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GOOD ENOUGH

by

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A Senior Thesis

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Washington University in St. Louis

In Fulfilment of the Requirements

For the Bachelor of Fine Arts

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Abstract:

The seven-foot-tall sculptural painting *Good Enough* explores the cultural significance of trophies in contemporary American society. As an ancient object representing achievement and reward, the irony of trophies' current junk-status pokes at absurd contradictions embedded in American culture. I offer context on the evolution of "the readymade" from Dada to Pop Art to 90s assemblage, and position *Good Enough's* handmade, tender approach as a celebratory twist to that lineage of cultural critique.

At seven years old, my cousin Will joined a karate class. The video of him splitting a wooden block with a single hand chop was the talk of Thanksgiving 2009 and considering that he and I were the same age and thus natural rivals, I left the family reunion with no choice: I would start karate too. I had something to prove; I was the bigger, stronger cousin despite being born four months younger. I was *winning-er*, I was fantastic.

My mom was excited, as was my sensei. “Don’t use your skills for evil,” he said. “Yes.” I split a wooden block and won the largest trophy I ever saw, bigger than myself. A triple decker with seven columns on the bottom layer structuring up to a large golden cup. A golden cup that represented nothing specific, an angel with wings. Was this a religious symbol? A reference to fantasy? Whatever the form, I knew it meant that I was a winner. Everyone in my dojo who split the wood (about a dozen in total) got one. Each trophy was the same form in different colors – mine was purple - with slightly different gilded adornments. That didn’t matter because Will never knew, all he knew was that I got the trophy and immediately announced my retirement.

This was the first of my many trophies, despite being relatively amateur at everything. In elementary school, I got a blue ribbon for good handwriting and a green ribbon every birthday. Gen X-ers frequently point to the rise in “participation” trophies as a poignant example of Millennials and Zoomers’ coddled upbringings and subsequent softness. In a 2015 study of 1,754 children ages 6-12, “60% of kids surveyed say everyone deserves an award, citing hard work and fairness as the main reasons” (Pao, NPR). Regardless of the increase in actual sports trophies, the carrot-and-stick motivation system is more nuanced in contemporary society. Rewards are everywhere and memories of winning are sought after and stockpiled: employee of the month awards,

big checks, taxidermized animal busts, reality show roses, Hollywood Ave stars, or the grand prize every woman is supposed to orient their lives around: a 25k honking diamond ring, extended in the outreached hand of a boy in khaki shorts and a polo.

Our modern conception of a trophy dates back to the ancient civilization: royal Egyptians' bestowed symbolic jewelry as honorable rewards, laurel wreaths were awarded to Olympic victors in Ancient Greece, Late Modern reliquaries enthroned gilded relics like the Valencia Chalice, otherwise known as the Holy Grail (*Cups, Medals...*, Proquest). Seventeenth century horse races popularized the trophy cup, a motif that lives on through the Stanley Cup, the Premier League Trophy, the Men's Wimbledon Cup, and the Claret Jug. Throughout time and cultures, the acquisition of physical proof of achievement and honor is consistent. These awards were individualized, valuable, and specific to the receiver.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Now, trophies are everywhere, tombstones to our past achievements. They litter secondhand stores, engraved with personal names but left behind. Recently, I began collecting these forgotten trophies and deconstructing them to learn their internal logic. Their construction is as cheap as possible, hollow, and connected with narrow bolts. The trophy is exemplary of our contemporary wastocene, the object most treasured (the prize itself!) is now diluted in to just another thing in our mountain of things.

These “junk” trophies use ubiquitous, interchangeable elements. They are shiny, gaudy, and made of plastic and cheap glue that starts to unstick from the moment of inception. Society associates winning with their cliché motifs – the laurel wreath, the cup, the stars and stripes. The website <crownawards.com> allows you to order any trophy – choose your laminate, choose your engravement, choose your topper – and be rewarded at your door for as low as \$6.99. Options for the column design include “American Glory,” “Inferno,” “Red Lightning,” and “Silver Solar” among others (Figure 3).



