned into our collective memory. The formula for the collective memory of 9/11 is unchanging: black smoke, twin towers, fire. I wanted the feelings associated with the image to be felt, but I wanted the image to blend into the chaos. Its treatment is like a scar; it is no longer a bright red, open wound, but its presence is a reminder that has made us more cautious. 9/11 was decades ago, but its outcomes are ever-present in how we act, think, and move about socially, politically, and mentally as Americans.

Another example of how my image treatment communicates content can be seen in the silhouetted Little Boy atomic bomb that the United States used to bomb Hiroshima in World War II (Figure 4). The bomb is outlined by a flat white line with a painterly sunset colored gradient inside. A cartoony blast with flat pink and red colors explodes out from the silhouette. The sharp edges of the blast complicate the 2D space by weaving over and under the bomb outline. The cartoon blast references a shallow and comical embrace of violence perpetuated by cartoons and
entertainment. This is seen especially in older cartoons I grew up watching like *Loony Tunes* and *Tom and Jerry*. By pairing these images together, our perceptions of violence are split.

Figure 3: Livia Xandersmith, Detail of 9/11 from *A Comedy of Agency*, 2022, oil on unstretched canvas and wood, 208.8” x 72” x 80”
Photo by the artist.

Figure 4: Livia Xandersmith, Detail of bomb from *A Comedy of Agency*, 2022, oil on unstretched canvas and wood, 208.8” x 72” x 80”
Photo by the artist.
between the shallow cultural use of violence for entertainment verses its real and quantifiably destructive and devastating counterpart.

The pink cartoony bubbles on the lower part of the composition also represent a cartoon reference to violence, but this flatly painted section is interrupted by realistically painted hands (Figure 5). The flesh-colored hands can be seen popping through the flatly painted bubble cloud. One hand points to another accusatorily, while the makes a fist in response. The third hand is further away from the commotion, but passively participates by filming or photographing the altercation on a cell phone. The bubbles reference the smoke clouds that would appear when cartoon characters would fight in classic cartoons (Figure 6). Most of the characters’ bodies could not be seen, only their hands or feet would poke out from behind the smoke, punching or kicking. Similarly to the depiction of the Hiroshima bomb, I wanted to use a staple in American culture, cartoons, to subvert or downplay the daily neighbor-on-neighbor violence and political polarization present within the US. By downplaying these altercations with cartoon imagery, I am commenting on our desensitization to violence and conflict on a global and local level.

More naturally colored and realistically rendered hands can be seen in front of the twin towers (Figure 7). One hand is holding a cell phone and appears to be photographing its surroundings. Another hand is pulling itself up on the edge of a silver plate. The tray that the hands inhabit is being held by a graphically silhouetted 1950s advertisement that, like the depiction of 9/11, is superimposed or filled with the American flag. This time the hands in the tray do not depict conflict, but they are trapped inside the tray of the advertisement. I used a 1950s advertisement aesthetic specifically because, for many, the 50s are considered an “all-American” time-period, one of post-war patriotism but also of a boom in consumer culture.
Advertisements of the 1950s focused on sexist gender roles, typically featuring a working 
housewife selling you a product on a silver tray promising a simpler life if “you’d just buy this 
product” (Figure 8). The reference to the ad contextualizes not only a consumer culture, but one 
that is layered with of socio-political problems that remain today like gender roles, sexism, the 
pay gap, etc. The hands are relaxed within the tray, to the extent that one hand takes pictures of 
its commodified prison.

Figure 5: Livia Xandersmith, Detail of cartoon bubbles from A Comedy of Agency, 2022, oil on unstretched canvas and wood, 208.8” x 72” x 80” Photo by the artist.

Figure 6: Example of Cartoon imagery, Looney Tunes
Figure 7: Livia Xandersmith, Detail of 9/11 and hands from *A Comedy of Agency*, 2022, oil on unstretched canvas and wood, 208.8” x 72” x 80”  
Photo by the artist.

Figure 8: Reference photo and example of 50s' advertisement.

