

Introduction

True, the people didn't have their once-cherished points right there on the top of their heads, but that didn't matter so much anymore. People just started assuming that every man had some kind of a point, whether it shows or not.

Narrator, *The Point*

The 1971 animated film *The Point* is a story about a boy named Oblio who lives in a place called the Pointed Village. In this village, everything must have a point—even the people, who all have pointed heads. Oblio is born with a rounded head, and through a trial with which most of the townspeople disagree, he and his dog Arrow are banished to the Pointless Forest. Oblio and Arrow have many adventures and meet all types of beings in the forest who are different from anyone they have met before: a wise man made of rocks, an industrious tree, three cherubic dancing women, and an inquisitive pterodactyl, to name a few (Wolf et al. 1971). Over the course of their journey, Oblio and Arrow find that though the forest is supposed to be pointless, this is not the case. The creatures they meet do not have points on the top of their heads, but they lead interesting and worthwhile lives, which proves that in fact that they do have points (philosophical ones instead of physical ones that is). In the end, the Pointless Forest leads the travelers back home to the village, where Oblio tells his story to the cheers of the villagers. With the realization that a person does not have to have a point on their head to have a point, the townspeople's heads and the village buildings become rounded. The above quote by the narrator is from the end of the tale and evidences the openness of the post-point village.

This story and film is near to my heart, but it also serves as an excellent starting point for an essay about my practice as an artist. At its core, my work is about questioning societally-formed modes of interpretation. *The Point* is a fable about exactly this same idea: just because there is a norm does not mean it is the best way to do something.

In this essay, I outline the conceptualization of my work thematically, with examples of my previous artworks throughout the paper. The most central part of my work is the societally-created notions and categories we use to understand the world. Because of their rigidity, these concepts limit our understandings and interpretations. Animals figure prominently in my work because they exist outside of the influence of human culture, and thus have a freedom humans do not possess. My creations are connected to absurd and nonsense humor because these types of humor question our expectations and open up alternative modes of logic. Play and the openness it facilitates are pivotal ideas in my work; the concept of play allows for freedom beyond traditional ways of understanding, though it is often dismissed in Western society. My creations are strongly connected with the ideas of cuteness and simplicity because they offer accessibility, and function to resist our base societal modes of seriousness and complexity. Alternative worlds form a significant part of my work and act as an escape from our everyday burdens as well as places to imagine other ways of being. I draw influence from printmakers and other 2D artists from the 17th century to the mid-20th century through their use of flatness and color, and the accessibility of their work, as well as contemporary artists through their playfulness and 'alternative' modes of dispersing their artwork. Combining all these ideas and influences, my thesis exhibition, *Yellow Spotted Tail*, acts as a created, ambiguous 'world' of animals and shapes which provides an avenue for viewers to question the bases of their interpretations.

Societally-Formed Conceptions

A significant conceptual principle of my work is questioning our societally-created notions and expectations and how they affect our experience of the world. The sociological theory of symbolic interactionism does a lot to explain how society is formed and how it influences us.

Symbolic interactionism was formed by sociologist Herbert Blumer from the ideas of pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead. The theory states that humans act towards things—physical objects, other humans, institutions, activities of others—based

on the meanings they have for these things. These meanings are not inherent to the thing, but rather created through social interaction; societal meanings of objects are built up from individual interactions and meanings. The process of meaning creation is an interpretive process—an individual interacts with an object and then decides how they will relate to it, and things may have societal as well as personal meanings. People live in their own ‘worlds’ which are set by their unique meanings of objects, thus in order to understand people, we must understand their societal, group, and individual meanings for things (Blumer 1969, Ch. 1). For example, the meaning of a chair is not inherently something used for sitting on, but our society has defined it as such; someone encountering a chair and then deciding to sit on it serves to define that object for them, and a person observing them also views how that person has defined that object to her or himself. Additionally, my personal associations with a wooden dining-room chair may be home-cooked dinners and discussion, whereas another person’s may be loud parental arguments at the dining table as a child.

Our own interactions are based on these created meanings and pre-formed patterns of behavior, which construct our entire lived experience. The knowledge that our own understandings build meanings, and thus society as we know it, allows us to think about how we can make society how we want it to be. I believe that we should have less directed and more open methods of interpretation in Western society—the meanings we hold are unnecessarily restrictive and serve to define objects in ways that allow for narrow understandings of them. If we were to define them instead in a more open-ended way, possibilities for where interactions can go open up.

In my work, I create ambiguous situations that provide the viewer without a clear means for resolving or defining what specifically is happening. These scenes create space for the viewer to question their, often automatic, evaluations. In a series of linocut and screen prints made in 2017, I depict an animal, a man-made element and a block of color. In one of these prints, *Marmot and House*, linocuts of a marmot and the side of a house are printed with a screen-printed overlaying block of yellow (see Image 1, page 41). The various elements in the print are recognizable, but the images are created and placed in such a way that we cannot make sense of what is occurring in the print or

what it means. In this way, our known understandings and definitions are not applicable to the image, so we relate to the print without them.

In relation to another theory which overlaps with symbolic interactionism, Charles Sanders Peirce, a mid-century philosopher with a semiotic approach, stated that “thought takes place through signs, and signs are neither mental phenomena nor wholly external objects, but rather relational entities constituted through and within the sensuous world of experience” (Crossland 2010). Peirce’s view states that our entire experience and understanding of everything around us is filtered through our subjective experience. We often think of ourselves as logical beings experiencing, analyzing, and reacting; however, we forget how very subjective our understandings are. What we glean from our senses and the conclusions we draw from those experiences are not objective or accurate—people in the same situation have vastly different experiences of it, thus it is impossible to say that any one of those interpretations is in itself ‘correct.’

A fascinating piece of history that exemplifies symbolic interactionism and Peirce’s concept of signs as relational entities is the witch bottle. Witch bottles existed in the 16th and 17th centuries in Britain and were placed beneath boundary areas of homes and buildings to ward off witches. They were thought of as an extension of the body of the witch, as well as an extension of the body of the person who was intending to ward off the witch (Crossland 2010). Our experience of the world is completely grounded within our personal and societal understandings of subjects, but we do not treat our everyday experience in this way. In Western society, we forefront the idea of objectivity to the exclusion of subjective experience, when in reality everything we experience is experienced subjectively. Yes, one can state that the belief that the physical body extends to the physical bottle is false because bodies end at the skin; but, this fact is just one way of understanding the body or the bottle. Our societal mentality dictates that the falseness of the fact is all that matters.

Blumer, a central figure in symbolic interactionism, “was a staunch critic of logical empiricism, and for him the idea that science was the one and only true vehicle for discovering truth was inherently flawed” (Carter and Fuller 2016). Our society places high value on the objective and the scientific method as modes of understanding, so we believe these ways of knowing are all that matters. However, our internal meanings and

understandings hold much more sway because our minds are not fact machines but rather function as subjective entities. We can analyze and think about both the objective fact and the subjective experience without having to dismiss either—it is clear that we can get much more out of thinking about how 16th-century Britains' belief of the bottle as an extension of bodies was formed and then affected their lived experience, than dismissing it entirely because their belief was untrue. We must utilize this same mentality when interacting with facts, objects, persons, and situations in the everyday. In contemporary Western society, we have put the objective on a pedestal to the exclusion of the subjective, when both are valid and important ways of understanding.

Within socially-created meanings, the use of categories also plays a pivotal role. The 'embodied mind and conceptual metaphor theory' within anthropology operates similarly to symbolic interactionism: the theory articulates that the categories humans use to structure their world and place items within are not inherent and objective, but are rather created by people and are affected by how we interact with objects (Knappett 2010). Categories and labels are fascinating to me because they provide a starting point for understanding an object; they make relating to the world as a whole quicker and easier. At the same time, they define and thus limit our understanding of a subject—we conceive of a person differently who we define as a 'hick,' we conceive of a bowl differently that we label as 'handmade.'

As with objectivity, I argue that we are too attached to these categories and we must learn to embrace ambiguity. For example, by labeling a twig 'a twig,' it defines it as something already known—we have seen a twig before, therefore there is no need to think about or investigate it. Our use of categories makes us un-curious because our categories themselves are rigid, and we are oriented towards them in such a way that once we have applied the label, the subject can be dismissed; we should use them as a starting point of understanding instead of a definition.

