SuperFicial: An Exploration of Decoration, Fashion, Taste, Camp, and Trends

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SUPERFICIAL
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by Jillian Ohl

Since the rise of consumer culture in the late 19th century, Americans have had a complicated relationship with decorative objects, the idea of taste, and the cycle of trends within our classist society. This essay examines some of the decorative objects in my childhood home such as patterned wallpaper and an antique chair as well as a contemporary brand name mascara. While these objects do not have major functional properties, their decoration and superficiality bring me joy. To better understand my appreciation of decoration and aesthetics, I assess how an object or fashion is considered in good or bad taste. While we inherit ideas of taste from our personal cultures and families, we can also be influenced by taste makers—politicians, celebrities, artists, designers, curators, and even social media influencers who have the power to shape, change, or wholly subvert established tastes. Those who can cleverly subvert the establishment by performing with an exaggerated ironic humor exist in the realm of camp. Camp is constantly responding to changing tastes and trends with a proverbial high-heeled foot on both sides of the fence. The essay considers high-profile camp figures such as Warhol and Madonna, focusing on the performative quality of their camp aesthetics. My research shows that taste-makers can subvert or overturn trends and that camp and superficiality can bring not only comfort, but also empower individuals. Ultimately, I argue that taste should be determined solely by the individual and separated from popularized trends and social class. We have the power to consume what we please even if it is decorative or superficial—a value reflected in my own art.
SuperFicial is a visual essay featuring my personal commentary on fashion and taste. I love beautiful things. I was raised by women who also love beautiful things. Beautiful things I include in SuperFicial include everything from red carpet celebrities, clothing, jewelry, furniture, wallpaper, period films, etc. Definitions of the word superficial include “being of the surface,” “not thorough,” and “lacking depth.” Describing something as shallow is typically derogatory. Somewhere along the line beautiful things got tied into this negative idea of superficiality. But what’s wrong with wanting to kick it in the kiddie pool with a margarita—does everyone have to swim in the deep end? SuperFicial both criticizes and celebrates the world of fashion and pop culture.

The Superficial Superpower

Decorative Emotional Baggage

In the illustrated visual essay I record my thoughts and feelings on items such as patterned bird wallpaper, designer brand mascara, bejeweled cell phones, and a chair with large carved swans as arm rests. The selection of these items was informed by tastes and aesthetic values passed down from my mother and grandmother, growing up in the early aughts, and a personal interest in high fashion culture. All four items are what would be considered by most as “nonessentials” and have decorated surfaces. The designer mascara which has a function (albeit a decorative function) is embellished in an attractive container meant to heighten the experience of its mostly female user base. Encasing a cell phone, an actually practical device, in rhinestones absolutely does help the object function better in any way whatsoever. With the research, I wanted to use these items to help explore the cultural history of decoration. Especially since I already did the hard work of drawing them for the visual essay.

The decorated surface is what elevates the item from the ordinary and mundane into something special. These special items help distinguish me and form a personal identity layered in personal history. After working in an architecture office, my infatuation with the

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decorative started to escalate. This was as a subservie backlash against my minimal design-y overlords who were obsessed with everything being in a “sterile” white. Swan Chair would certainly not be welcomed in the office. I guess we all have different tastes…

Too Faced’s Better Than Sex mascara has a ridiculous name and seafoam green container. The textured surface on the container imitates sweat beads or some other sexy wetness. All of these things are mostly irrelevant to the product which is described as “a waterproof, intensely black, volumizing mascara with an hourglass-shaped brush that separates, coats, and curls each lash to voluptuous perfection.” Better Than Sex also comes in waterproof. Which is good if the sweat beads are actualized. But is that really “better than sex” as the title claims?

On Sephora.com the product is labeled 3 out of 5 stars but as a user, I will say I recommend this product—it is actually great. Better than sex? Well maybe if you have had sex, and for that, I am sorry. But every boring weekday morning I can take this out of my makeup bag and have a moment of joy admiring its ostentatiousness and functionality.

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The female writer/powerhouse Susan Sontag (1933-2004) wrote _Against Interpretation_ as a response to rich white male art snobs critiquing and over analyzing a piece of abstract painting or minimalist sculpture. She argues viewers should accept the visuals for itself—separate from heavy ideas that are not clearly addressed in the art. I grip onto her notion of avoiding interpretation. She seemed to recognize the inherent snobbishness and intellectualism that follows interpretation. The superficial or surface level artwork purposely lacks depth and for that reason is far more accessible to the public. It asks the viewer to feel the pleasure of looking. The ephemeral quality of joy is

The bird-patterned wallpaper located in my mother’s kitchen, powder room, and primary bathroom (all different patterns) represents superficiality because it sits on the surface of the wall and provides no primary function besides decoration. Some would argue that it is easy to clean but only if you do not invest in hand painted wallpapers like my mother. The patterns are delightful and truly liven up a space without having real birds flying around the kitchen. There is the moment of hummingbird immersion in the small guest bathroom intended for women to “powder her nose.” But the wallpaper serves for a lovely moment in an otherwise dull closeted space intended for routine bodily function. Dare I say it allows for some escapism?

Patterned wallpaper in the scope of the project also acts as an example for trends. In 2010 when my mother attempted to put the house on the market, potential buyers were disgusted by the early 2000’s wallpaper. Now in 2022, patterned wallpaper has found a renaissance with companies such as Anthropologie and Spoonflower exhibiting robust collections for consumers.

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2 An outdated term once referring to make up reapplication and touch-ups now referring to cocaine use. Which can converge take place in the powder room.
that are chiefly prized for their utility, rather than for their purely aesthetic qualities. Ceramics, glassware, basketry, jewelry, metalware, furniture, textiles, clothing, and other such goods are the objects most commonly associated with the decorative arts. These are items in the modern home that we touch and use everyday—why not make them beautiful?