Figure 9: Livia Xandersmith, Detail of hands from *A Comedy of Agency*, 2022, oil on unstretched canvas and wood, 208.8” x 72” x 80”  
Photo by the artist.
Act 1, Section 3: Controlling

The two hands that can be seen with phones represent a newer type of image, one that we control, but simultaneously controls us: social media images (Figures 7 & 9). As I previously stated, we are living in a time where media and technology allow us front row access to conflict. News outlets provide us with a macro narrative to the world’s problems, but what about images that are more personal? It is easy to be affected by information from news or history books, but images we see on social media are posted by individuals, a micro narrative which can often represent larger social issues. When individuals come together, the reach of these personal posts can create great change. As a recent example, the murder case of George Floyd was one that gained traction due to a witness filming and posting the altercation online. The immediate communication allowed the injustice, and its larger systemic roots, to go viral on a national and global scale. In an NPR article, author Cheryl Corley assesses the effect of such videos:

…one thing is certain: the protests and court proceedings after his (George Floyd) murder in Minneapolis might never have happened without a bystander's video. Videos of many incidents across this country, are transforming law enforcement. \(^{13}\)

I wanted to include this new aspect of image culture which is having a massive impact on the spread and the intake of images. But this power of image seems to come with a tradeoff. Documenting every aspect of our lives and the chaos around us can distract us from prioritizing a healthy relationship with social media and intake of images.

I am interested in the social media programming that feeds the hunger for images but can never satisfy said hunger. Infinite scrolling was a major inspiration to the way I composed the allegory of A Comedy of Agency. By making the composition overpopulated in a long seemingly never-ending painting, its extended format construction lends itself to a discussion on the way
we are fed information over social media. Infinite scrolling is the never-ending feed of posts, advertisements, and news headlines on a social media feed. It can auto-generate new posts as users scroll down, creating an interface with no natural break in image consumption. Thomas Mildner and Gian-Luca Savino, researchers in Human factors in computing systems, published the results of a study called *Ethical User Interfaces: Exploring the Effects of Dark Patterns on Facebook* where they screened participants and analyzed the effects of programming like endless scrolling:

Facebook seems to keep general satisfaction up, but it is the individual person who develops problematic usage behaviors through features like endless scrolling… Investigation of such features offer insights into how user interfaces may affect people’s well-being. 14
Act 2:
The Hidden Powers of Images
Act 2, Scene 1: Manipulating

Each element of the composition in *A Comedy of Agency* is intertwined and weaves into each other. For example, the 9/11 representation’s cloud becomes the steam from the volcano. However, the true connective tissue of the composition is the undulating, multicolored fabric. This fabric acts as a visual representation of image manipulation. When studying for my art history degree, I became enamored with Caravaggio’s drapery which he used to create movement and to frame a composition. I thought of them as theatrical curtains that revealed his narratives. They controlled where the viewer looked and the tone of the piece. In his painting, *Death of the Virgin* (1604-1606), an undulating, crimson curtain revealed the lifeless body of the dead Virgin Mary while the disciples gathered around her (Figure 10). Caravaggio made every scene he crafted into a production. From then on, I thought of drapery as a tool that took viewers away from reality and into a theatrical space where information could be concealed or revealed to the viewer.

In *A Comedy of Agency*, the flowing fabric is a tool to conceal and reveal, but I also use it as movement through multiple scenes (Figure 11). It twists and turns into multiple subject matters making it the only constant throughout the composition. Because of its free flowing and consistent nature, it becomes its own persona and acts as the viewer’s guide through the composition. It also hides many connection points in the composition. For example, in the photo below, the blue sky can be seen cracking, but somehow, the cracks stop on the other side of the yellow drapery. The flowing fabric aids in the complication of this surreal space.

Arbitrarily colored hands, cut off at the wrist, manipulate the fabric. They seem to have control over its invasive movements. The owner of the hands is unknown and ambiguous. They are the action of our collective unconscious or maybe the actions of our
Figure 10: Caravaggio, *Death of the Virgin*, 1604-1606, Oil paint on canvas. Photo by Wikipedia.