In her 1985 essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," Donna Haraway advocates for many of these same ideas. Haraway utilizes the concept of a cyborg as a vehicle to discuss societal boundaries and their disintegration within Western culture in the essay; the cyborg is a successful device for this concept because it exists on the continuum between animal and machine and thus is difficult to classify. She advocates for

embracing ambiguity in relation to societally-created categories. For Harraway, “a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of... contradictory standpoints” (Harraway 2004, 13). Thus, a space where we no longer define things as one or the other; in viewing subjects outside of such clear distinctions, we can open up new possibilities.

In a piece from 2019, *Social Animals*, I created a set of sculptures from painted wood that depict personified animals and shapes (see Image 2, page 41). The viewer cannot clearly categorize the animals—as species of animal or as non-human—nor the shapes, which reference forms from nature yet do not entirely represent them. They are intentionally semi-ambiguous subjects that “refuse the search for innocent wholeness” (Harraway 2004, 9), that is, they do not fit neatly into a single category. Thus in the work, I question our desire for cut-and-dry comprehension and where the line exists between two things, for example a shape or plant, or a person or animal.

Animals

Animals are the most readily apparent element of my work and have figured prominently in my creations for as long as I can remember—I have very few pieces that do not depict animals or personified animals. The concept of ‘animal’ is an interesting one to approach in relation to categories; contemporarily, we maintain that we are distinct from animals, when humans are a type of animal themselves (DeMello 2012, 16). Within Western culture at large, we are attached to maintaining things in their distinct realms, and this concept of separation affects our conception of everything around us. Non-human animals are a good example of this reality because they are not that dissimilar to us, yet by retaining the word ‘animal’ as a category solely for non-human animals, we maintain separation from them. This separation affects an entire conception of and ways of interacting with animals, because as a result of their distinct category, we then see the dissimilarities between us and them more than the similarities. “Once [animals] are incorporated into human social worlds, they are assigned to human categories, often based on their use to humans, and it is these

categories (lab animal, pet, and livestock) that shape not only how the animals are seen but also how they are used and treated” (DeMello 2012, 10). The categories we use to define animals also define our understanding of animals; we are unable to relate to them outside of human societal constructs.

I have long been interested in animals because they have distinct ways of existing as compared to humans. Non-human animals exist outside of societally-based conceptions of the world (Harraway 2004, 9). They do not exist within systems of rules and regulations in the same way we do, and are free from cultural, social, and personal expectations. For instance, they do not feel pressure to ‘figure out’ their life path or act socially appropriate. Because they exist outside of our created concept of society, they also avoid the societal underpinnings that we grow up with subconsciously, which define our experiences of the world around us. For example, we see an object and immediately define it as something, such as ‘a glass’ or ‘a leaf.’ Animals, however, do not interact with objects in such categorical ways, and instead they use their senses to observe and explore them. They are free from signs and symbolic interactionism because they did not grow up in our ‘complex’ society.

I portray creatures in my work to question our social and societal norms, which often serve to divide us and forefront our dissimilarities as opposed to our similarities. Without the delineated norms humans have, in a way, animals are more accepting of each other. Their freedom and lack of social rules and defined categories are all things we as humans could learn from them—I portray animals to imagine other ways of being in the world. My creatures are often personified so they exist in a place in between humans and animals; they are more similar to us than we might believe an average animal, but also not entirely within our same human world.

The work I created for my midway exhibition, *Lines of Action*, in the fall of 2018 consisted of woodcut and screen print collages of personified Western animals. The title, *Lines of Action*, is a sociological phrase that references the meanings we take from others’ behavior. The animals were portrayed together in various groupings—one such grouping depicts several creatures wearing various styles of capes (see Image 3, page 42), and another shows two animals wearing outfits with tee shirts with a third wearing only underwear (see Image 4, page 42). The same animal or character appears in

multiple groups wearing different clothing in each one; in the images listed here, the goat-like being wears a cape in one and boxers in another. This type of portrayal questions larger societal norms through clothing norms, and the arbitrary lines we draw between what is socially acceptable and what is not. For example, it is normal and thus 'logical' to wear a tee shirt and pants to meet up with friends but wearing only underwear is not. In the cape image, we have no basis of norms for cape-wearing, since these are not clothing items we commonly dress in within Western society, so we have not defined these creatures' behavior as norm-adhering or not. Through a creature wearing a cape or a tee shirt or underwear, the groundlessness of these customs is made apparent. Additionally, within society, we use people's adherence to such norms to understand and judge them. The fact that these norms are socially created, and thus unattached to reasoning outside of our specific society, points to show that such inferences do not yield much insight and function to limit our understanding of others.

Part of animals' freedom comes from their lack of control—humans constantly attempt to control as much as they can of the world around them, when in turn, we define animals as “creatures lacking conscious self-control” (Hart 2012). Because of this conception, our expectation of them is completely different than expectations we hold for ourselves and other humans. By defining animals as creatures without control, we allow them a freedom that we do not permit ourselves. We mark our competency, in part, by how well we are succeeding at controlling that which is around us, when instead, an attitude that embraces a certain lack of control would improve our everyday lived experience. The world itself inherently cannot be controlled, so we are fighting a losing battle. In embracing a lack of control, we can loosen our hold on our expectations and desires about how things will go and can instead be more open to what does end up happening. Control encompasses a desire for a specific outcome, whereas through embracing a lack of control, we are more open to what does in fact happen because we do not have a specified desired result (Carse 1986, 18).

Humor

Like animals, humor can allow us to expand our views of the world. Humor is primarily about conflict resolution—through humor, we get pleasure out of experiences in which our guesses or expectations are incorrect (Weems 2014, xv). As we move about the world, we are constantly forming hypotheses about what will happen or what we will need to do. When our guesses are incorrect, and thus the conflict is resolved, we feel joy as a result of a release of dopamine (Weems 2014, 33). From an evolutionary standpoint, it makes sense that the discovery of an incorrect idea would be a positive experience because that process is beneficial to us—when we find something different to be true than what we previously thought, we are then often better positioned for the future. Surprise is a pivotal piece of humor, and “one of our most valued emotions” (Weems 2014, 37). This entire process occurs within our minds, that is, outside of us nothing was expected or unexpected; it is only our assumptions we are placing onto scenarios that in turn surprise us when incorrect. I am fascinated by how this internal process of expectation creation hugely influences our experience of the world. The reality of this process is also why I am drawn to humor: because it delights in the moments in which our expectation game has failed. To me, these moments are a reminder that we are fallible, and that the world is vast and that we do not know much of it. By creating work that does not allow us to easily create assumptions, I am reminding us, and myself, of these ideas.

My own work is most connected to absurd and nonsense humor specifically; the two terms are similar and often overlap. Absurd humor is “concerned with the absence or refusal of meaning” and is “opposed to conventional serious discourse” (Attardo 2014, 1). A joke is an example of a common type of incongruity because there is an unresolved or strange element that is then resolved with the punch-line. Absurdist humor, however, does not have the same resolution as an average joke would—it “does not culminate in a punchline that restores meaning” (Proulx 2010). Similarly, “[i]n nonsense [humor], the logic that sustains interpretation collapses” (Attardo 2014, 545).

I am interested in questioning our basic ways of understanding and interpreting the world, and these two types of humor work as great tools for this idea because they question our most basic concepts of logic and rationality. “Nonsense has been experienced as a form of freedom, especially as a means to free thinking from the

conventional bindings of logic and language” (Attardo 2014, 543), and absurdist humor can “be an aggressive weapon against the pretensions of rationalist discourse or existential certainty” (Attardo 2014, 1). Because these forms of humor are based outside of our typical modes of understanding, they lead the way for other potential ways of interpreting and viewing the world.

Research has been done comparing nonsense humor to incongruity-resolution humor (the more typical type of humor that has a logical explanation in its resolution) in relation to testing the funniness of various jokes and cartoons. The results found that nonsense humor was tied to “openness to experience, nonconformism, and youth” (Attardo 2014, 545). It makes sense that individuals drawn to this style of humor would possess these traits because the premises of these forms of humor question the foundations of how we conceive of our world. Through the process of finding nonsensical things funny, we allow for incomprehension and ambiguity, things with which we are rarely comfortable. In a sense, this style of humor is an acceptance of a world that is itself never completely knowable, as well as an acceptance of our limits of comprehension as humans.