Artists affiliated with the Arts and Crafts movement of the mid-19th century desired to push away from the industrialization and capitalism forming in modern Western society. As more household items were becoming mass-produced, more Americans across classes now had access to inexpensive decorated goods. Where the wealthy upper class could afford hand-painted French wallpaper, the lower classes could settle for something cheaply manufactured. To differentiate themselves from the lower classes, the wealthy invested in hand-crafted items created and designed by artists such as William Morris. Morris was disgusted with modern factories and found inspiration in the intense and detailed labor of medieval artisans.

Adopting the fashionable Arts and Crafts trend, the bourgeois late-1800s home featured items that were decorated and elaborate, from light fixtures to doorways. The decadent idea of “arts for art’s sake,” also known as aestheticism, was popularized by writers of the time such as Oscar Wilde. He promoted the concept of the decorated “House Beautiful.” Meanwhile in the American south, elites financially ruined by the Civil War painted artificial bricks onto their homes. The intent was to mimic the expensive material fearing they would be seen as lower class without its visible presence.

The Arts and Crafts movement as well as the asceticism trend began to fade as avant-garde art became the prevalent aesthetic. Avant-garde art of the 20th century prioritized concept and socially driven work that often went against the bourgeois. Since decoration was still associated with the upper class its reputation among artists began to tarnish. Decoration and illustration were pushed to the side and rejected for its commercialism and ties to capitalism. Although Arts and Crafts leaders like William Morris were devout Socialists, by the twentieth century the patrons and clients of the House Beautiful were often powerful

The joy of superficiality is found in watching horrible trash reality television such as Love Island while eating dinner. Or wearing your favorite perfume while doing house chores. The painfully boring task of folding laundry is heightened by the sweet scent of gardenia. The superficiality of beauty is often incorrectly judged as a guilty pleasure when it should be celebrated as one of life’s pure delights. And also acknowledged as vitally important in the world of visual arts.

**No One Wants To Be A Decorator Debbie**

Decoration is a surprisingly controversial idea in art and design. In the case of the architects I worked with, it was used dismissively, as a term that described women who attempt to pass as an interior designer. These women were labeled “Decorator Debbies.” No one wants to be a Debbie. This insult holds the elitist and sexist view that decoration is in a separate sphere from art and design. Decorative Arts are “arts that are concerned with the design and decoration of objects not enough to fully sustain a person, but fills in the gaps of the irrelevant and monotonous day-to-day life.

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4 Love Island disappointingly does not take place on an island but instead a mansion. The contestants insist on wearing tiny swim-suits the entire time. There is a pool, but the contestants never go swimming.


IV William Morris’s wallpaper designs are still available for purchase for roughly $4.50 per square foot from Anthropologie.
Using Mucha’s poster as inspiration, I created a spread that asks why fashion and smoking cigarettes continue to be connected. The layering of French poster design is an homage to Art Nouveau.
industrialists. Avant-garde became “high-art”—art that was actually for art’s sake rather than commercialized for financial gain. The aesthetic of the Arts and Crafts movement morphed into Art Nouveau (1890-1910) and eventually Art Deco (1920-1930s). Both movements favored decoration and were manifested into designs such as event cars, posters, subway signs and vacuum cleaners.

While the wealthy upper class still attempt to invest in fine decoration, most Americans have succumbed to the route of mass production. Retailers like IKEA have made mediocre design low cost and accessible to the public. The argument of embracing the hand-crafted now centers less around social mobility and appearance, but rather environmental sustainability and an aversion to “throw away” culture. But based on the opinions of the aforementioned elitist architects, decoration is still frowned upon. Commercial art and high art still remain in separate spheres.

One Can Never be Overdressed or Overeducated — Oscar Wilde

“Fashion is a form of self-expression and autonomy at a particular period and place in a specific context, of clothing, footwear, lifestyle, accessories, makeup, hairstyle, and body posture.” Many describe fashion as a method of creative self-expression—how we choose to present ourselves to the world through garments. But it is important to stress that fashion does not only describe wearable clothing. Fashion applies to all consumer goods around us contextualized in time—our cell phones, coffee tables, wrist watches, and compact SUVs. The freedom to exhibit our individualism through these items can produce joy and is worth the financial cost and possible judgment of others. The need to be seen as an individual is quite human. For those interested in it, fashion can produce positive emotional responses for the user including self-acceptance, confidence, nostalgia, and/or a sense of identity or belonging.

While I greatly admire fine textiles and sewing construction, my interest in fashion lies in these emotional responses and the overall culture. Culture is “The way of life of a people, including their attitudes, values, beliefs, arts, sciences, modes of perception, and habits of thought and activity.” Culture as applied to fashion can be described through a solar system analogy. If fashion (the consumer goods) is the sun, then the planets orbiting it are the people and tastemakers, mass media, production, marketing and branding, and finally, history. Susan Kaiser expresses that fashion and culture are endlessly tied especially in terms of custom, a word originally derived from costume. You cannot fully understand the sun without studying the solar system. All aspects of fashion, whether cape, chair, or car, are rooted in design and follow basic design principles like contrast, balance, hierarchy, movement, and variety, to name a few. Both 3D and 2D designed objects fundamentally speak to aesthetics. What is often not discussed in design education is the relationship to taste and trends and how they function within the fashion solar system.

It’s mmm…mmm…Taste-y

So Distinguished

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) affirmed that “good taste” comes from the educated viewer. Bourdieu was a French sociologist who researched taste in society, publishing the 1979 book Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste. According to Bourdieu, those who have good taste can look at an object of art or design and see its history, precedents, references, and recognize possible creative alternatives. Most art and design is created based on a deviation from previous established patterns and the viewer must have the educated eye to see the work’s implicit histories. This ability to read a work is crucial to understanding and

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6 The Biltmore House in Asheville, North Carolina built by George Washington Vanderbilt built in 1889 is a perfect example of this. For those interested in decorated gilded-age estates, I highly recommend it.