Figure 11: Livia Xandersmith, Detail of Fabric in *A Comedy of Agency*, 2022, oil on unstretched canvas and wood, 208.8” x 72” x 80” Photo by the artist.
ancestors setting our stage. The artificial color of these hands was to differentiate them from the
other naturally painted hands and to stop them from seeming completely human.

The idea of these disconnected hands and their illusive master(s) came from a fascination
with Munos Dei or the Hand of God motif in Jewish and Early Christian frescos (Figure 12). It is
a motif that depicted a floating hand, not attached to a body, reaching out or gesturing toward
figures in the composition below. The hand was usually small in scale comparatively but was the
center of power in the narratives it reigned over. The anonymity of the God and its complete
power struck me as profound. The control that the hands in *A Comedy of Agency* possess
suggests a lack of agency within the space.

A more contemporary version of this same mysterious hand is the vaudeville hook which
was a pop culture trope used to remove bad or long acts from the stage (Figure 13). Similarly, it
too was an anonymous hand or hook that was cut off by a curtain or wall and maintained all the
power of its productions. It decides what the audience sees and for how long. Could this
anonymous and illusive power source hold up a mirror to our social power structure? There are
power sources that we do not question and take a more obvious role in society: authority, money,
government, etc. But I am interested in the powers hidden behind the scenes or powers from the
past.
Figure 12: Example of Munos Dei (Hand of God), (Detail) Keystone of the triumphal arch of the main apse of Sant Climent de Taüll
12th Century, 95 x 100 cm Fresco. Photo by Wikimedia.

Figure 13: Example of Vaudville Hook, 1922 Man (Buster Keaton), in a gladiator costume, performs a dance when left alone on stage, and although the audience cheers and laughs, the director pulls him off of the stage with a vaudeville hook and throws him out of the theater. Photo by Getty Images.
Act 2, Scene 2: Remembering

Controlled narratives can be closer to our personal lives than we might expect. I find that images of my memories have more control over me than I once realized. In my work, Please Stand By, 2021, I used an image of my childhood (Figure 14). This image of my siblings is one that I associate with simpler times, simpler than the life and time that I am currently living in. It elicits a feeling of nostalgia and happiness. But when I think about what was going on around this time in my family’s history, I am struck by reality. This was an image of innocence and the figures in this image have not been hit by their impending struggles. I wrestle with how these images pull me away from my present, only to focus on another time that, in its totality, is not better or happier than my present. I chose to depict the figures in Please Stand By in quintessentially 90s attire to illude to the idea of this being a memory, but the figures’ heads filled with TV static to depict a confusion, disconnect, and impending loss of innocence.

Memories can be communal as well as personal. Collective memory can be a powerful tool to a creating a master narrative. The media and entertainment we intake can feed into how we remember or think about something within history or society. Allison Landsberg, a scholar in memory studies, coins the term prosthetic memory in her essay, Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture, where she suggests:

…the commodification of memories through history films, television, museums and the Inter-net threatens to construct pasts that are privately satisfying rather than publicly useful. …the way many Americans remember the past has the effect of atomizing them, rather than building collective solidarities. Because many of the Americans surveyed emphasize first-hand experience and the familial, they tend to construct a more privatized version of the past, which might as a negative consequence ‘reinforce rather than break down barriers between people, resist rather than promote change. I am interested in how images from history and culture can be commodified, but even more so how images can be interpreted based on their micro context rather than their macro context.
Figure 14: Livia Xandersmith, *Please Stand By*, 2021, Oil and screen-print on canvas and wood, 34.5" x 28.5", Photo by the artist.
Figure 15: Example of Toile du Jouy pattern, Photo by Getty Images.

Figure 16: Livia Xandersmith, Detail of *A Comedy of Agency*, 2022, oil on unstretched canvas and wood, 208.8” x 72” x 80”. Photo Courtesy of Richard Sprengeler.
In *A Comedy of Agency*, I reference an image I loved as a child, the toile wallpaper in my grandmother’s bathroom. Toile du Jouy is a popular style of decorative pattern from the 18th century and originated in France (Figure 15). It is often made up of a white or off-white background with a repetitive pattern representing a rather complicated picture, usually with a countryside motif with scenes of domesticity and leisure activities. I loved the antique look of the wallpaper and the figures in their Rococo style clothing.