We often forget that logic itself is a human creation and is thus worth questioning, and nonsense and absurdity are avenues that allow for such questioning. When we are freed from our concept of logic, a whole world of possibilities opens up; without strict rationality, there is room for personal experience, experimentation and play. For example,

nonsense can fruitfully be used to teach philosophy, as in Zen koans (study dialogues in Zen practices), which freely exploit quasi-comical or paradoxical utterances, like the famous initiation question, ‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’ Nonsense dialogues in Zen koans records and collections are used to gain insight and to approach alternative and original forms of understanding that defy standard reasoning (Attardo 2014, 545).

Nonsense subverts our search for standard meaning and our techniques for evaluation, to a certain extent. We are instead free to experience something as it is without these societally-created conceptions placed on top.

Nonsense humor has a distinct place in contemporary Western society, and proof can be found in TV shows, YouTube videos, memes, comics, drawings and more. The state of the world and our current life realities are primary reasons why people are drawn to this odd humor. We live in a time in which institutions that previously defined meaning for past generations are less prevalent, such as religion and the formation of family (Pew Research Center). For the millennial generation in particular (the generation most attracted to this humor), life is essentially not what we were told it would be. College was supposed to be a smart choice but instead the majority of students ended up in vast amounts of debt and while often unable to find a well-paying job, which leads to postponement of buying a home, getting married and having kids. “Millennials are also the first in the modern era to have higher levels of student loan debt, poverty and unemployment, and lower levels of wealth and personal income than their two immediate predecessor generations (Gen Xers and Boomers) at the same stage in their life cycles” (Pew Research Center).

Additionally, individuals today are constantly bombarded with information. We live in a world of never-ending stimuli—texts, emails, articles, social media—and we must create and manipulate our persona online and in-person (Koltun 2017). There is so much out there that people are able to choose their own facts; “business-funded think tanks produce reports indistinguishable from hard data, except that they are not remotely true” (Bruenig 2017).

All of these realities lead to “life... feeling unpleasantly rootless, something that is being reflected in a stranger, more chaotic form of comedy” (Aroesti 2019). Lack of sources of meaning, economic instability, and a world constantly ping-pong and changing around us can be seen in humor that makes light of such a confusing and difficult state. Nonsense humor can act to counteract these realities and make them more tolerable. Also, the weirdness of this humor is an indication that previous structures and concepts are no longer functional. “By staking out a playful space to meditate on emotions that are usually upsetting (like the dread and anxiety of living in a thoroughly postmodern world), millennial surrealism intermixes relief with stress and levity with lunacy” (Bruenig 2017).

Though the generational facts I have provided are primarily about millennials, these are contemporary issues we all face, and for which we need some type of antidote. Finding humor in the difficulties of a society and world that is in many ways not functioning well makes these things easier to deal with. Through amusement found in nonsense, we embrace a lack of logic and thus an existence outside of logic, which in turn opens up alternative ways of creating logic itself.

In 2019, I created a piece titled *Pink Fowl* that consists of a series of gouache paintings combining text and image (see Image 5, page 43). Each of these works had a nonsensical phrase (from a collection of phrases I had saved over the last decade) painted with an unrelated image. Viewing text and image together is a common experience, though we are used to one illustrating or explaining the other. In these images, I resist that expectation by creating work in which no real connection or understanding can be drawn from the phrase or image individually or together. Through its nonadherence to logic, the work creates a space for alternative interpretations, and opens a door to reevaluate our concept of logic itself. In a certain sense, it represents our current, uncertain world, but at the same time, it portrays an alternative, friendly, silly one that is in contrast to it.

Play

Play provides an excellent way of acting outside of the realm of traditional logic. It is not something we consider important in contemporary Western society; we have little, if any, room for it at all. Currently, we are oriented towards a narrow sense of productivity. We feel we must be constantly accomplishing tasks at work and in our leisure time (Klein 2019b). On our days off, a day 'well-spent' involves activities that are a step toward a concrete goal—for example, a morning run to keep healthy or time spent on a passion project from which we hope to one day earn an income. We are orientated towards a productivity that is defined by capitalism, thus we feel that if we are not 'producing' something, our time is not well spent (Klein 2019a). In this societal mode, we leave ourselves no time to pursue things without a clear and quantifiable

future result, and when we do engage in something 'unproductive' for a period of time, it is difficult not to feel guilty. Play itself has no ulterior goal, leads us to no definable result, and thus it is not something we readily make time for in Western society.

Play is not 'productive' in our limited definition of the word, and "it is never a task" (Huizinga 1980, 8). It allows for a freedom that we cannot really experience in our current everyday lives; "[c]hild and animal play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom" (Huizinga 1980, 8). Because we are not channeling our efforts towards an exterior goal in play, we have room for alternative actions and behavior. We need an escape from the constant pressure of production, and the freedom that comes from play allows us to explore other ways of orienting ourselves and existing in the world.

In play, we interpret as we go and we are open to adjust and alter our interpretations; this attitude translates to openness to new possibilities (Kirby and Graham 2016). We are not attached to an outcome in the same way as we are in seriousness or most of our everyday lives:

To be playful is not to be trivial or frivolous, or to act as though nothing of consequence will happen. On the contrary, when we are playful with each other we relate as free persons, and the relationship is open to surprise; everything that happens is of consequence. It is, in fact, seriousness that closes itself to consequence, for seriousness is a dread of the unpredictable outcome of open possibility. To be serious is to press for a specific conclusion. To be playful is to allow for possibility whatever the cost to oneself (Carse 1986, 19).

Because the essence of play is creating as one goes, it is not attached to an outcome, as we are in most moments of our contemporary lives. We are also not attached to "an established script, an ordering of affairs somewhere outside of the range of our influence" (Carse 1986, 18). In this resulting freedom and lack of script, we can find a certain amount of space from social and societal expectations, which in turn gives us room to evaluate them. This headspace allows us to toss out old ideas and try out new ones (Kirby and Graham 2016). We thus can then explore new ways of crafting our lived experience in ways different from our societal norms.

Play also exists as “an alternative to modern scientific method... [It] brings forth genuine knowledge of genuine truth and has a structure all its own—a structure which must be accounted for if we are to have an accurate understanding of what knowledge and truth really are” (Vilhauer 2010). Play offers an alternative to our societal mode of knowing which is based on dichotomies; it opens a door for the expansion of our narrow understanding of knowledge itself.

Additionally, play itself is fun. Contemporarily, we have constructed a world that dismisses fun and excludes it from the majority of our lives as adults. Fun is relegated to scant free time, when the majority of where we spend our time (work, chores, to-dos) are defined as necessary but burdensome. There is no rule that most of life must be unfun and that we must settle for this type of existence, thus we need to find ways of restructuring society and our everyday lives that function to redefine and reinvigorate these activities. Yes, we need attitudes that are more lighthearted and allow us to approach activities with an attitude of fun, but it requires more than just a change in perspective. We need to find ways to form societal norms that function to create a lived reality that is one in which we look forward to participating from moment to moment; we need a society that makes enjoyment its priority instead of productivity. Play itself acts as a move in this direction because through it, we can test out different ways of behaving that can eventually lead to new societal ways of being.

“In culture we find play as a given magnitude existing before culture itself existed, accompanying it and pervading it from the earliest beginnings right up to the phase of civilization we are now living in” (Huizinga 1980, 4). Essentially, play creates culture, thus it is an excellent way to alter it. We need play in order to find ways to reimagine society, and make it into one where productivity, in our limited sense of the word, is not our only goal. Through play, we can create a society that embodies freedom, embraces multiple ways of knowing, questions hierarchies, and prioritizes fun.

All of these elements of play are concepts which I advocate for in my work; my pieces visually reference children’s play—such as imagined worlds, cartoons, and storybooks—because it is the only time in our lives that we are encouraged to play with abundance. Animals are an important part of children’s worlds—

[c]hildren of all cultures are drawn to animals from a very young age, forming attachments with them and making them central in their lives... [C]hildren have not reached the point that so many adults have where the animal and human worlds become separate; animals are, to many children, playmates, parents, friends, and teachers (DeMello 2012, 330).

Animals portrayed in a manner that references children's experience is important in my work because this imagery references a time before societal categories so dictated our relationships. As children, animals could be all these things to us that they cannot as readily as adults. In addition, this type of animal imagery references this mode of constant play that children and animals often operate within. Many of us experienced and thus have nostalgia for the freedom and openness we had when playing when we were young. These associations allow me to create scenes that remind us of those feelings, while also maintaining an open-ended quality that exists in play and serves to question our typical modes of categorizing and understanding.

