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***Ghosts in the Garden:
Cultural Critique through the Lens of the Absurd***

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The primary lens by which I deconstruct my work is the absurd and “lucidity” of the absurd as developed by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus’ absurd grows out of the tension between human desire for establishing order with the impossibility of doing so in a universe that continually resists our abstractions. The absurd then becomes a means to understanding the criticisms in my work of consumerism, behavior, and spaces which attempt to control or constrict people. I approach my art as an “other” or “outsider” from the system of Protestant moral dichotomy in which I grew up. There are important parallels between my work and Southern Gothic Literature, resulting from my cultural background. Cormac McCarthy, Flannery O’Connor, and Truman Capote are the key authors with whom I ally myself. My use of the absurd, magical realism, and horror ties my work not only to the Southern Gothic, but also to authors such as Michal Ajvaz, who I draw heavily upon for the imagery in my work. However, I turn his absurd towards my own absurdist cultural critique. The use of the absurd for cultural critique and key similarities in style closely tie my work with illustrator Mary Leunig and painter Yun-Fei Ji. My work looking at broader cultural concerns uses similar mechanisms to Yun-Fei Ji in building my critique, while my more self-reflective work connects more clearly with Mary Leunig. With all of these writers and artists the absurd is a key concept to understanding their work and intentions.

Ghosts in the Garden: Cultural Critique through the Lens of the Absurd

The absurd developed by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and subsequently adopted by Michal Ajvaz in *The Other City* provides the best conceptual framework for understanding my art practice. Camus' absurd arises out of the conflict between human desire to create order explaining the universe with the impossibility of conforming the universe to any manmade framework (p. 28). Camus states that attempts to diffuse or overcome the absurd rob men of the potential to create meaning in life. He says, instead, by embracing the absurd a man can "live without appeal," and find meaning in "the struggle itself toward the heights," alluding to Sisyphus' triumph over the gods at the end of the essay (p. 123). Camus argues from a nihilist standpoint to argue in favor of life being worth living, developing a sort of positive nihilism: by admitting the defeat of hope in the irrational universe, the opportunity for making meaning appears. Camus reasons that in recognizing the absurd the nihilist gains freedom from the need to create an ordered universe. He can live "without appeal" while maintaining his nihilism towards experience. In *The Other City*, Michal Ajvaz builds his plot on the narrator's desire to establish order in our world by finding the center of the "other city." The narrator slowly learns his quest is impossible, the unreason and chaos of the universe prevent a center from existing. The narrative trajectory mirrors what Camus' imagines for Sisyphus and the narrator of *The Other City* claims the same victory in defeat. Revealing the presence of the absurd remains a constant in my work as a means to make broad and concentrated societal critiques.

Camus and Ajvaz also embed an emphasis on lucidity of the absurd in their work. Lucidity is key to accepting the inevitability of the absurd, but also explains the purpose of magical realism and fantastical imagery in my work and that of Yun-Fei Ji, Mary Leunig, Michal Ajvaz, and Southern Gothic literature. In all of these cases “magic” is just a guise of the absurd intended to heighten a viewer or reader’s awareness of the absurd. When selecting visual and narrative



Figure 1 — *The Garden Party*. Andrew Catanese. Ink and Enamel on Paper. 38 x 36 in. 2015.

content of my work, I do so with an emphasis on lucidity. Sometimes I draw directly from Camus’ or Ajvaz’s writing, other times beginning from life, or from other writing or cinema. The spaces I select are ones which figure prominently in Ajvaz’s writing: gardens, wallpapers, tunnels, closets (Figure 1). In these spaces, the absurd is most easily seen. In my work, as with magical realists like Ajvaz, the absurd transforms into the fantastical, heightening

the lucidity so valued by Camus.

The absurd becomes an especially important lens for my paintings that satirize a consumption based identity construction. With these, lucidity is primarily an awareness towards conventional roles dictated by cultural and behavioral norms. The paintings are cartoon-like figures painted in enamel and acrylic on photolithographic prints on a Crate & Barrel Advertisement. I insert characters to disrupt the message in the advertisements. The disruption reveals the way a consumption-based identity reduces the moral and ideological values’ substance to signifiers.