As I got older, I began to examine the imagery in my grandmother’s wallpaper for the first time and noticed images that made me question my admiration. Firstly, I realized the wallpaper represented an affluent social class which only had leisure time and were truly disconnected from the struggles of their time. Secondly, there were also images of men relaxing and swooning over women by playing instruments. Other women washed clothes and took care of children. The most unsettling was an image of a man grabbing a woman by the waist while she pushed him away. At their feet, another woman reclines as she watches the events unfold and eats grapes (Figure 15 & 16). It was in that moment and realization I had lost my innocence and opened my eyes to the image’s hidden power over me. Growing up with this wallpaper every day and adopting these problematic images as beautiful or even romantic sickened me.

I placed this image of the man grabbing the woman in *A Comedy of Agency* throughout the composition (Figures 16, 17, & 18). It can be seen as a wallpaper-like backdrop where it is pixilated, and the image is obscured or censored. It can also be seen as a clear, readable screen-print that is printed over elements of the composition. Over the course of the piece, the image gets overprinted, and the subject starts to become obscured again. The treatment of this imagery was meant to bring in a discussion regarding the loss of meaning that comes with overexposure
or repetition. Our unconscious intake of imagery can sway our subconscious if they go unnoticed.

The butchered deer that hangs in my painting was also a visual of my childhood that took some time to fully comprehend (Figure 17). My extended family are all hunters. I refused to attend the hunting trips because I did not want to harm any animals, but to my dismay I was an unwilling participant in the butchering process. I have a vivid memory of my uncle cutting open a deer’s abdomen and me picking up the entrails and putting them in large bowls after he cut them loose from the carcass. I remember the sound of the splat on the garage floor. For some reason, helping to clean and prep the dead animal was not as bad to me as pulling the trigger. But now I wonder what is worse. Pulling the trigger from several yards or being up close and personal with the guts of a kill?

After the collection of the organs, I went inside to clean the blood off my hands while staring at the toile wallpaper. I started to think about the connection between the deer and the women in the decor. They were both unsuspecting victims of violence in different ways that fed into human desires. In both images, there is a predator and prey. One is very literally prey, while the other is more subtle, but they were both culturally acceptable. So acceptable in fact that they had both become décor, the wallpaper in the bathroom and the stuffed heads above the mantel. I took both the presence of the wallpaper and the deer for granted as benign images. When an image is ever-present in our lives, we stop noticing or never stop to think about their significance in a larger context. Their benign presences in our lives hold power over our subconscious view of culture and the world because their power is constantly present yet undetected. It was not until I stopped to contemplate the wallpaper and the deer that desensitization turned into an awareness
of distress. This was not necessarily personal distress, but a greater social distress the effects of which were present in something as seemingly benign as home décor.

Figure 17: Livia Xandersmith, Detail of *A Comedy of Agency*, 2022, oil on unstretched canvas and wood, 208.8” x 72” x 80”, Photo by the artist.

Figure 18: Livia Xandersmith, Detail of *A Comedy of Agency*, 2022, oil on unstretched canvas and wood, 208.8” x 72” x 80”, Photo by the artist.
Images from my family photo albums can also be seen in *A Comedy of Agency* (Figures 20 & 21). The figures from these photos have been manipulated to lack identity. A cluster of figures, suggestive of a family portrait, can be seen but they appear as empty vessels (Figure 19). I was more interested in the trope of “family” than depicting real individuals. Without identities, these figures can act as stand-ins. A substantial amount of how we conceptualize the world, especially when we are young, is installed in us by our parents’ values. I was interested in capturing that beginning, but there is also something very American about the posed image of a nuclear family (Figure 19). The cartoon anvil’s rope being cut by a green hand, suggests an abrupt change to the idea of the perfect family, the American dream and many more associations.
Figure 20: Family Photo, Example of nuclear family. Photo from Artist's family collection.