My own youth and experiences surrounding play figure prominently in my work. I grew up in central Oregon outside of town on a big field, and I spent many days exploring the land with our family dog. Animals have always been friends and playmates to me, from pets to imagined animals to toys. As a kid, I drew animals every day, played pretend jungle cats with my best friend, built furniture and food for my toy bears, made forts out of quilts for my small plastic horses to roam, and wore a dog costume every day for nearly a year. Play and animals have always been hugely important in my life and were always connected in my mind. As a child, I was drawn to both of these things because of the different ways of existing and pure fun they both offered.

In my work *Characters*, an installation from 2012 (see Images 6 and 7, pages 43 and 44), I made woodcut prints ranging in size from several inches to four feet. They depicted personified animals, plants, and other forms and were installed around all three floors of a campus building playing off the architecture of the space (many prints were also created specifically to reference parts of the building). This work functioned to create a context of play within a building people often move through in a state of seriousness as they head to class or a meeting. Since the prints were placed in different areas of the building, viewers could make a game of finding them as they moved around

the space. My professor told me that her young son was certain that there were more within the walls, meaning that since these creatures were 'hiding' around the building, they must also be hiding in the walls.

In this installation, I wanted to create a space for play within a place not typically defined in such a way. By playing the 'game' of searching out the prints, or even simply viewing these characters interacting with the building in different ways than our own, viewers are acting outside of the way they normally would in an academic building. The scope of the exhibition was not defined and viewers did not know what to expect or where they would find prints, so it was difficult for them to form expectations in relation to the installation. Time spent viewing or seeking out these characters acts as an antidote to stressors and 'productivity,' and because the work has no defined outcome or interpretation, it is open to possibilities and encourages new ways of thinking.

Cuteness

Ideas of play and youth are strongly connected to the concept of cute; children's play often involves cute elements, such as toys, book illustrations, cartoons, etc. Humans are drawn to cute things because they share features with babies; we find babies cute and thus appealing, which makes us want to care for them. Subjects that share features with babies, such as large eyes or heads, we also find cute (Herzog 2010, 39). Despite the fact that humans are naturally drawn to cute things, in Western society, cute has a negative undertone (Pellitteri 2018). The word 'cute' can be used positively, meaning appealing or adorable, but it can be used to belittle its subject. Because of this fact, cuteness is an excellent way to resist seriousness and hierarchies within society.

My work has clear associations with cuteness. I portray primarily mammals—beings we are predisposed to find cute—in simple, colorful ways that reference illustration. These creatures are then placed in scenes with human-made objects or playful shape forms. In my reference to the idea of cuteness, I work to counteract the societally-created hierarchy wherein that which we deem cute can be

easily dismissed and is defined as less valid or worthwhile. Through cuteness, playfulness and fun, I can also resist the default seriousness we have in society.

When interacting with something cute, beyond the dismissive undertones, it is socially acceptable to be lighthearted and playful. We can be silly and fun in relation to cute subjects in ways that we cannot be in most other parts of our everyday world. Because of this playful attitude, cuteness also allows us to be open to possibilities, and thus “[c]ute becomes... a way to fight back against the curtailment of possibility” (Kerr 2016). As we grow up and become more enmeshed in society, it becomes harder to see the potential possibilities within our everyday lives; through cuteness, we can begin to open those possibilities up again.

Simplicity

Often that which we find cute is also simple. My work has always had a limited number of elements in its composition, as well as simplicity within each element itself. For example, a series I did in 2014 featured a woodcut print of a single Western mammal and a shape (see Images 8 and 9, pages 44 and 45). I want viewers of all ages and backgrounds to feel able to approach all my creations, and simplicity—as well as cuteness—allow for such visual accessibility. By creating approachable work, people feel they can access it exactly where they are without needing specific knowledge or a specific background to get something from it. Also, I can better portray my concept through simplicity because our conditioned methods of interpretation are more readily visible in simple created environments as they function to isolate and highlight a specific idea.

This simplicity is also translated to where and how the work is installed. Several of my works have been in spaces not typically reserved for art, such as campus buildings, shops and eateries. The works are also installed in a simple manner—they are stuck directly to the wall using tape or repositionable glue, or they are placed somewhere, standing upright through use of a paper stand. Both of these types of simplicity allow for accessibility. Physically, viewers can encounter the work in everyday

places, without needing the intention of going to an art space to see work; the work instead enters their daily lives. Also, because of its simple installation, there is not a multitude of elements to the work and it can be taken in visually relatively easily.

I find in my own life experience that within Western society, we have an, often subconscious, belief that complexity is superior—there can be a subtle boastfulness to someone stating how busy their life is, or how many different things they juggle at their job, or how many extracurricular activities their child is involved in. These behaviors stem from an underlying belief that the more we have going on in our lives, the more significant we then must be. This concept is tied to a classist distinction as well—the poor often do not have complex jobs and job titles, they often do not have many technological gadgets in their homes, and they often do not have children in a multitude of extracurriculars. The belief in complexity is something that our society actively facilitates through the jobs we esteem most, the families we define as most successful, and so on. This societal concept is also tied in with the belief that more is better.

Because we revere complexity, simplicity belongs outside of the realm of adults and in the realm of children, beings who are still in the process of learning about the world. Once we are no longer a child, we must learn to leave simple things behind. Often the most simplistic elements in our lives are those from which we get the most benefit or pleasure—a walk outside, a chat with a friend, an afternoon spent reading a book—so it's a shame our culture doesn't enshrine simplicity like it does complexity.

In creating work that is visibly and undeniably simplistic, I am, in my own small way, resisting this societal norm. Through this work, I can subtly state that that which is simple is worthwhile, and something to which we should give more of our attention.

Alternative Worlds

In addition to providing a space to resist complexity, simplicity also acts as a sort of reprieve from contemporary society. The ideas of a reprieve from our current world and alternative worlds are combined in this section because the subjects are interrelated and very much connected within my work.

There are many aspects of contemporary society from which we need a getaway; economic woes and information overload, constant busyness, the pressure of productivity, and an orientation towards complexity are those I have mentioned earlier in this paper. Escape from these contemporary issues manifests in various ways through the decisions we make and the ways we manage our lives. For example, despite the fact it is a simple task we complete everyday, getting dressed is often a significant stressor. We want to express our true self to those around us, and because we live in a consumption-based society, we express ourselves through goods, such as clothing. Attempting to express the natural complexity of a whole human being through clothing is difficult, and thus the stress of 'correctly' expressing ourselves in clothing can feel unmanageable. Some people separate themselves from this stressful experience by having limited types of clothing and thus wearing essentially the same thing every day, which makes it so they have little choice to make as they get dressed. This method of intentionally limiting clothing options is also a subconscious way of simplifying one element within our difficult world (van der Laan and Velthuis 2013, 27). It is fascinating to me how these lamentable aspects of our society, which we do not often spend much time thinking about since they are baked into our everyday realities, manifest themselves in the base-level experiences in our lives.

Another concept that forms a large base of Western society and adds to our overall stress is individualization. Individualization is connected to our contemporary lack of socially-weighted institutions (such as the church or the family profession), which historically played a significant role in determining our lives. In lieu of these institutions directing our lives, pressure is now placed on each person to create their life as they want it.

Contemporary individuals are invited to live as if making a project of themselves: they are to work on their emotional world, their domestic and conjugal arrangements, their relations with employment and their techniques of sexual pleasure, to develop a 'style' of living that will maximize the worth of their existence to themselves (Buchli 2010, 505).

Today, we are expected to affect our own ways of living in the world that make our lives the best they can be; this reality manifests itself in self-help books, fad diets,

organizational tools, 'life hacks,' and other such ideas. There is a massive amount of pressure that comes with creating a fantastic life because in order to do so, we must be working on so many areas of our lives constantly. There is no real rest in this way of living and the to-do list is ever expanding—once we have started taking a daily probiotic for gut health, then we must implement new strategies of limiting our screen time so we can sleep better.

All of these contemporary realities that create our current society function to make it a stressful and difficult one. Thus, we have a need for escape, and especially escape as a way to conceive of other ways of living and creating society. We have some modes for getaways in society, such as the weird, absurd humor in streaming shows and comics that offer a wackier mode of being than our serious one. In my own work, I offer a scene or an experience of an alternative world. In a work I created in 2018 titled *Rodentia*, I made polymer plate prints of personified rodents that I placed around arts, English, mining, and geology buildings on campus (see Image 10 and 11, pages 45 and 46). These small prints function to create their own rodent world within our human one, and because of how they are placed in the building, they encourage viewers to notice parts of the space they might not otherwise consciously. In this way, through the creation of a different world within our own, these creatures allow us some room to re-imagine our own reality. The work also temporarily removes viewers from the everyday stressors they experience as they move through the building.