Figure 3

Still, trophies are not completely meaningless objects. *Free Throw Contest Winner Katie Robinson 2007, Beer Pong Tournament Champion, Dairy Queen Softball League Runner Up*; the trophies I collect are memories now forgotten and made unpersonal again. Even if they are not my memories, when I fill my shelf with these junk objects, I look well-accomplished. They maintain their semiotic character of victory.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 4

In my found object trophy sculptures, I reinvented the traditional silhouette of the trophy while utilizing the base as a dramatic frame for my two-dimensional works, a similar effect to putting something on a plinth and calling it art (Figures 4-6). The trophy is then similar to the art object both conceptually – a competitive status symbol teetering between personal and surplus – and formally – an object of uncertain value displayed on a plinth. If I put my paintings and drawings on trophies, they win. Even through deconstruction, the basic elements of “trophy language” (faux marble base, small golden topper, etc.) communicate the objects’ original intent.

Good Enough introduces a different challenge to the factory-made trophy. While using the same visual motifs, the handmade is prioritized. My painting sits on a plinth which is also a trophy base, the columns are wrapped in two monoprints that use hand stamped stars with childlike zeal. It stands like an illustration in space, covered with symbols and icons of victory, all pointed towards a more nuanced painted image that stands on two spindly yellow rods. Pool noodles are sandwiched in between the front and back of the cut-out medallion, further blurring the line between two dimensions and three. All in all, the sculpture stands at 7’ and gestures towards elements of trophy-ness without being a 1:1, clear cut trophy. As a viewer told me, “something about this feels important.”



Figure 7

The painted scene is centered in a comically large medallion and shown from two different perspectives, front and back (Figures 8-9). It's ambiguous; an amorphous sunburnt swimmer in an embellished floral swimmer cap and tight goggles is sitting on a pool noodle, holding daffodils. Just enough of the setting is referenced to create context in the circular painting: red and white flags, triangular pool ladder holds, tiles, and fencing suggests an outdoor pool. A total eclipse tops the circular composition, a solar flare on the other side. *Good Enough* culminates at this painted image, yet it resists clear analysis. The sculpture moves away from a “this is that” object distinction.



Figure 9



Figure 8

The swimmer motif appears frequently in my work: sunburnt, squishy figures stuffed into swimsuits and caps. The figure gestures at the complex, specific social dynamics of the pool environment, at gender and body image and its fraught status within American history. Engaging in conversations with older women (including my grandmother) and St. Louis-specific research provided me valuable insights into

Midwest swim pageants, from “appropriate” swimming attire to the inclusion of fitness in the beauty standard (Figure 10). Gender integration in public pools had complicated cultural consequences: they spurned the creation of pageants and bikinis (Hohman, HISTORY.com). They allowed white women a public place of leisure—but only after racial segregation had been established. Public pools shifted American attitudes away from Teddy-Roosevelt-era militant recreation to the embrace of leisure in the 1920’s (Wiltse 124). Leisure at what cost? In America, the history surrounding recreation and pleasure is anything but indolent.

I poke holes in these complex social histories, associations, and contradictions in order to collectively acknowledge their absurdity. The aesthetics of this pageant context – sashes, flowered hairbands, synchronized walks and poses – point towards contradictions in American leisure and wellness culture that are similar to my investigation into celebration and achievement in Americana.



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13

The painting's ambiguity blurs the genre-fiction of *Good Enough* somewhere between painting and sculpture, engaging with the discussion of “painting as object,” derived throughout the course of contemporary art. A collision point exists between the minimalist's impulse to distill objecthood conceptually and the 1990s assemblage sculptor's investigation into using everyday objects as materials to extend the definition of objecthood: objects created from disparate objects, or as Massimiliano Gioni writes, “impromptu combinations and nearly barbaric gestures” (67). While describing one of Jessica Stockholder's large installation sculptures (or “room-filling assemblages”), Armin Zweite writes, “Stockholder's oeuvre, household objects and mass-produced industrial products possess no flea-market charm. Aestheticized and without function, all of this “stuff” has been reduced to its semiotic character” (12; Figure 14).

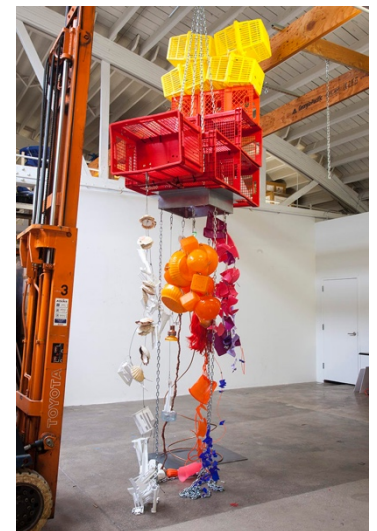


Figure 14

Good Enough engages with the “painting as object” conversation in a similar vein to assemblage sculptors: any object in the 21st century has associative power and imbued

memory even (and especially) junk. Yet, *Good Enough* has no intention to override that association and doesn't use found objects. It focuses on the meaning we still attribute to junk, and its handmade qualities reject uniformity and hone in on the personal quality of these objects with stamped stars, unperfect handwriting, and graphic, hand drawn linework. In regards to the changing nature of the readymade since Dada, Laura Hoptman writes, "The very 1960s notion of 'junk culture' nor the 1980s one of product culture are applicable... [sculptures] are products of an *object* culture, a post-Duchampian period in which the idea of the readymade has been so absorbed that an object from life is as obvious a material for art as oil paint" (UnMonumental, 134).