8 While I cherish my inherited fine antiques, I do enjoy the trip to IKEA to purchase everything from cheap candles, picture frames, and coffee tables. Everything in balance, right?

9 Architects see their work as the highest art form.

10 This is seen in Washington University’s MFA programs. While under the same umbrella and in the same building, the Visual Art and Illustration programs do not overlap in classes, dialogue, or structure.


13 Susan B. Kaiser is a professor of women and gender studies, and the textiles and cultural studies graduate groups at the University of California, Davis.

appreciating the language it is speaking and the subtlety or exaggeration of the deviation. The arbiter of good taste has the ability to read an aesthetic object with all three levels of meaning determined by art historian Erwin Panofsky (primary content, secondary iconography, tertiary and intrinsic iconography).

Lower class audiences (i.e. uneducated and with less refined taste) do not appreciate being alienated or introduced to new or foreign visual concepts. Their commitment to the stable and established taste contributes to the “popular aesthetic.” The audience of the popular aesthetic prefers form to provide a direct function and because of their lower economic status naturally prefer things that seem responsible and frugal—born out of necessity. Sometimes choosing a popular aesthetic is influenced by religion or morality. In some societies rejecting decoration or a commitment to conservatism remains precedent in their consumer habits. Whereas those with an educated taste can appreciate art that projects a sense of frivolousness. For example, a blue collar worker living in a rural environment would be less likely to purchase decorative art glass. Art glass requires a safe and secure viewing space and very likely is an object that isn’t meant to hold or display anything. A vase that cannot even hold flowers can seem quite absurd to most audiences.

Bourdieu goes on to state that those with distinguished taste have and prefer the ability to judge the aesthetics of banal objects of the common people and prefer everyday material possessions that possess the qualities of the “pure gaze.” An example of the pure gaze is the consumer who purchases a beautifully designed and well-crafted teapot as opposed to one that is inexpensive, thoughtless, and easily obtained by the consumer. Bourdieu is building on the philosophy of his predecessor’s like Panofsky and Kant who did not dabble in the idea of taste. An important, if not vital, aspect of Bourdieu’s research which I have not yet mentioned is that it is whole-heartedly French. The history of decoration and aesthetics is so deeply embedded in French society, especially compared to the traditionally 

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15 Bourdieu, Distinction, Routledge, 3.

V Elizabeth Viglee Lebrun created beautiful masterpieces depicting Marie Antoinette and her fashions for the public eye. (I personally prefer the Sofia Copolla version with Kristen Dunst.)

VI If I was Kant I would not spend my time philosophizing about aesthetics and judgment as much as I would be wondering who decided that wigs should look like that and why. Why gray? Why the curls?
Kim Kardashian in Balenciaga in 2022.
Madonna in Gaultier. Remember when Like a Virgin was the most controversial thing ever?!

Below: SuperFicial, Lithography, Monoprint, Collagraph, and Collage on board, 13x18", 2022. I collaged a Marie Antoinette-like figure with contemporary imagery fitting her persona in our modern society.
puritanical American. While Bourdieu may seem to have an unbiased aesthetic taste as a social scientist, his position as a French man says otherwise. His research was also conducted solely on French citizens. I am not a sociologist by any means, but I can speculate Bourdieu’s research findings would be different in 2020’s America.

She Bought Army Pants and Flip Flops, So I Bought Army Pants and Flip Flops

The German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) boldly grappled with the idea of beauty and aesthetics. He believed that to recognize that something as beautiful is to confirm that it evokes positive feelings and has been thoughtfully designed although it carries no functional purpose. It gives pleasure but does not further mankind’s desire to survive or procreate. Kant was one of the first recognized philosophers that wrote on beauty and his views are strictly reflecting Western values. He was writing in the 18th century when Marie Antoinette was the ultimate trendsetter and a quick Uber ride to your friend’s house was a three hour horse-drawn carriage ride. So while Kant was certainly on the right track, it is difficult to place this type of philosophy in today’s world obsessed with concept and subjectivity.

As the preeminent theorist on aesthetics for the last few hundred years, Kant’s thoughts on beauty are legitimate but outdated. What this guy in a fluffy wig did not acknowledge was beauty’s and taste’s role in society. Marie Antoinette acted as a trendsetter in her time, and by the virtue of her celebrity, advanced certain beauty ideals within French society. These ideals included a pale face, pink cheeks, big gray wigs, feather headdresses, and other fashions now considered a part of the Rococo aesthetic.

If this system of trendsetting sounds familiar, we still see it with celebrities such as the contemporary Kim Kardashian and her 1980’s predecessor, Madonna. Antoinette was certainly camp with her exaggerated and unrealistic hairstyles which quickly became a

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16 His research asked people of varying social classes to grade how beautiful they determined certain things such as sunsets and cabbage. On a scale of 1-10, how beautiful is a cabbage?

staple in the French court. In 1990 Madonna famously wore French designer Jean Paul Gaultier’s cone-bra corset on stage causing an uproar. Unlike Antoinette, Madonna exploited sex-as-taboo turning the traditionally constricting unseen inner-ware into an independent garment. This famous subversive act has become a monument in the fashion canon and helped normalize corsets as a garment. Kardashian, more like Antoinette, holds a regal place in American culture. Her way of exhibiting heavy contouring of the face, long thick wavy hair, plump lips, thin waist, and thick hips have become the beauty ideal for millions of young women. Every outfit worn by the 40-year-old reality television star who is essentially “famous for being famous” is instantly seen online by the entire world. Her wearing of avant-garde designers such as Demna Gvasalia for Balenciaga has pushed them into the limelight. All three women used their platform of celebrity to set and/or subvert trends within feminine ideals.