It is important, in my work, that these alternative worlds are comfortable and safe spaces because such places create space for people to counteract identity pressures and to assess their world. Safe spaces also act in contrast to the uncertain world in which we live (Risto 2016). Thus, from a comfortable yet distinctly different location and vantage point, we can access the state of mind and the tools that allow us to potentially find different ways of acting in the world, and thus creating society.

It is difficult to find something more representative of alternative worlds than children's and youth fiction. These books frequently feature protagonists in unique worlds with different norms, possibilities, and beings. As a child and teenager, I spent large amounts of time reading these books, and they have a huge influence on my current 'created worlds.' My favorites included many of the classics, such as *The*

Phantom Toll Booth, Winnie the Pooh, The Big Friendly Giant and Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, as well as newer books, such as *Abarat, The Secret of Platform 13, Fire Bringer*, and *His Dark Materials*. These tales have some of the largest influence on what I make as they provided some of my initial foundations of what an alternative world could be. I adored these books because they offered near endless possibilities in comparison to a world that often feels prescriptive.

The universes in these books influence my imagery also, as well as films made for children, like *The Neverending Story, FernGully, Fantasia*, and *The Point*, in which characters navigate worlds different than our own, and through their adventures, their views are expanded. The simple drawings and playful, varied colors of these films directly affect my own creations (see Image 12, page 46).

Art Historical Influences

In connection with the idea of created alternative worlds, Henry Darger, an artist who worked in the mid-century and is of large influence on me, also constructed his own elaborate world through paintings and text (see Image 13, page 47). Darger was not an academically-trained artist, and his work was discovered posthumously. His masterpiece is a 15,000-page, 300-image illustrated story titled *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*. The work “is filled with colorful landscapes, fantastic creatures, and epic battle scenes between opposing forces of good and evil on an imaginary planet” (Harris 2013).

Darger’s work captivated me for many reasons—initially because of the aesthetic choices in his work. He uses pencil and watercolor in a beautiful range of tones in his paintings, and we share qualities of simplicity and flatness. Though his scenes often have many more subjects and background elements than mine, he renders them with simplistic lines and areas of flat color. Additionally, Darger created a detailed, complete other universe in his non-working hours simply because he wanted to or needed to. I find his work captivating because he seemed never to seek out outside validation or

understanding. Darger's childhood was horrific, so perhaps the creation of this universe was a way to express or cope with this reality (Harris 2013).

Ukiyo-e prints from Japan's Edo period (1603 to 1868) also utilized a flat and simplified aesthetic, though they were created in a vastly different time period and place than Darger's work. Ukiyo-e prints were made for a newly-wealthy middle class that had money to spend on art, culture and entertainment and workshops created prints representing cultural happenings. A new technology was utilized in the woodblock prints that allowed for images with many colors to be printed much more easily, thus these prints were more colorful than those made previously (The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2004). Utagawa Kuniyoshi, a printmaker in this time period, created many images featuring anthropomorphized animals, especially cats (see Image 14, page 47). In the 1840s, the military government created new policies intended to increase their control, which included a ban on the representation of famous people within the cultural industries. Kuniyoshi still portrayed these individuals, but instead represented them as cats with hints in the image as to the person each feline represented.

I am fascinated by this early portrayal of personified animals because both Kuniyoshi and I are using animals to say something that it is difficult to express otherwise. Beyond formal qualities, I am also interested in ukiyo-e prints because they were created to be accessible to all social classes. Because middle class individuals could afford them, they were a part of popular culture; they did not exist in a separate realm made for elites, something that is not true for a significant amount of art history.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, a turn-of-the-century French artist, borrowed heavily from this Japanese woodblock aesthetic (Clericuzio 2015, 656). Lautrec had a masterful use of color and space (see Image 15, page 48), but beyond formal skills, I am drawn to his work because of its connection to the everyday. Lautrec depicted the working classes—not the traditional subjects of art in this time period—and because many of his works were posters, they were artworks regular people saw, as opposed to tucked away in galleries or the homes of the wealthy. This accessibility is something I try to achieve in my own work through its approachability and simplicity. Like Lautrec, I want to create work that connects with the quotidian individual.

The early 20th-century art movement known as Dada is also connected to the everyday, as well as with my own work. Dada arose during World War I in Europe, and was, in part, a reaction to the war. Dada artists espoused nonsense and non-art in reaction to a war they deemed senseless (Trachtman 2006). For these artists, “the war merely confirmed the degradation of social structures that led to such violence: corrupt nationalist politics, repressive social values, and unquestioning conformity” (MoMA Learning). My own prints and sculptures offer a suggestion of another world and way of living as did Dada; however, my work is comfortable, whereas Dada was more jarring—Dada artists often created work that was intended to shock people into realizing the state of humanity. Though we have different approaches, their concepts and my own share a central idea of questioning logic, and specifically the idea of nonsense or absurdity as a way to expose other modes of interpretation. Dada artists frequently employed play in the creation of their works, often in the form of chance, such as creating a composition by dropping paper cut outs and gluing them down where they landed (Trachtman 2006). Their use of humor is also apparent, as in *Art Critic* by Raoul Hausmann (see Image 16, page 48), in which the critic is portrayed as a buffoon with a silly face and a shoe on his head. This humor, and much that I have found in Dada pieces of art, pointedly makes fun of the establishment, whereas in my own work, I do not aim to satirize anything but rather show alternative possibilities.

Contemporary Art Influences

The creations of Lord Birthday, a contemporary poet/comic/digital artist, are firmly rooted in nonsense humor and have definite connections to Dada (see Image 17, page 49). His work combines simplistic drawings with absurd lists, and he started making this type of work in 2015 while working as a college professor in business (Penning 2017). Birthday’s creations are difficult to categorize and thus outside of the realm of what we are used to, which makes them interesting and appealing; they may not be classified as art by traditional contemporary standards, as they are distributed primarily online, in social media, and mass published in books. In this way, his work is like the Dada artists,

who worked in untraditional ways which much of the public did not classify as art at that time. Also like the Dadaists, Birthday questions and pokes fun at our logic through nonsense and humor in drawings that resist a concise and defined meaning.

His work is multidimensional and open to possibilities, and it functions to make us laugh while calling into question our societal norms. My own commonalities with Birthday include a resistance to categorization, and a subtle questioning of society through a different type of logic than our societally-based one. I also find commonality with the fact that his work and the message behind it is not directorial and limiting, but instead open-ended which encourages thought in a multitude of directions. We also both place importance on accessibility: his work is not intimidating, and accessible visually as well as through its mode of dispersal (the internet), which allows him to reach a large audience.

David Shrigley is another contemporary artist whose mode of working also prioritizes accessibility. He is best known for his drawings (see Image 18, page 49), though he also works in photography, sculpture and other media. Shrigley's humorous pieces comment on the everyday absurdities of life.

[H]umor in art has the effect of making those particular artworks seemingly more accessible by virtue of providing an enjoyable, shared visual experience. In addition to the inclusive nature of humor itself, Shrigley's formally economic style of production and intentionally accessible forms of distribution make viewing his artwork both fun and easy (Westerman 2013, 44).

Shrigley's work is readily accessible to the public because he publishes his drawings in books and sells prints and other objects which can be afforded by many. Visually, his work is also simple and straightforward, which assists in its accessibility—people can “[view] his work without needing to ‘work to get it’” (Westerman 2013, 45), and thus his creations are available to a broader audience.

Shrigley and I share the use of simplified aesthetics, and we both prioritize accessibility. Our creations also have in common lightheartedness and playfulness, and they function to imagine other ways of viewing and interacting with the world. Shrigley's untitled photograph depicting a vast swath of vibrant grass with a small sign on it that says “imagine the green in red” really speaks to this idea (see Image 19, page 50). In

this piece, we are shown something we are used to seeing—a large green lawn, likely part of a park—but this humorous sign invites us to think differently while looking at this scene. The simple idea of imagining green grass to be red is humorous and brings us into a playful state of mind. In turn, it also reminds us that there are many ways of experiencing things differently than our typical day-to-day mode; the work reminds us of these possibilities.