Figure 21: Family photo, Sister, Photo from Artist's family collection.
Another image from personal photos is an image of my sister as a toddler in mid run with her arms outstretched (Figure 21). She does not appear empty like her counterpart. The child’s head and arms within the work are filled with stripes of color that are taken from a SMPTE color bars used as a television testing pattern. She is also digitally warped where her bottom and top half seem to be misaligned (Figure 22).

All through the allegory, elements of digital imagery can be seen disrupting the cultural and historic imagery. TV testing patterns, glitches, and cracks revealing thin strips of colored lines, like a broken LCD television, run rampant in the composition. I have chosen to depict these digital motifs as a way of grounding these events, visuals, and images within the context of the digital age. I think of this painting as a screen. The cracks allude to the surface of the painting breaking, hinting back to the source of much of this imagery: phones and TV screens. The nature of this digital imagery signals there is an error to be fixed.

Figure 22: Livia Xandersmith, Detail of *A Comedy of Agency*, 2022, oil on unstretched canvas and wood, 208.8” x 72” x 80, Photo by the artist.
Act 3: Becoming A Layer of the Work
**Act 3, Scene 1: Inhabiting**

My piece *A Comedy of Agency*, as mentioned earlier, is mixed media installation that consists of a painting that floats a few inches from the wall and hangs like a curtain (Figure 23). The painted canvas is accompanied by painted wooden pieces that stand in front. Behind the brightly painted front piece, black sandbags hold down the colorful prop pieces (Figure 24). In response to my research about dramaturgical sociology, I wanted to think about the stage and viewers being actors as a metaphor for how we are interacting with the chaos of the world. I wanted to create a backdrop that represented the chaos and the fire that is inherited and the constant stoking of its flames. The painting acts as a theatrical backdrop and the front pieces act as stage props, both painted with bright colors. I wanted viewers’ eyes to be hit by a vivid spectacle.

![Image of A Comedy of Agency installation](image-url)
But for there to be any spectacle, there must be a spectator feasting their eyes on the production. Viewership becomes the contributing factor to the power a spectacle holds. As within art, there is a natural distance between the spectacle and the spectator within theater. Art philosopher Jacques Rancière points out this issue in *The Emancipated Spectator* where he states:

First, viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals. Second, it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive.¹⁶
How can one interact with the spectacle in a way that attempts to break through this prison of viewership and into a thought process of active consideration? Rancière shares an answer to this question:

The spectator must be removed from the position of observer calmly examining the spectacle offered to her. She must be dispossessed of this illusory mastery, drawn into the magic circle of theatrical action where she will exchange the privilege of rational observer for that of the being in possession of all her vital energies.17

The front prop pieces sit roughly 6 feet from the painting. This distance allows a comfortable space for viewers to walk in between the layers and inhabit the work. The shape of the front piece is made of five individual parts that come together to create a symmetrical curve that acts as a framing device for the painting and the viewers standing within (Figure 25). The desire for viewers to be able to step into the piece was apparent to me while thinking about image culture. As much as ads, news, and entertainment images are a part of our cultural identity, our physical image is how we personally identify. I was fascinated by the question: What happens when viewers step inside and become a layer of the work? What happens when our physical image and identity collides with the images that give our lives, experiences, and perceptions context?

Visuals of the stage and of performance interested me first because wooden props and backdrops are paintings and objects that are flat but meant to suggest something real. No prop or backdrop in theater is meant to fool the viewer into thinking that actors are in a real environment or location. They claim what they are— fake. Within traditional paintings, canvas stretched on wood, it feels like looking into a window or portal where viewers can see realistically rendered landscapes and portraits. But paintings are only organized pigments placed just right. I am interested in the fakeness of painting itself. But in theater and set design, there is no window or
portal. Actors are a layer of stage, interacting with the props and interrupting the painted backdrops. I wanted this same open quality to my work.