Historically, those who acknowledged and spread “good” taste were supreme leaders and royalty. The aesthetic stylings of Queen Elizabeth I and even her Sumptuary Statutes influenced Renaissance fashion trends and who could legally wear them. We still see people in power influencing what is considered in good taste—celebrities, politicians, curators, media, etc. do an excellent job of this. Designers and artists can create beautiful things but if those in power do not acknowledge it, can they be considered beautiful? People seek guidance on what is in good taste. With the upper class acting as the designated taste makers based on their education, power, and economic freedom, their aesthetic will be considered in good taste. This is contrary to the popular aesthetic of the lower and working classes who are numerically more prevalent but not more powerful.

As we are typically the cultural and social class of our parents and family, we are raised with certain understandings of taste. As adults, seeing other displays of taste can provoke feelings of disgust or visceral intolerance. However, adopting a taste of another social class can result in social mobility (either lower or higher). To radically summarize Kant’s beliefs, beauty stems from the sublime and should produce an overwhelming and complex emotional response. When an object or piece of art deviates from that course by taking a shortcut they can be perceived as vulgar or cheapening the experience, thus being in bad taste.

When Taste Stops Being Polite and Starts Getting “Real”

If there is “good” taste then there is certainly “bad” taste. Just as there are people in power who help define good taste there are those who advertise bad taste. Thinking of bad taste, the MTV reality show of the 100’s, Jersey Shore immediately comes to mind. While Jersey Shore seemed to be one of the most popular shows on television, they were still determined to be in bad taste. But what about their performance suggested bad taste? The exaggerated use of skin tans in combination with unusual hairstyles, excessive animal print, revealing outfits, and uncoiffed behavior are most definitely at play. The show has yet to be distinguished as art or endorsed by anyone in high or elite culture. Cast members are routinely mocked and associated with derogatory terms. While Jersey Shore lives in the world of bad taste, it is widely beloved as recognized by its millions of viewers and afterlife in streaming services. The research exploration of exactly why Jersey Shore found its way into the hearts of Americans, is better left to a proper social scientist. In 2022, we have come to almost adore the performers.

What I can determine by my limited knowledge is that watching bad taste makes ourselves, the viewer, feel better about our situation in class and society—Well at least I’m not like them! This feeling is in addition to an outsider’s ability to ridicule the show’s subjects. Bad taste is not only seen in working class groups such as those with Italian backgrounds from Mid-Atlantic states, but also in “new money” Americans. The upper class with established generations of wealth are often appalled by those who ostentatiously display their new wealth through new fashionable things such as McMansions, sports cars, and displays of designer labels. If subtlety is a mark of good taste and the upper class, new money certainly lacks that. The trashy reality shows for this category include the Real Housewives franchise and Keeping Up With the Kardashians.

The stars of Jersey Shore, Real Housewives of Whatever, and Keeping Up With The Kardashians appear to be aware of their trashy personalities and choose to amplify the performance in order to exploit it. Trashy and bad behavior is encouraged and rewarded by the public’s

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18 Most people, that I’m aware of, do not want to be compared to Snooki or The Situation.
This performance delights the audience further because we, the viewers, feel in on the joke. Humor that is in good taste, like visual art, is nuanced and requires knowledge of history and deep references. Humor that is in bad taste relies on easy often slapstick gags as well as overt references to the body or sex (e.g. fart and poop jokes). In Western society displays of sex in art has an established view of being in bad taste and it would be in better taste to simply and gracefully allude to sex without showing it. *Jersey Shore* is happy to show it.

Returning to my *Better Than Sex* mascara, I can now consider its position in the world of taste and fashion. It is a pretty little object that also serves a function for the aesthetically concerned consumer. It comes at a higher price than mascaras that are designed for the popular aesthetic sold at mass retailers. Taste makers such as beauty magazines and social media influencers have endorsed it (the fact that they might have been paid to do so is irrelevant). However, the direct reference to sex has historically been seen as in poor taste… so what gives? Why would they name a best selling product something so *tacky* and contradicts everything

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19 Is "all publicity is good publicity" really true...?  
IX The cast of *Jersey Shore*.  
X The Season 1 poster for *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*, 2007
else about the product? Because the brand producing the mascara, Too Faced, is campy. Their name is a play on words referencing the female catty nature of being “fake” or “two faced” with the idea of “putting on a face” as in to apply a lot of makeup. Camp delivers everything with a (well mascaraed) wink.

**Pack Your Bags, You’re Going to Camp.**

Camp is a style of performance relating to the combined use of the ironic, theatrical, comical, artificial, excessive, frivolous and ostentatious. The resulting aesthetic is meant to challenge society’s understanding of displays of high culture and cultural norms. One way that camp achieves its transgression is through constantly contradicting itself. For example it can be both cheap and expensive and self-aware yet unaware. Another example of a performance of camp is to authentically display artificiality. Philip Gore (1959-1989), an American art writer and critic, describes it as a “lie that tells the truth.” Again, exhibiting a contradicting viewpoint. Some of Gore’s “Camp Rules” include “a second childhood… a disguise that fails…

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20 If the Kardashians were at all funny, they would check all of the boxes.
laughing at *The Importance at Being Earnest* and without knowing why and knowing why.\(^{21}\)

**Pretty, Witty, and Gay**

Camp can be used as both an descriptive adjective and a verb, as in “to camp it up.” Camp is often associated with queerness because of the LGBTQ community’s traditionally marginalized and oppressed place in society which in turn, inspires exaggerated and transgressive displays of gender and sexuality. Camp’s irony, theater, humor, artificiality, exaggeration, and ostentatiousness are often utilized by Drag Queens in popular culture further associating camp with queerness.

The once social taboo of homosexuality and drag only encouraged the performance to indulge further into sexual taboos such as BDSM, voyeurism, and exhibitionsism. It is important to discern that not all camp is queer and not all queer people are camp. However, they are intrinsically tied due to camp’s place in modern LGBTQ history.