Chris Johanson, an artist based in Los Angeles, shares with Shrigley a humorous and simplified aesthetic. Johanson is largely self-trained, and got his start making posters and zines as part of the punk scene in the Bay Area (Raymond 2012). Much of Johanson's work depicts loosely drawn people in awkward positions with stream-of-conscious text bubbles (see Image 20, page 50). In 2001, at the UCLA Hammer Museum, Johnson showed a collection of paintings as well as a built city scene (Hammer Museum; see Image 21, page 51). This work is made out of plywood, and features rectangular paintings hung on the wall; elements, such as cars or figures, made of cut-out pieces of wood which stand upright; and painted buildings and a mountain which are fully three-dimensional. This exhibition fascinates me because it moves between dimensionality and is unconcerned with creating a convincing illusion (unlike most dioramas). It has a wonderful authenticity to it because it is clearly cut wood that is put together and painted—in a way, it is not trying to convince us of anything. The movement in this work is also wonderful: viewers walk next to the walls looking at the works hung there, and also move around the buildings and along the road. Like most dioramas, it captures a frozen moment in time, but it is not a complex or majestic scene, but a simple almost-crudely-rendered one depicting people moving about a city.

Like the other contemporary artists I have mentioned, Johanson and I share a bent towards humor, simplicity, and the odd and nonsensical. We also both create work that moves between 2D and 3D and references dioramas, and we are both concerned with the everyday realities of life.

Finally, Lorien Stern, an artist based out of the desert in southern California, creates playful ceramic works (see Image 22, page 51). Stern's pieces depict things of which we are generally afraid, such as death and sharks; however, she renders them in

a colorful and fun manner. Stern is interested in playing with the dichotomy between that which we fear and that which we enjoy, and by portraying this subject matter in such a way, she makes difficult subjects more approachable. In addition to ceramic work, Stern also sells prints, clothing and more through her website and in shops (Alvarez 2017). Stern and I share qualities of playfulness and fun as significant aspects of our work, and additionally, animals are depicted in most of her pieces as they are in mine. We also share an orientation towards created objects that can be placed together in various ways—Stern does it with ceramic pieces in her installations in gallery spaces and I, in my variable prints and installation of sculptural pieces.

The contemporary artists mentioned above have several things in common: they create work that, in part, exists outside of traditional ways of showing and disseminating art, whether that is through the internet, published books, or art merch; they are interested in expanding our established notions of what art is by expanding the idea of what falls into the ‘art’ category (such as an Instagram post or a greeting card); it is important to them that a large audience is able to experience and own their work, and visual accessibility—so viewers can take something from their work regardless of their background—is also important; and, they reject standard notions of how work should look or be by creating pieces that are not ‘well-crafted,’ serious, or finely-tuned in a traditional way. Instead, their works are playful, authentic, humorous, and odd.

These contemporary artists work to expand certain ideas of what art is, something that artists have been doing since time immemorial. Art history itself is defined through movements and categories pertaining to a certain period in art, such as a movement like Dada or a larger category like modern art, which includes Dada and many other movements. As a whole, modern art was an ideological crusade towards a Western, 20th-century sense of ‘human progress.’ On the other hand, contemporary art does not define itself by an overarching philosophy, but rather “presents itself as something of a default category or catch-all” (Obrist 2010, 60). In other words, that which is contemporary is simply whatever is currently being created, as opposed to a modern creation, which typically had an adherence to a larger, sweeping ideology.

The modern period in the West was marked by the cultural certainty of its creed as the inevitable and correct one for an overall improved state of humanity. Essentially,

the path towards betterment felt clear and it was just a matter of moving along it (Obrist 2010, 60). In our post-modern culture, we no longer have a defined and trusted path towards improvement for all humans, and as a result we have more freedom and humility, which allows room for alternative viewpoints. Without this accepted route towards utopia, contemporary art “deal[s] with the ambivalence of the experience of emancipation” (Medina 2010, 7). If we can embrace our lack of definition in the art world, and the myriad of choices it allows for, and who knows where we can end up as a result. From this freedom, we can expand into totally new ways of art making, and new ways of conceiving of experience itself, in turn creating a more open society.

Thesis Exhibition: *Yellow Spotted Tail*

My thesis exhibition, *Yellow Spotted Tail*, is an installation composed of screen prints and wood, foam core, paper maché, plaster, and soft sculpture of personified animals and shape forms. Together, these elements function as a created world that resists and questions our cultural norms and ways of interacting. It is playful and simplistic, so it questions seriousness as our default way of operating and our attachment to complexity. It is ambiguous and the elements themselves—whether creature or shape—are difficult to confidently place in a category, such as ‘lion’ or ‘tree.’ This ambiguity questions the utility of such categories and how they affect our experience of something. Because these pieces themselves do not have overt and specific meanings, the installation questions our desire to define and then move on, as well as the idea that there is only one way of understanding or finding truth. Its ambiguity also forefronts subjective meanings and allows room for multiple interpretations, as well as creates a certain freedom because it exists outside of ‘known’ situations for which we have societally-prescribed ways of interacting. Because it is an alternative world outside of our ‘known’ one, it acts as a space to explore different ways of perceiving and interpreting. My intent is that this exhibition creates a place that opens up room to make our society, and thus our world, more open and thus improved.

Historically, I have worked primarily in woodcut and screen print. I am enthralled with experimentation of imagery as opposed to image creation, and printmaking lends itself to this orientation because the same image, or plate, can be printed multiple times in different ways with or without various compositional elements. Woodcut and screen print especially lend themselves to this way of image making, because in both processes, I can have multiple separate plates that I print in different combinations each time. In this way, I am a monoprint maker because I have rarely created an identical series of prints.

My sculptural work is created based on the same idea: I create multiple pieces that together form a scene. The individual works can be placed differently each time, so each element within the installation can play off the other elements, or the space in which it is installed, in various ways. Thus, in addition to creating the work in a playful manner, I am also constructing the 'alternative world' or installation playfully.

The work in the space shifts from 2D (prints on paper on the walls and floor) to 3D (sculpture in the round) to pieces in-between (flat works on stands made to sit upright). My imagery has associations with children's illustration and films, and through the use of flat work, I can draw on these associations. At the same time, 3D sculptures are also significant in the installation because they directly connect to the physical world we interact with every day. The movement between these two dimensionalities alludes to the idea of play. Toys exist in various stages of dimensionality (from coloring books to paper dolls to stuffed animals), so the work visually connects to this variability in form. The combination of 2D, 3D, and in-between is also playful in and of itself because that which we typically encounter is flat or dimensional but not both. This playfulness connects to ideas of ambiguity, wonder, and the unexpected, which are concepts also associated with 'alternative worlds.'

Additionally, by mixing the two dimensionalities, I do not subscribe to the cultural norm that they exist in separate categories—that either we can be absorbed in the 2D imagining it to be 3D (such as reading a book or watching a film), or we are physically present in the 3D (such as playing a sport or watching a play). In our culture, we choose one or the other—one is defined as real and one is defined as an illusion, and we do not combine them because then the 'illusion' is made apparent. In this work, I reject this

concept of an illusion; the illusion is instead our belief that there is one correct understanding of a situation, or even the world itself. By having both dimensionalities together, I break away from the dichotomy of that which is real (3D) in contrast to that which is represented (2D). The work represents the idea that knowledge and existence themselves can be experienced outside of categories and in multiple ways, and that we cannot authoritatively define what is real and what is not. For example, it is difficult to say if a flat triangle is less real than a three-dimensional one, because we do not encounter these objects in our day-to-day lives. In this way, the work blurs the line between our own world and an imagined one and embraces that which is in-between.

The pieces in the exhibition also vary in size from relatively small to large. This difference in size speaks to that which we interact with every day: some objects fit in our hands and others we must walk around in order to view all sides of them. The differently-sized objects in the exhibition place the viewer at different points in relation to them, for example those they can look down on and those they look out at. The size variance also creates a playful viewing experience, in part because the viewer cannot as easily anticipate what they will see next, and the unexpected allows room for more possibilities.

This work exists as an installation because it is important that people are able to enter into it. If these pieces were 'traditional' works on paper, they would portray a window into a world. If they were individual sculptural works, they would not function as a scene or group. The connection between the work—the 'created world'—and our everyday lived lives is pivotal because the work is about reevaluating how we interpret and interact with the world. An installation allows viewers to experience and interact with the sculptures and prints the same way they interact with things in their everyday lives; they can physically experience the work and the relationships between them personally. Through installation, the gallery space becomes a playful 'alternative world' into which the viewer is invited, and the viewer becomes part of the work, interacting with it just as the creatures and shapes within it interact with each other.