Figure 2 — Crate & Barrel Advertisement “Good Design is So Comforting” from *Dwell* (Nov. 2014) back cover. New York, NY: Dwell Media.

The signifiers are, in turn, used as pressures to buy things. In the three paintings, I mock the flimsiness of this method of identity construction through visual puns: the rafters become stretcher bars, the sofa becomes a butt, another character curls between the cushions, another’s foot subtly slips off the advertisement around the side of the canvas. By making literal what the sofa promises the consumer, the viewer is given a space to laugh at these characters. The irony of the humor lies in the way that the viewers and I participate in the very same system of identity construction.

To explain the mechanism of my critique and elaborate on its connections to the conceptual frameworks I have mentioned, I will deconstruct the way the Crate & Barrel advertisement

pressures consumers to buy (Figure 2). It is one of several I have used from interior design and architecture magazines such as *Dwell*, *Elle Decor*, and *Southern Living*. The magazines and their advertisements build themselves to cater to a new bourgeois or the new generation of the bourgeois. The magazines target predominantly white, wealthy, young people, and women and effeminate gay men. The advertisements purport to embody in their products the values and ideology of this new bourgeois. As a part of a commercialized society that constructs its identity through purchases, the target group is compelled to buy the right sofa, sinks, and decor to imbue their life with the moral and ideological values they are supposed to desire. Consumption used to “sanction and identify [status] as a badge of distinction,” (Wirsching, 9).

My work then alters the advertisement to draw attention towards the absurd conflict inherent in the consumption-based identity. That conflict is the result of limiting a person into conventional roles or types. The different roles restrict the person in a way so that the parts

do not integrate and grow into increasing conflict. The Crate & Barrel advertisement is particularly useful to my work because of the way the advertisement adopts rhetoric and signifiers from the old philosophical values of liberal-bourgeois identity construction in marketing products to the new bourgeois. In doing so, the advertisement enhances its own absurdity by selling anti-consumerist values. The advertisement text reads:

“While the clean look of our Lounge Sofa is very much in the moment, its craftsmanship has a rich history of quality we’ve been known for since 1962. Loung is made top to bottom in the USA at a family owned workshop in North Carolina. It’s built to last with a handcrafted frame of certified sustainable, kiln-dried hardwood. And its family friendly fabric is exceptionally durable and stain-resistant to stand up to almost anything a kid can dish out. Now isn’t that comforting.”

The repetition of family and the advertisement’s focus on a family’s interaction with the sofa’s fabric serve simultaneous purposes. The first is the way in which, “the family [is] not proof against consumer culture; indeed, it ‘imposed a duty of consumption,’” (Wirsching, p. 5). Andreas Wirsching quotes Hans Freyer to explain the specific way consumerism harnesses the family as a pressure on the consumer. Tied to this use of family in the advertisement is the second goal of the advertisement: to signify the liberal-bourgeois philosophy meant to appeal to the new bourgeois. The liberal bourgeois of the late 19th century and before regarded family, education, and estate as a key parts of a persons identity. The family is co-opted here to distance the advertisement from urbanization and commodification of the public world. The advertisement sets the consumer at ease by making the sofa seem a resistance to the impersonality of the consumer world.

The use of private spaces in the advertisement as a signifier of liberal bourgeois aversion to industrial society allows the sofa to appear to embody values and ideology. The advertisement gives the consumer the impression that the sofa will imbue the home with the values promised in the language and presentation of the sofa. Rural elements further family as a signifier of liberal-bourgeois philosophy here. The advertisement promotes simplicity and practicality,

but without sacrificing “quality,” elegance, and “comfort.” The color scheme is clean and white for the most part, only exposed wooden beams interrupt the white and neutral colors in the room. Exposed beams and simple wall finishes imply a rustic simplicity mirrored in the anti-urban attitude suggested by the family and the “family-owned workshop.” Down to details such as typeface, this simplicity is emphasized. The tagline, “Good design is so comforting.” and the rest of the text are printed in a sans-serif type that reaffirms simplicity as a value in the advertisement.