To respond again with a reality show example, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is absolute camp. The “lie” as Gore describes it, is the main point of traditional drag—men dressing up as women.\(^{22}\) *Drag Race* has all of the elements of typical trashy reality tv including interpersonal drama, unrealistic challenges, and *gauche* behavior. *Drag Race* proudly and gladly leans into fart jokes and direct sexual references with full understanding that it is considered in bad taste. The comedic self-awareness and connotation of self referencing take it into extreme camp. Everything about the show exaggerates artificiality—contestants render themselves unrecognizable through masterful use of makeup, lip sync songs, and of course use ample boob and hip padding. This form of artificiality is surface decoration to the extreme.

The show contradicts the trashiness by adding a layer of glamor through couture costumes. Appropriation is a major part of camp and the drag costume. Costumes are constantly referencing or appropriating already famous outfits or fashions but amplifying and exaggerating the original aesthetic. Most importantly, it takes

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21 Core, Phillip. Camp, The Lie That Tells The Truth. Delilah Communications, Ltd, 1984, 7. Everything about Oscar Wilde is understood to be camp, especially his British Dandyism.

22 Drag has now morphed beyond traditional gender binaries, further reading Hall, Jake. The Art of Drag. Nobrow, 2020. XIII Season 14 contestants on RuPaul’s Drag Race. This season took a controversial turn with a performer identifying as a heterosexual man. They placed 9th out of 14.
all of the above very seriously. It is no wonder it has gone world wide, produced conventions, and even a traveling performance tour.

Marginalized communities like those associating with LGBTQ have embraced the camp aesthetic for its subversion of good taste and contradictions of gender performance. Upper class viewers often interpret camp as vulgar for its play in the cheap and unrefined. While camp in art, fashion, and media can be initially seen as in bad taste and disruptive by the upper class, it is celebrated by the marginalized lower class who in turn happily consume it. Viewers and participants are able to find a sense of community and belonging within that shared marginalized experience. This fits into fashion’s larger role in creating positive emotional feelings.

**I Liked It Before It Was Cool**

The world of camp looks very different than it did in the 1960’s when Susan Sontag was writing or in the 1980’s when Phillip Core published his book. The Met’s Costume Institute revisited the subject in 2019 with an exhibition displaying its influence on modern and contemporary fashion. But even then, writers and critics found themselves fixated on the celebrities on the red carpet and if they properly demonstrated the aesthetic of camp through their outfits. Other commentary was heterosexual/cis-gendered celebrities were appropriating queer culture. Angry and charged internet debates ensued—which is not camp at all! The ridiculous idea of a red carpet, one that is already wrapped in superficial performance, beauty, and artifice, totally escaped the critics. Camp does not want to be a black or white absolutist idea and only laughs at your petty Twitter threads. Even more so, it does not want to be taken too seriously. And if camp does not want to be taken seriously, is an established institution like The Met the appropriate place to celebrate? The argument continues.

As the institutional ideas of gender are breaking down and homosexuality becoming less taboo, it does not

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XIV Kylie Jenner, Kim Kardashian, and Kendell Jenner at the 2019 Met Gala. But is it camp?
XV Kim Kardashian at the 2022 Met Gala wearing Marilyn Monroe’s 1962 dress. Which is very camp.

make sense for camp to be sequestered in a dark corner only for the use of gay men. This is one of the reasons people had such a strong reaction to The 2019 Met Gala. What were straight celebrities of the upper class doing “being campy” and making it mainstream? Camp is built on references and now lives in a world of references referencing other references (much like trends). So at what point does it matter who is referencing what as long as it is educated and self-aware? Camp is mainstream and no longer is hidden away by marginalized groups, but of course can still be found there. RuPaul’s Drag Race is watched and adored by millions, both queer and not.

What the popularity of The 2019 Met Gala and Drag Race did accomplish is bringing camp into the mainstream as a trend. Gender non-conformity is no longer as taboo as it once was, even 10 or 20 years ago. If the camp aesthetic relies on subversion, especially of cultural taboos, what will be the next move? If camp is mainstream, is it even camp anymore? To the first posed question I hope the next cultural taboo will be overly conservative republicans. Those trying to avoid mainstream culture, angsty teenagers will be dressed as Barbara Bush. As to the second more existential question, I take a Sontag-ian route of avoiding interpretation. It is not necessary to officially label something as camp or not camp. Again, camp avoids the binary.

In an unexpected turn at the 2022 Met Gala, Kim Kardashian arrived in a dress last worn by Marilyn Monroe when Monroe delivered her infamous “Happy Birthday” to then president John F. Kennedy. The dress caused a scandal because of its allusion to sex and nudity. Months later the 36-year old actress died tragically by suicide, destroyed by fame. She has since been immortalized as an American sex symbol. By 40-year old Kim Kardashian wearing the dress to the 2022 Met Gala, who’s theme was inspired by Gilded Age America, she is making several direct references to herself as Hollywood and American royalty as well as an established sex symbol who’s fame is one of mythological proportions. Kardashian purposefully arrived later than most guests for maximum media attention. The look was topped off with slicked back bleached blonde hair. Andy Warhol himself could not create a better art installation.

**Warhol is Ironic, Doncha’ Think?**

Irony is another word, like camp, that is commonly misunderstood. Irony is “typically, the expression of one’s intended meaning through language which, taken literally, appears on the surface to express the opposite—usually for humorous effect. The intended meaning is not in the message itself: the audience has to refer to context cues (for instance, nonverbal signals) in order to interpret its modalit y status.” Which can be interpreted as sarcasm as employed through a contradictory measure which can be humorous. Another definition includes “A state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what was or might be expected; an outcome cruelly, humorously, or strangely at odds with assumptions or expectations.”