The installation also expands outside of the gallery space physically and through interactivity. In a section of the gallery, visitors are invited to move paper characters and shapes around to create their own 'world.' They can also draw their own character and

add it in this section or take some of my printed characters home to place where they choose. Characters are additionally placed in spaces around the community, such as campus buildings, coffee shops, restaurants, community spaces, and more. The installation thus expands beyond the gallery location, and also even beyond only those who have visited the gallery, as individuals who have not seen the gallery installation see characters around town or the takeaways in the homes of those who visited the space. The goal of the work is to question our daily lives, and there is no better place to do it than within these everyday spaces themselves. By blurring the line between the installation and the non-installation (rather, the rest of the world), the separation between this 'alternative world' and our 'known' world is diminished, and we have room to imagine new possibilities in the mundane.

This quality of the unexpected is important in the work in relation to that which is familiar. These pieces are not off-the-wall odd—they are whimsical, familiar, friendly, yet different. It is important that they are familiar enough that viewers have some frame of reference for interacting with them, yet different enough that they do not completely fit in previously-formed ways of understanding. They function to interrupt the viewer's typical pattern of interpretation instead of taking them into an entirely unfamiliar realm. If the objects are completely foreign, then they do not function to question societal bases because they do not engage them at all; we have no basis for understanding or interacting with an object that is completely unknown.

Conclusion

Socially-formed conceptions, animals, humor, play, cuteness, simplicity, and alternative worlds are all ideas that hugely inform my work. Though seemingly varied, all these concepts provide avenues for us to imagine alternative ways of being. Our interpretations are societally-formed, and because our society is oriented towards categories and dichotomies, they narrow our experiences of the world. Animals exist outside of our human societies, and thus allow us to see alternative ways of existing. By playing with our expectations, nonsense humor makes room for lightheartedness and

the questioning of norms. Play is unattached to outcomes and imbued with openness and possibility, and stands in contrast to the concrete and known. That which is cute invokes our blithe selves, and simplicity enables ease of access and resists our societal orientation towards complexity. Alternative worlds allow a reprieve from our own world, and are excellent avenues to imagine entirely new ways of existing.

These concepts encourage discoveries about our world, our society, and ourselves. As I observe all three of these things in my own life, I find that I am constantly surprised at my everyday revelations. This is most especially true in relation to self-discoveries—how I frame situations in my head, hidden convictions I hold about myself, and so on. Making work is a part of my discovery process as well, and through it, I understand more of my most essential beliefs.

My work is based on the open-endedness and fun of play; as I create, I try out things and make discoveries, which in turn leads me to new ways of making. This process and the works themselves enable me to express my core beliefs that are either subconscious, difficult to put into words, or do not have many chances for expression—I am not often one to espouse beliefs without explicitly being asked, and our contemporary Western society does not leave much space for sprawling, core-of-your-being philosophical conversations. Creating the piece and having it out in the world allows me to communicate my ideas visually, in a mode that is true to the ideas since the creations are playful, simple, and allow room for the viewer to interpret as they will. But after the process of creation, and upon thinking critically about the work, I am also able to articulate these beliefs to myself and others in ways I could not have before creating the piece. Essentially, the piece is created largely outside of conscious conceptualization and words, and its creation, in turn, allows me to more aptly speak to the beliefs behind it.

In *The Point*, one of the first individuals Arrow and Oblio meet on their journey is the Rock Man. Oblio asks the Rock Man if they are still in the Pointless Forest, but the Rock Man will not answer his question as Oblio wants him to. Instead, the Rock Man takes issue with the name the 'Pointless Forest' and tries to explain to Oblio that the forest is not pointless at all. He wisely informs the two adventurers, "ain't necessary to possess a point to have yourself a point" (Wolf et al. 1971)—point first in the physical

sense, and second in the philosophical sense. The Rock Man invites Oblio to question the basis of his beliefs about the 'Pointless Forest' formed by the Pointed Village. Over the course of the journey, Oblio and Arrow dig beneath their societal convictions and discover that they do not find the forest pointless at all, but rather full of unique inhabitants with unique ways of doing things. Just like the two adventurers and the post-point villagers, who embrace Oblio and Arrow's views of the forest upon their return, we too must expand beyond our built-in ways of understanding so we can open up to alternative and holistic ways of experiencing the world around us.

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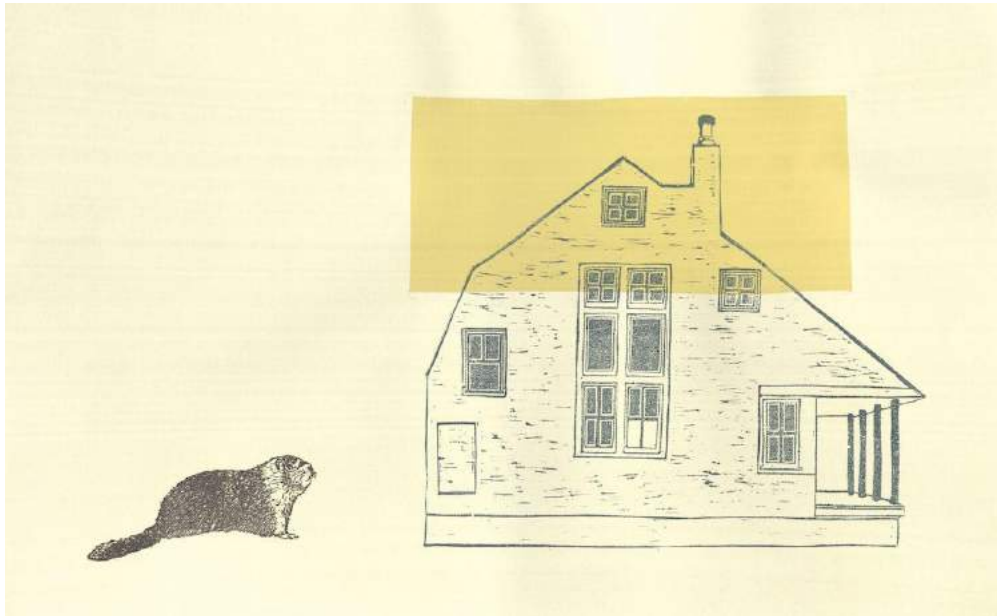
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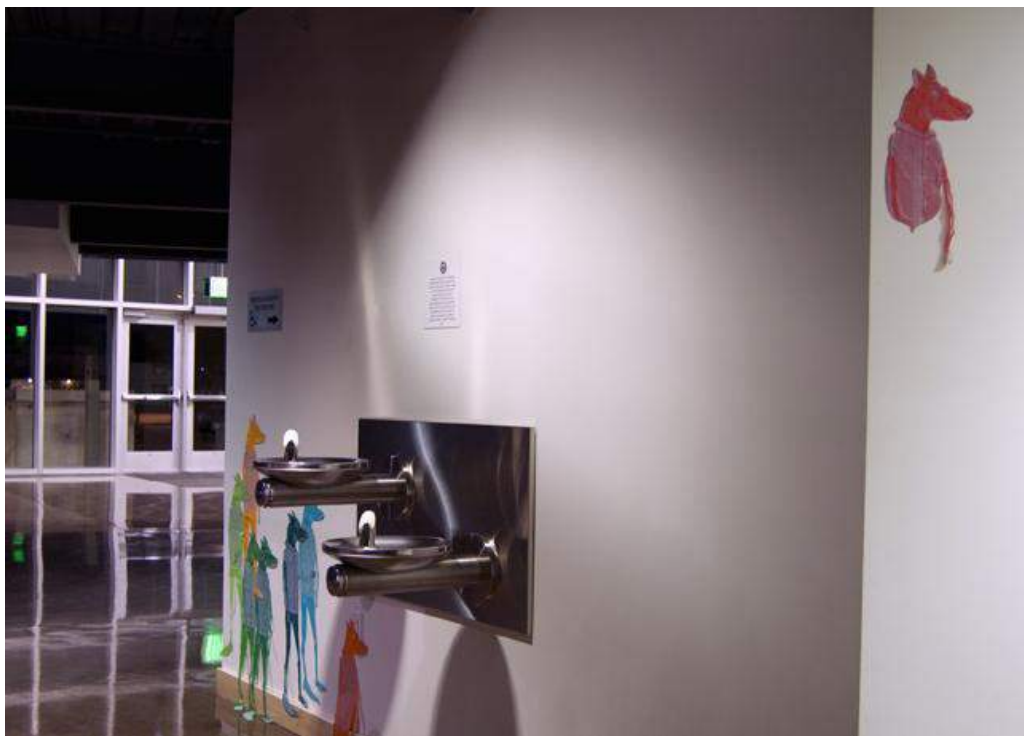
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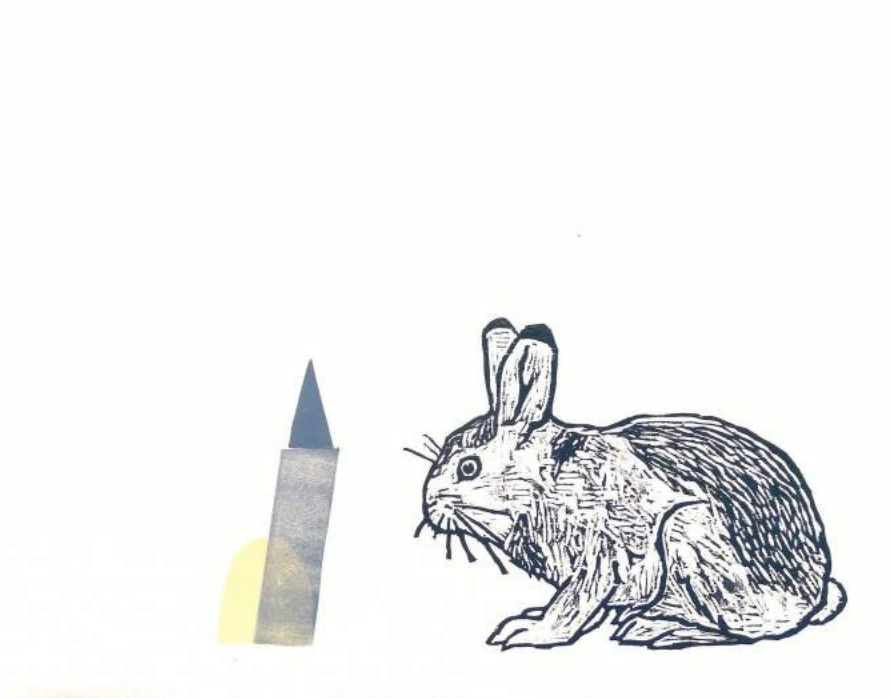
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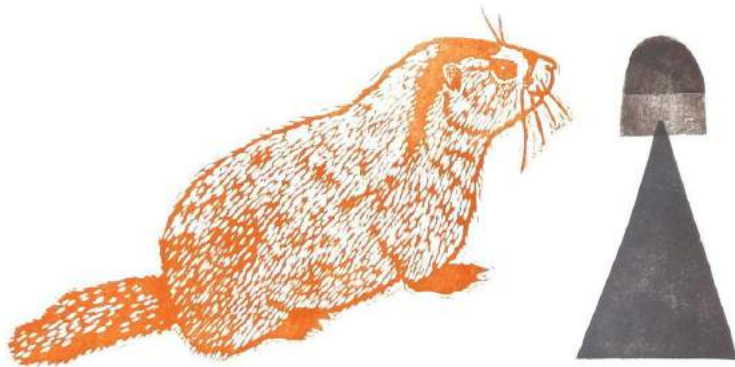
Author's artwork. 2012. *Characters*. JPG image from personal collection.