Figure 3 — *Selecting the Right Sofa* Andrew Catanese. Enamel, Acrylic, and Photolithograph on Cotton. Three panels 25x30in, each. 2015.

All of this underlines the values imbued in the sofa, by distancing it from the urban masses.

The mechanism in the advertisement demonstrates the way commercialism overcomes opposing forms of identity construction. By co-opting the anti-consumerism as an identity to be bought, the Crate & Barrel advertisement powerfully demonstrates the way consumption based identities flatten and minimize the values they sell. An anti-consumption identity founded on consumption, must inevitably fail to deliver on its promised ideological stance.

To disrupt these spaces and accentuate the shallowness of the advertisement’s claim, I insert characters who are not supposed to belong in the space (Figure 3). At least they don’t belong based on the primary audience of the advertisement and magazine. I paint the

characters so that they move in and out of the real space of the canvas and the illusory space of the photolithographic print of the advertisement. The characters I add and the print build tension visually through differing image languages and the characters confounded desire to belong to and embody the values of the advertisement. Their efforts result in a humor that is a key element in where my critique occurs, mocking the absurdity of this system and of participating in this system. The humor grows out of the limitations of a system of identity construction based on purchases. The inadequacy of an identity made by conforming to objects leaves the figures bare and flat, as substanceless as the sofa's claims.

I use wallpaper and garden imagery to address the idea of control differently from its role in the advertisements. Wallpaper has been a frequent choice for me because of the way prints of flora serves as a metaphor for controlling nature (Figure 4). Floral prints rose in prominence with the urbanization and industrialization of

Western society. Wallpaper was a way to bring an ever-more distant rural world into the urban fabric. Ironically, Victorian wallpapers often used lethal amounts toxic pigments for the color green (Saunders, 16). The comic twist of an attempt to control nature which backfires interests me as an example of the conflict between human desire to create order and the reality of a world outside of human control. The very purpose of the wallpaper here causes its collapse as the desire to come ever closer to replicating nature makes the wallpaper more toxic.

My interest in gardens begins again with the intention to control and mimic nature. The garden also provides a convenient space which connects me to the Southern Gothic: the muggy, intrusiveness of the strange and inexplicable which insinuates itself across the genre. In the



Figure 4 — *Self Portrait with Hungry Ghost*. Andrew Catanese. Oil Paint on Canvas. 25x30 in. 2015.

works included here, I did not use Southern Gothic stories or novels for the specific imagery (Figure 5 and 6). Instead, the magical realism of Michal Ajvaz was a starting point for building the scenes in *The Garden Party* and *In the Woods (Peeing)*. Ajvaz's influence led to incorpo



Figure 5 — *The Garden Party* (detail). Andrew Catanese. Ink and Enamel on Paper. 38x36in. 2015.

presence of the “other” in these works represent my interest in the exclusions created by Southern Protestant moral dichotomy.

The embedded cultural critique in the print-paintings and the stylistic tendencies in my other paintings tie my work to the painter Yun-Fei Ji. His paintings are usually in ink and watercolor on mulberry paper formatted as hanging scrolls or horizontal scroll paintings. The format and the subject of the paintings are both critiques of China. The format provides a critique through the fact that when Yun-Fei Ji trained at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts, the only acceptable style was still Socialist

rating more mythic and magical creatures and Boschian hybrid creatures. However, dark halls, heavy plants, androgenous creatures, undirected action, non-sensical space, and an abundance of snakes allude to my distinct interest in Protestant morality. Specifically, the



Figure 6 — *In the Woods (Peeing)*. Andrew Catanese. Enamel on canvas. 8x10in. 2015.

Realism (Prose, 83). The style becomes symbolic of other heavy-handed policies among the PRC in regard to art and other social controls. Stylistically, the ink and watercolor bears a visual similarity to the way I use thinned enamel; however, for my work, style does not act as a part of my cultural critique. Instead, multiple styles interact in my work to contribute to its meaning.