In my previous explanations of camp, I emphasize the importance of irony in camp performance and aesthetic. Although irony is a device that is typically employed for literary use, it is commonly found in visual art and fashion. A quick glance of Pop Art would produce the reaction of artists criticizing mass media and popular culture. On closer observation, the artists are typically celebrating the fraught culture as well. Fraught in the sense that the artists are aware of the unethical nature of living in a capitalist society obsessed with fame, celebrity, wealth, and material goods. Andy Warhol celebrates all of the aforementioned things but thinks critically about them as well. This is seen in his paintings featuring plane crashes, electric chairs, and mangled dead bodies.

23 Kendall and Kylie Jenner both decided to add colored feathers to their gowns to make it “campy.” Their looks came off as lazy and forced. However, Kim Kardashian chose to wear French designer Thierry Mugler (1948-2022) who created some of the most famous camp fashions of the 90’s.

24 I’m only half joking...

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XVI Before and After, 1961. An image taken from a plastic surgery ad in a newspaper. The painting invites several different interpretations. The first read is highlighting the visually interesting graphic and high contrast nature of a magazine ad by turning it into high art. The second read is commenting on America's fascination with altering self appearance and striving for perfection (still relevant today). The third read is reflecting Warhol's insecurities with his own bulbous nose.

XVII One Dollar Bill, 1962 - Commentary on America's obsession of money and wealth or an admiration of the graphic design of the dollar bill?

There has always been an argument circling Warhol’s Campbell’s soup can paintings and whether or not he truly loved the all-American staple as he claimed to. Through increasing the scale, creating a wide range of flavors and styles, endless reproduction, and displaying them in a formal gallery setting, Warhol affirms his admiration for the product—the proverbial “putting it on a pedestal.” I know many would agree the typically banal metal soup cans have never looked better. For Warhol, a child of working class immigrants, the product acts as a signifier for the embrace of the American dream and lifestyle. Although many interpreted the result as repeating the item until it became meaningless and separated from its reality—moving the soup can into pure image and decoration. The soup can paintings act in all of the above ways, they do not stick to binary interpretation.

Most of Warhol’s works have several meanings that can contradict one another. The soup cans lovingly depict his favorite lunch food while also nodding towards America’s mass consumerism. This applies to Warhol’s Coca-Cola bottles and celebrity portraits as well. The paintings are both critical and celebratory. His early career portraits (before they were produced just for commission), are mainly of people he appreciated or found fascinating including Debbie Harry, Michel Basquiat, Mick Jagger, and Marilyn Monroe. Some were personal friends, but others he admired for their fame. The portraits act as the traditional decorative portrait but also acknowledge America’s (and the artist’s) obsession with celebrity.

Andy Warhol’s paintings are ironic because we expect visual art to do a certain set of things and we expect a Campbell’s soup can to do another—never to be combined. Viewers did not expect Coca-Cola to act as art and art to look like a Brillo Box. In the 1960’s when the original soup can paintings were being produced, audiences were still getting used to the postmodern theory of art. Viewers were left to decide for themselves if the artist was employing sarcasm or not. The answer to this in regards to Warhol, is both yes and no. He even further destroyed the idea of the “inspired artistic genius” by simply asking friends what he should paint. Warhol’s background in commercial arts meant he appreciated graphic design and aesthetics but had the conceptual mind of a modern artist. Taking imagery from commercial art, which is not regarded as fine or high art, Warhol purposefully exploited this idea especially through enlarging the images and displaying them in a “white wall” gallery.

Andy Warhol’s materials and production were low cost and his subject matter was equally in bad taste. These subjects including body builders, car crashes, and explicit homosexual sex, were rarely things the
established upper class wanted to acknowledge. But by making himself a fashionable celebrity, the upper class became easy to convince that these images and smut films were indeed fine art. Warhol became a fashion tastemaker propelling his “superstars” like Edie Segeick and The Velvet Underground into fame. During the 1960’s and 70’s every club he entered (especially Studio54) or brand he endorsed was given a stamp of good taste acceptance. The clash of low and high art along with low life drug addicts next to wealthy celebrities was a dichotomy that he thrived in. The constant subversion of what is expected by both art and artist is something he strived for. Another camp aspect of Warhol’s work is in the use of appropriated images. Camp is always referencing an existing establishment while subverting the original meaning.

What cements Warhol in the camp lexicon is his balancing act in good/bad taste and low/high brow art as well his performative qualities. As Philip Core writes, his “effortless trendiness during the 1960’s was the result of a carefully cultivated attitude of complete passivity.” His curated persona would infuriate and delight television interviewers when he would deliver deadpan answers. Warhol’s wigs were proudly artificial, sometimes even silver. The artist was painfully self aware to the point of being extremely self conscious about his personal appearance. Which one would never guess by the high quantity of self portraits he produced and his time in front of the camera. Although never publicly announcing himself as homosexual, Warhol was unafraid of producing highly erotic work such as drawings of man friend’s genitals and photography and film of explicit sex acts between men. Enjoying sex-as-taboo, he marketed his sex films as high art and not pornography.

By the 1980’s Warhol’s artwork was over-saturated and felt outdated. As a fashionable celebrity, it is difficult to remain relevant when trends and tastes change from decade to decade. His once groundbreaking paintings had been sequestered into the commercial and decorative. For an illustrator that had his start in advertising, being “decorative” was never considered a complete insult, but was a blow to his ego in the later years. Although tastes changed over his 40+ year career, his work and themes remain more popular than ever as well as a cornerstone in American Queer and Art History. Warhol’s thoughts on everyone having their “15 minutes of fame” likewise remain more relevant than ever, especially in a world of reality television and social media. He would certainly be fascinated with the trendsetting hyper-celebrity essence of Kim Kardashian.

The Reigniting of a Flash in the Pan

It’s Trending…

A shift can occur when taste makers within the upper class such as designers, curators, celebrities, and journalists notice the lower creative class performing a particular camp or tacky aesthetic. These taste makers can then choose to appropriate, exhibit, or promote the aesthetic when exposing it to the mass public on highly publicized platforms (social media accounts, red carpets, museum exhibitions, runway shows, etc). Kaiser and Bourdieu agree that lower classes mimic the tastes of upper classes in hopes of social mobility or at least projecting a sense of good taste.