Figure 25: Livia Xandersmith, Detail of *A Comedy of Agency*, 2022, oil on unstretched canvas and wood, 208.8” x 72” x 80”, Photo courtesy of Richard Sprengeler.

In *Picture Day* (2021), I painted an oil on canvas painting that acted as a backdrop (Figure 26). The painting has layers of unnerving images: an explosion behind a skyline, buildings melting down into red upside-down venetian curtains, and toxically bright vegetation. The backdrop is accompanied by a stool and front prop pieces placed on the ground in front of the painting. Viewers are invited to sit inside this designated space and take their photo with a surrealist, dystopian backdrop which culminates into a set up resembling a grade school picture
day. I wanted the viewer to be the completing element of the work. Their physical presence and forced smiles complicate the concerning background imagery.

Figure 26: Livia Xandersmith, *Picture Day*, 2021, 84” x 108” x 96”, Oil on canvas and wood panel and readymade objects. Photo by the artist.
*Picture Day* also led me to an interest in flatness and creating paintings that reference their own “fakeness”. By creating these front prop pieces in *Picture Day* and *A Comedy of Agency*, I became interested in the possible relationship between painting and sculpture. Creating flat pieces that exist in a 3D space creates a contrasting quality. The graphic, flat objects lend themselves to the idea of an image, not a thing. For example, Stephanie Syjuco, specifically in her work, *Dodge and Burn (Visible Storage)* (2019), uses this idea of props as representing images (Figure 27).

![Figure 27: Stephanie Syjuco, Dodge and Burn (Visible Storage), 2019, Wooden platform, digital photos and printed vinyl on lasercut wood, chromakey fabric, printed backdrops, seamless paper, artificial plants, mixed media. Overall, 20’ x 17’ x 8. Photo by Stephanie Syjuco.](image)

In this work, Syjuco utilizes a raised platform, hanging backdrops, and flat, vertically standing props. She layers a diverse collection of images and objects associated with modern cinematics, advertisement imagery, and the colonialist expansion of the Philippines in the
1900s. The flat, standing props appear to be taken from stock photos sites pushing this idea of image over object (Figure 28). Her use of flat prop pieces and a densely populated stage of layered images and objects bares many similarities to how I think about my use of cultural images and historical events in *A Comedy of Agency*. In *Dodge and Burn (Visible Storage)* digital motifs, like chroma key green items and digitally manipulated Photoshop transparent backgrounds are intermixed with the images and objects. Syjuco states:

> The allusion to postproduction and image manipulation is a direct reference to the construction of an American narrative that is itself a problematic construction.

The relationship Syjuco finds between the larger ideas represented by the image and object props and the digital motifs is one regarding the manipulation and exploitation of images, objects, and people within history, Hollywood, and media. Although Syjuco’s work focuses strictly on colonialism, I similarly am interested in how a densely packed collection of images and ideas can recontextualize and critique each other in a way that was previously unseen, especially within the digital age.
Act 3, Scene 2: Luring

For many of the works in my practice, color is always highly saturated. Color, like images, can distract, signal, and communicate a message or mood. Bright colors remind me of toys, childhood, and fun. I wanted to create an enticing color palette that lures viewers in, but when they get closer, they are struck by much more dangerous images than they bargained for. Carnivals are a great example of how brightly colored images can lure us in. We are enticed by the spectacle of bright lights, colors, music, and the smell of fried foods, but when we inspect our surroundings closely, we notice disturbing information. The rides all creak, the games are all rigged against us, and the food that I smell has flies on it. Once the veil of the spectacle is ripped away, we are left with real and complex realities that escaped us in our initial assumption of superficiality.