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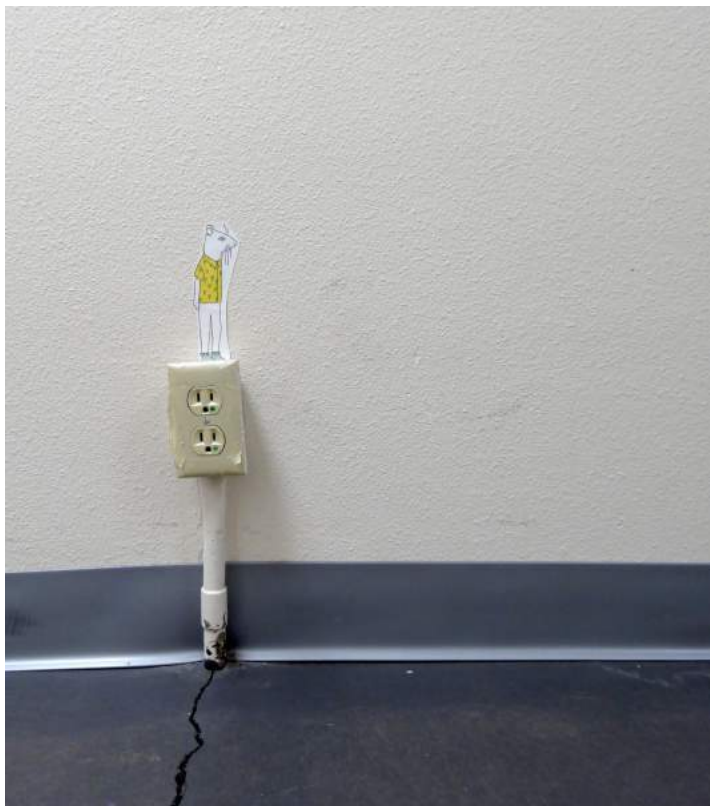
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Author's artwork. 2018. *Rodentia*. JPG image from personal collection.

Image 12



Wolf, Fred, Harry Nilsson, Carole Beers and Norm Lenzer. 1971. *The Point*. Murakami-Wolf Productions and Nilsson House Music Inc. Film still in JPG format on Midnight Only. <https://www.midnightonly.com/2017/03/27/the-point-1971/>.

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Darger, Henry. 1910-1970. *Young Rebonna Dorthereans - Blengins - Catherine Isles, Female, One whiplash-tail*. Photograph in JPG format from Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris on Artsy.net.
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Image 14



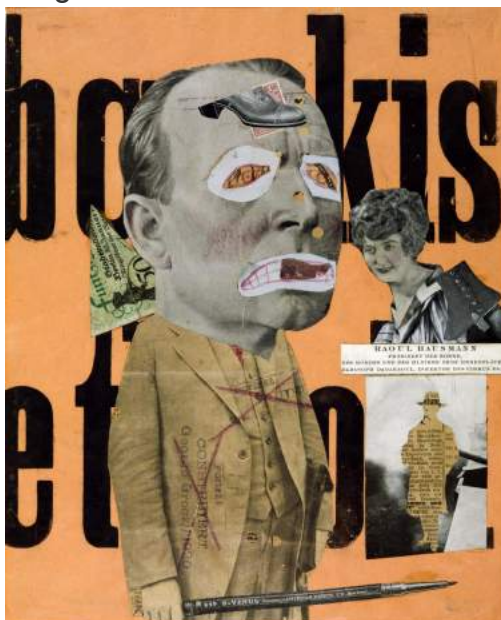
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<https://illustrationchronicles.com/Obsessed-with-Cats-The-Ukiyo-e-Prints-of-Utagawa-Kuniyoshi>.

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Toulouse-Lautrec, Henri. 1891. *Moulin Rouge: La Goulue*. Photograph in JPG format from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/32.88.12/>.

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Hausmann, Raoul. 1919-20. *The Art Critic*. Photograph in JPG format from the Tate Modern. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/d/dada>.

Image 17

6 DAYDREAMS THAT WILL IMMEDIATELY IMPROVE YOUR MOOD

1. Oh hey person who called me a crybaby in 8th grade so good to see you KNOCKOUT PUNCH.
2. Oh hey person who broke my heart in 11th grade how the heck are you SHINBONE KICK.
3. Oh hey professor who failed me in college math I'm doing pretty well thanks MATH SLAP.
4. Oh hey person who didn't hire me because I seemed "odd" hey thanks for the feedback FROG BITE ON THE KNUCKLE.
5. Oh hey sports coach who called me a lazy little loaf let's walk across this basketball court MASSIVE SLAM DUNK OK WOW I MISSED IT BUT STILL QUITE POWERFUL.
6. Oh hey church person who said I was going to hell watch me climb up this tree SUCKED INTO HEAVEN BECAUSE SURPRISE I'M FREAKING HOLY.



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Shrigley, David. 2017. *Untitled*. JPG image on Art Basel.
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Shrigley, David. n.d. *Untitled*. JPG image from David Shrigley's personal website.
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Johanson, Chris. 2002. *Untitled*. JPG image on Artspace.
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Johanson, Chris. 2001. JPG image from the Hammer Museum.
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Stern, Lorien. 2017. *Stardust*. Photograph in JPEG format from Ochi Projects.
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