Fast fashion and major retailers sell consumer products that reflect the trendy aesthetic for low prices and in turn help the aesthetic find its way into middle America’s homes and closets. Once the aesthetic is diluted and widely absorbed by the lower and middle class, the upper class no longer sees it as being in fashion. The aesthetic being exhibited by lower classes is now seen as vulgar, tacky or in poor taste. The trend is subject once again to a camp deviation by creatives taking advantage of its historical position in both good/bad taste and the upper/lower class. While the wealthy upper class typically prefer things that read as “classic,” describing something as “trendy” can often be derogatory.

The cyclical process of trends can only happen after the industrialization and the democratization of fashion. The internet, social media, globalization, and speed of information and production force this revolution into a faster speed than ever before. Contemporary art and fashion is composed of multi-layered compounded tastes weakly being held up by the powerful upper class. With social issues such as beauty ideals, gender norms, wealth disparity, cultural appropriation, and power dynamics at the forefront of conversations, in addition to the pressing need for sustainability, the cycle of trends and taste seems doomed for disruption. But alas, established institutions change at a glacial pace.

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27 Core, Phillip. Camp, The Lie That Tells The Truth, 89.
28 He was actually a paid male fashion model for a time and later had his own tv show.
29 An equal opportunity employer, Warhol also filmed homosexual sex.
**That’s Hot.**

Y2K fashions (1999-2009) and celebrities like Paris Hilton have found new popularity in the 2020’s. What was abandoned in the 2010’s and seen as tacky has reemerged as fashionable...but still tacky. Young tastemakers started to wear and display the fashions on social media because of Y2K fashion’s place in bad taste—a subversion of the established system. This morphed into a trend for mass culture not understanding the irony at play. What started as a performance of young adults finding cheap and discarded trends of yesteryear at thrift stores somehow turned back into high fashion. The nostalgia for a time with dial-up internet, flip phones, and no social media, contrasts with a time where we are oversaturated with digital media, and yikes, the Metaverse. Y2K fashion is a trend that sits within a 20 year cycle. It retreated into the corners of bad taste before being resurrected by a younger generation that cannot truly relate to its original use.

Paris Hilton in the early 2000’s performed a character that was overly superficial, unintelligent, rich, and ignorant. Her exaggeration of this self-absorbed and superficial character alluded to the fact that there was an element of self-awareness and artifice to the persona. By 2010, Paris Hilton’s branded image became tired, tacky and looked down upon as America entered the new decade. The contemporary Y2K trend references its previous self but appears to yearn for a simpler time rather than celebrating bedazzled Juicy Couture sweatsuits. Whether or not young college students seem to understand the subtle complexity and signifiers of low rise pants and belly button rings remains unknown. For adults that lived through that era and will shudder at a “whale-tail,” remember a time of excess that was strangely sandwiched between 9/11 and the 2008 recession.

What Generation Z is picking up on is the fun of this vapid performance. The styles that are foreign to a 20 year old operate well in a realm where young people

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31 The 2003 reality show “The Simple Life” with co-star Nicole Richie exemplifies this performance.

32 Happy endings—the Y2K trend and hindsight has brought a new appreciation for Paris Hilton and how she ruled pop culture and fashion for a decade.

33 A whale tail is a visible thong; with the Y-section of the thong or G-string showing above the pants waistband. Jenny Desborough, “What Is a Whale Tail? Inside the ’90s Fashion Trend Making a Comeback.” Newsweek (blog), June 8, 2021


XXIX A Y2K inspired look from Blumarine’s 2022 Resort collection.
SuperFicial, Digital Collage, 2022. I chose to appropriate this image and add upon the narrative. The addition of more jewelry promotes excess and the long blackened fingernails imply a youthful edge. The drawn pattern in the background activates the space in a playful manner. In the foreground I drew a 2000’s era Razr cell phone and an unwrapped lollipop. The cell phone alludes to a previous era and the candy and decorated lighter further suggest a youthful innocence. The original photograph is clearly from an earlier time, perhaps mid-twentieth century. The resulting themes contradict each other: new/old, high/low fashion, womanly/girly, rough/refined.
express gender, or lack thereof, in a multitude of new ways. The early 2000’s represented beauty ideals that for women included being ultra thin and focused around the male gaze. Young men and women seem to be reclaiming and subverting the look of an over-sexualized late 90’s pop star in an interesting and powerful manner. While the trend has found its way into fast and high fashion, it is at least rooted in the sustainable habit of second hand clothing. The attraction to second-hand clothing makes sense for the ethically minded generation and can act as a screw you to major fashion retailers. The Y2K fashion trend will most likely fizzle out within the racks of Target, H&M, and Zara. The taste makers that once made it cool will lose interest when it becomes inauthentic and mainstream — leaving room for the next campy trend to surface.

Wait, I’m Going To Let You Finish But…

**If You Like It, Buy It**

Art and fashion have been with us for as long as humans have been considered humans. While it is easy to dismiss these visual and superficial aspects of life, they have played a crucial role in society and culture. Moreover, they have the power to impact people on a personal and emotional level.

Decoration, fashion, art, and taste cannot be understood without examining how they operate and shift within a class based society. Traditionally, arbiters of good taste and trendsetters have been powerful and wealthy members of the elite upper class. Tastemakers intend to visually separate themselves from lower classes which helps assert their power. Mass media and the internet have given strength to those traditionally marginalized by giving them a platform to “influence” trends. Currently, power is not only determined by how many countries you colonize but also how many followers you have on Instagram and TikTok. The speed of information and quantity of people spreading it have sped up the cyclical movement of trends.