Relating back to the idea of the function of “Spectacle Pedagogy” mentioned earlier, Garoian and Gaudelius speak about what the stimulation of the spectacle can do to viewers:

Given its mass appeal, the power of spectacle culture is in its pedagogical function. Its captivating stimuli overwhelms and arrests our bodies’ attention and in doing so inscribes a self-validating ideology of commodity culture… With its persistent indoctrination and commodification of our bodies, spectacle culture continues to establish itself as a driving force in determining both private and public desire.20

When creating A Comedy of Agency, I wanted to hide the complexity and seriousness of my imagery behind this idea of a captivating spectacle. Visuals of a carnivalesque aesthetic were present in my mind. When designing the front set piece, I was thinking about the common photo-op wooden cutouts that carnival goers stick their faces into (Figure 28). Like the elements in the painting, these photo-ops force a change of context. Traditional cutouts place one’s physical image into stereotypical or trite narratives. I was interested in creating an object that would
prompt the presence of the human body, but one that only allowed them to enter the space with a more elusive narrative. I designed the organic shapes of the front prop pieces to be open to interpretation (Figure 29). Most people call it fire, without a second thought, but the original form came from images of an evergreen tree line reflected in a lake below. Just like the powerful images I discussed above, I wanted the front pieces to be subject to perspective and context. Like whether a glass is half full or half empty, the front pieces could be fire, a representation of destruction, or they can be evergreen trees, a representation of life and perseverance.
Figure 29: Detail of *A Comedy of Agency*, 2022, oil on unstretched canvas and wood, 208.8” x 72” x 80”, Photo courtesy of Richard Sprengeler.

Figure 30: Detail of *A Comedy of Agency*, 2022, oil on unstretched canvas and wood, 208.8” x 72” x 80”, Photo Courtesy of Richard Sprengeler
I am lured into *A Comedy of Agency* by the color and the promise of a visually stimulating spectacle. The front pieces pull me in with a desire to interact with an object that cues my physical presence with its scale, placement, and the assumption of a photo opportunity. For me personally, the colorful images in *A Comedy of Agency* and my ability to become a layer of the work and one of the images, implicate my actions and reactions in a way that makes me hyper aware of every image I view. But it also implicates every image that I have let become a part of my identity as a woman, a Millennial/Gen Z’er, an American, and as a 21st century human.
Epilogue: An Encore
Entering this program in 2020, my goal was to use painting to explore my own internal struggle of identity and humanity in a brand-new era of global and local pandemonium. My quest to untangle myself from the new confusion of a never ceasing chain of threatening events, led me to open a Pandora’s box of time, history, and culture. In retrospect, I think my end goal was to comfort myself by finding complexity, confusion, and conflict within every era of recent history. I cannot say that I succeeded in this goal of self-soothing or that this goal is completely achievable in the first place. But I have found a relief in letting the chaos be a defining factor of my humanity and acknowledging that there is consistency in the unpredictability of time, history, and culture.

In my future work, surrealism will continue to have a place in my image making process. My new goal is to push the contrast and juxtaposition between subject matter and the diverse paint handling of such subjects. I want to continue to analyze image culture while playing with the concept of flatness and fakeness. I am not finished contemplating the role of the viewer’s physical presence in my work. Installations that have a physical relationship to the body, through scale, framing, or occupancy, is a necessity to further implicate viewers and to break the distance between the viewer and traditional painting. I want to expand figurative painting to include our physical bodies, not just images of them. I visualize whole room installations with multiple wall and floor pieces that can be navigated in-between and around. The hope for my work is to implicate and complicate how viewers consider their intake of images. I want them to consider how their perceptions of reality are deep webs of complex happenings and ripples created by the decisions of the past.
End Notes

2 Ibid., 3-14, 69-76.
3 Ibid., 69-76.
4 Ibid., 5.
8 Ibid., 249.
14 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 4.
19 Ibid.

This text informed the way I was thinking about how an object and an image could interact with the body.

As she mingled her body with the caricature’s, posing so they might together flatten into a photograph, she complicated and disturbed the distinction between person and text, “why” and “how.” Of the two subjects that posed at the Hotel Exposition in about 1930, only one was sentient, but she took her cues from the inanimate caricature. The woman arranged her body in response to the caricature’s coordinates; it prompted, inspired, and
structured her actions. In this dense interaction between thing and human, the caricature scripted the woman’s performance.

This idea of an object scripting a performance was key to the way I am speaking about the front prop pieces of *A Comedy of Agency*. 
Bibliography