Figure 7 — *Mistaking Each Other for Ghosts* (Detail). Yun-Fei Ji. Watercolor and ink on Xuan paper 14 1/2 X 27 1/2 inches. 2007. WEB: http://www.jamescohan.com/exhibitions/2010-02-19_yun-fei-ji/artworks#artworks/14.

The subject matter forms the other half of Yun-Fei Ji's critique of China. Ji incorporates imagery from literature into works like the *Three Gorges Dam* scroll, which primarily centers on a critique of the PRC's mistakes leading up to and their response to a crisis that began with a dam

break. Literary traditions and specific works become sources for visual subject matter for us both. In *Mistaking Each Other for Ghosts* (Figure 7), Ji uses ghost stories from a 17th century author, Pu Songling (Garcia, 20). I turn to 20th century Southern Gothic writers and magical realists like Michal Ajvaz for paintings like *The Garden Party* and *In The Woods (peeing)*. Ji's use of absurdist cultural critique and of literary sources for content both connect his work to mine.

While the visual mechanism is very similar between my work and Ji's, the subject of critique and my own cultural background are more closely tied to Southern Gothic Literature. Flannery O'Connor's short stories, Truman Capote's *The Grass Harp*, and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* have all exerted a powerful influence on my thinking. Growing up in Richmond, Va, I was exposed to the same arbitrary and specific dichotomies of right and wrong in Protestant morality. The influence of that way of thinking about gender, sexuality, and race has continually shaped me, especially as someone who always felt a deep-seated opposition to a Protestant system of morals. I have often felt like the five characters in *The Grass Harp* who find themselves in the treehouse facing down a menace that opposes them for vague reasons

founded on a code of law that, “doesn’t admit differences” (p. 41). Things which refuse to fit to norms of culture and behavior are treated as threats to Protestant morals and so the sense of the other as a broad category becomes a part of my work. These concerns lead to questions of sexuality, mental health, and gender in my work, as does the desire to undermine any easy categorization of a person.

The significance of my background has lead all of my paintings to be on some level semi-autobiographical (Figure 8), tying them conceptually to Australian illustrator Mary Leunig. Her works, while reflecting on Australia’s culture, still contain deeply personal responses to the conventional roles dictated to her by society (Figure 9). As with my work, the categories are inadequate to reality and Leunig subsequently becomes an “other.” She



Figure 8 — *Self Portrait*. Andrew Catanese. Oil Paint on Canvas. 25x30 in. 2015.

suffers for her inability to conform. Her works look at motherhood, love, artmaking, and mental illness, and she faces down a similar categorizing influence to the one that I address from the South. Like with Yun-Fei Ji, I connect stylistically with Leunig because of the use of illustration and humor. However, on the level of using the absurd to follow it to its



Figure 9 — *There's No Place Like Home*. p. 11. Mary Leunig. Web. Retrieved from <http://www.maryleunig.com/publications/no-place-like-home/>.

impact on the individual, there are much closer ties between my work and Leunig's than there were between mine and Yun-Fei Ji.

When Camus speaks of a desire "to live without appeal," (53) it is to live without appealing to the higher power of gods for systems of behavior or meaning. The absurd demands the rejection of external constructs of gender, sexuality, and race that do not match with a person's rational thought. The absurd man is equally incompatible with Marxist labor-based identity and liberal bourgeois' education-property identity construction as it is with a consumerist model of selfhood. All of these are systems which exist outside the reality of the self. To combat these, Camus creates a positive nihilist philosophy which provides recognizing the absurd as the first and only suggestion as to how a person should begin defining the self. The absurd is as important to understanding my work as it is to understanding the Southern Gothic, Yun-Fei Ji, Michal Ajvaz, or Mary Leunig. While the yoke of the absurd cannot be destroyed, Ji, Leunig, Ajvaz, McCarthy, O'Connor, Capote, Camus, and I do turn the heads of our readers and viewers to look at the weight they carry. Only by knowing the presence of this control in its comic circularity can I move in directions other than those dictated to me by the culture which has shaped me.

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