With tastemakers establishing what we see as high art or fashion, power is also placed in the hands of those who are brave enough to creatively subvert it. Those who proudly exhibit bad taste can provide a sense of entertainment and relatability to viewers who do not see themselves as the elite. However, subversive trends are often adopted by tastemakers. From their heighten platform, they spread the trend causing it to permeate and ultimately normalize within society thus diluting its novelty.

Based on the above research, I argue that individuals should indulge in the aesthetic they so choose separated from class and power dynamics. Do not trust what established tastemakers and trendsetters are promoting unless it agrees with your own judgment. Trends are not worth my personal investment because they are exhaustingly compounded, contradictory, cyclical, and ultimately wasteful. Through this project I have realized that my enjoyment of the camp aesthetic is due to its sense of humor, subversion, and self awareness surrounding the concept of taste and fashion. When collecting for my home or closet, I select objects based on whether or not it brings me joy. I purchase art not because of its conceptual merit, but because I want to look at it everyday. My superficial tendencies and enjoyment of decoration and commercial art counteract established modern Western views of high art and fashion. I choose to embrace this and reflect my views in my art.

Diana Vreeland (1903-1989) was a longtime editor-in-chief at Vogue, stylist to Jackie Kennedy, and consultant to The Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She was a definitive arbiter of good taste and still remains an icon and legend. Even with her impeccable style she is quoted as saying “A little bad taste is like a nice splash of paprika. We all need a splash of bad taste—it’s hearty, it’s healthy, it’s physical. I think we could use more of it. No taste is what I’m against.” Bad taste can taste really good sometimes.

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34 I am speaking specifically of a friend’s banker father who scoffed at these interests throughout our entire friendship. They had a tragically ugly home—proof that a McMansion does not equate to good taste.

35 Some still struggle with the power of the social media influencer because it disrupts the traditional class structure of tastemaking. How can a stay at home mother in Nebraska without a college degree tell people what makeup brands work the best?

36 As for the man mentioned in Footnote 25, his aesthetic is not wrong—but it is ugly. He is welcome to buy whatever horrible brown leather recliner from Rooms To Go he so chooses...as long as he enjoys it.

37 I like to think Marie Kondo stole this idea from me.


**Opposite Page:** SuperFicial, Monotype and inkjet print. 22x30”, 2022. Swan Chair gets a funky and low-brow facelift.
Is There More To Life Than Being Really Really Really Ridiculously Good Looking?

My taste was greatly influenced by my mother and her mother’s confident love of fashion and decoration. These material possessions, seemingly meaningless in the grand scheme of things, mean a lot to me. They have the power to evoke feelings of nostalgia or emotions like pure joy. Objects of fashion can act as cultural signifiers for something much larger or carry long compounded narratives and histories. A tall order for just a pair of pumps, right? But I argue that for me, producing pleasure is an important function of art and design.

The SuperFicial Visual Essay features the Swan Chair in the first chapter. The Swan Chair as an object is physically bulky and heavy. It is difficult to move and especially fit through doorways. Despite its large size, it is not comfortable for lounging or Netflix watching. However, this “weighty object” carries a personal history and symbolizes three generations of antique-loving women in my family. No one needs a chair with huge wooden swans for arm rests, but it remains an important part of my individual identity.

Taking the lessons learned from camp, taste, Warhol, and fashion trends, I create work that smiles with knowing contradiction. SuperFicial uses subject matter within fashion culture and high brow taste and employs them with low brow materials. It wants to both celebrate items of superficiality while also acknowledging their lack of functionality and/or poor ethics. The self awareness, vulnerability, and humor are expressed through my love of camp aesthetics. The use of collage and layers mimics how trends operate within society being repeated, appropriated, and compounded over time. Trends are mocked by using photography and illustrations of women through varying time periods but when placed together in the book their stylistic differences begin to disappear and blend together. The form of a glossy art book contrasts with the busy sketchbook style of the interior spreads. Design decisions are inspired by fashion magazines such as Vogue that I read as an adolescent and teenager. This is in addition to designing on the grid, as a conventional book, and deliberately breaking the established grid.

SuperFicial is subversive in the way that it speaks to established and academic contemporary art being overly serious and concerned with concept over aesthetic. While the conceptual approach to art making was once subversive in itself, it now seems tired and forced. SuperFicial acts as a guilty pleasure for the viewer. I have been made to feel guilty about my superficiality and this work acts as a response to that by reclaiming the personal shame and guilt through making beautiful images about beautiful things. Through the process I have realized that much of the guilt and shame I have felt has rarely been from outside factors but rather from my own internal voices questioning my self-absorbed nature. We are our own worst critics, aren’t we? While the book started as an argument defending fashion, glamor, and camp, it became a visual diary recording the process of my own self acceptance. Through seeing this embrace, I hope (and encourage) the viewer to do the same regarding their insecurities of beautiful guilty pleasures. The book does promote social or political change but does ask to be self aware and reflective. It encourages fashionable fun while also pointing out flaws in ourselves and Western consumer culture. Taking inspiration from Warhol, the work is proudly decorative, celebratory, campy, deeply personal, humorous, and slightly critical.

Opposite Page: SuperFicial, gouache and ink with digital collage, 2022. Audrey Hepburn in a contemporary version of Breakfast at Tiffany’s. A costume that has found its way into visual culture but has lost its connection with the original film.
Image Credits & Works Cited

I. Ohl, Jillian. Swan Chair, Photograph, 2022.


This book was created at Washington University in St. Louis, in the MFA Illustration and Visual Culture program in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, in the spring of 2022.

The body text is set in Baskerville. The title text is set in Didot. The book was designed and typeset by Jillian Ohl based on a page design by Ben Kiel with assistance by Audra Hubbell. Text editing by John Hendrix and Heidi Kolk. Production and binding was completed by Advertisers Printing, St. Louis, Missouri. This book is printed on Cougar and 100lb text.