One sculpture that uses enlargement as a humorous commentary on worship and exultation is David Herbert's *VHS* (2005), an 8' tall tape of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Figure 15). As Meghan Dailey writes, the humorous monolith "reclaims the power of the monumental form on its own terms: large, but unglorified, a common object rendered uncommon by its unexpected scale, it commands our attention" (11). Associations are invited and pop culture is lampooned.

Herbert's piece is in dialogue with the enlargement of surplus product and brands in Pop Art. While Warhol and other pop artists used repetition and enlargement to present the meaninglessness of people and products, interviews with Oldenburg show a more nuanced interest in injecting otherwise replicable objects with a comical sense of purpose and feeling. Examples include *Soft Toilet*, *Soft light switch* (Figure 16).



Figure 15

OLDENBURG: ...Duchamp is known for calling a thing art, rather than making it. A lot of that is picked up in pop art, too—by Andy [Warhol], for example. But I’m always careful to say that I changed everything I found. So that was the big difference. Mine was not pop art. I maybe started with a subject, but I changed the subject.

ROSE: There’s always a transformation.

OLDENBURG: And lots of things were injected into it from my mind and my feelings, which is not true with most of Duchamp’s work.



Figure 16

Enlargement in *Good Enough* is in similar opposition to Warhol’s 1:1 recreation, like his *Brillo Boxes* for example. Our object associations and their absurdity are treated lovingly – made fun of yes, but not scorned.

The not-so momentous let down is ever familiar in the 21st century: physical monuments contested, personal heroes disgraced, technocracy, bureaucracy. Recently – between recession, pandemic, and global conflicts – graduation too is more sigh than woop. This trophy also stands as an ironic celebratory gesture for myself; with the same facetious tone as a giant check, my painting degree is literally an inflated prize. It is “good enough.”



Figure 17

Assessing glorified objects across American culture – art, trophies, tapes, junk – allows the viewer to reflect on notions of value and the ways we have learned to assign it.

Is it a sculpture? Is it a trophy? Yes, no. Recognizing absurdity is a connective, collective, and necessary act. In 2007, the New Museum opened the exhibition *UnMonumental: The Object in the 21st Century*, which positioned contemporary sculpture in an ad hoc space. As Richard Flood states in the exhibition essay, “There isn’t time or distance enough to perpetuate monuments. We live in a world of half-gestures where there is no definitive stance and the sands shift incessantly over a desert of evidential truth” (13). *Good Enough* uses intention and tenderness to address the cynicism of collapsing standards. It is an homage not just to the things we cherish (prizes, junk), but also the act of cherishing things. Even stupid things.

Especially stupid things.

Figure List:

Figure 1: Getty Images. *Greek civilization, 5th century B.C. Red-figure Pottery*. 2011.

Figure 2: AP News Room. *Stanley Cup Finals Devils Kings Hockey*. 2012.

Figure 3: Crown Awards. *Wesbite Screenshot*. 2024.

Figure 4: Levin, Haley. *Trophy Study I*. 2024.

Figure 5: Levin, Haley. *Trophy Study II*. 2024.

Figure 6: Levin, Haley. *Trophy Study III*. 2024.

Figure 7: Levin, Haley. *Good Enough*. 2024.

Figure 8: Levin, Haley. Detail from *Good Enough*. 2024.

Figure 9: Levin, Haley. Detail from *Good Enough*. 2024.

Figure 10: HISTORY.com. *Portrait of the first Miss America contestants, Atlantic City*. 1921.

Figure 11: Levin, Haley. *Swimmer*. 2023.

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Figure 14: Stockholder, Jessica. *Strings Attached Too*. 2014-2017.

Figure 15: Herbert, David. *VHS*. 2005.

Figure 16: Oldenburg, Claes. *Soft Toilet*. 1966.

Figure 17: Levin, Haley. *Good Enough*. 2024.

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