

Tanya Bakija
MFA Artist Statement

FUZZY LOGIC

In many cultures, play is an important aspect in fostering ideas, ethics, and morals within a culture. Various forms of entertainment that incorporate play include television and toys. My own personal history with cartoons and toys has shaped my own aesthetic, favoring flat, graphic shapes, contour lines, and physicality of objects. I combined these elements to create a line of plush, handmade dolls, the starring characters of my narratives within a universal art museum. Using parody, these characters help me to engage the audience and ask questions about many things, notably the schism between high and low art.

Cartoons have the ability to bring groups of people together. People both young and old can share this experience, much like my father and I did when I was a little girl. My father did not speak much English, yet we were able to enjoy cartoons, like *Tom and Jerry* together, since there was no dialogue, except for the occasional scream. More modern cartoons, however, rely on dialogue, in addition to slapstick comedy and visual humor that delights children. Adult-oriented cartoons, such as *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*, entwine sophisticated humor with its satire of modern culture, giving adults something to think, and laugh about. In fact, adults watch a surprising amount of cartoons, giving way for Ted Turner to create the popular cable network, Cartoon Network, in 1992, which has its own late-night programming of adult-oriented cartoons on its Adult Swim (Mitchell 5). With cartoons drawing inspiration from the reality of a large part of the population, common experiences can be shared through cartoons (Mitchell 7). Not only cartoons on television, but animated films, such as *Aladdin*, which appear to be targeted towards children, include a lot of humor for adults to enjoy.

As more adults watch cartoons, they reminisce about their childhood. Hollywood has taken on this trend by creating movies that are spin-offs of toys of my generation's youth, such as *Transformers*, and *G.I. Joe*. In fact, adults are beginning to dress, act, gesture, and speak more like children, leaving some to call this new breed of adult a variety of names, such as immature adults, kidults, yupster, alterna-yuppie, and grups (Sternberg 2). These adults opt away from more "traditional" adult branding, such as the suit and tie, and instead opt to keep those rock t-shirts and sneakers on when they go to their job, or a late-night rock concert on a work night.

Keeping with this youthful attitude, adults are also collecting toys again, but sophisticated, designer toys. Designer toys are specialty toys, usually created by artists in limited editions. The materials range from vinyl, to plush, to paper, but the dolls definitely have a youthful, urban appeal. At the same time, these dolls help revive a nostalgic feeling of the past, and being a child. The artists designing these toys, such as Tim Biskup and Gary Baseman, are active in the Pop- Surrealist/Lowbrow art movement, genres of art that appeal to me. These artists share a common use of flat, graphic shapes and imaginative characters. Designer toys give people an opportunity to own a small piece of artwork, and perhaps interact with the work more than if the work was displayed on a wall. The plush designer toys, Ugly Dolls™, helped me to see the potential in some of my doodles, which I developed into my own line of plush figures.

My aesthetic is closely associated with cartoons and toys, with the use of flat, graphic shapes, contour lines, and physicality of objects. Illustration artists in the Lowbrow/Pop-Surrealist movement, such as Josh Agle (Shag) and Tim Biskup, use flat shapes and areas of color to create their work. Heavily influenced by Pop, Tiki art, and the Car Culture, these artists create playful pieces of two-dimensional work, as well as many designer toys. Other resources include fine artists Ida Applebroog and Caitlin Wheeler. Both artists render the figure in contour lines, a favorite technique of mine. As a compositional device, these lines flatten the space in the

picture plane, and the resulting image becomes more graphic. These features are similar to the comic books I read growing up, particularly Matt Groening's *Life in Hell* series, with crudely drawn characters, in simple black and white. This simplified approach allows attention to be given to the graphic narrative, and gives the characters a simple, charming quality. It is probably no surprise that his successive animated series, *The Simpsons* and *Futurama*, appeal to me as much as they do.

One common element these different groups of artists' share is the use of narrative in their work. My ultimate goal for my MFA journey was to incorporate the narrative, something I never previously explored. I want my narratives to engage the viewer, without asking too much from them, and to do this I needed to get outside of my own personal narrative, and find something bigger than myself, and at the same time something that held personal meaning for me. Ultimately, I created this narrative, and infused it with parody and humor. Like cartoons, I decided to use humor to encourage participation by the audience with my narratives. I saw the potential in my doodles for them to take on this challenge. Mischievous and cunning, these little characters are let loose in various environments, and the viewer is allowed to enjoy their adventures.

The surge of craft in contemporary art allowed me to think about different ways to accomplish my narrative goals. Much of my resource materials reside in a low art classification, making craft my optimal vehicle. The feminine associations with craft connect it to being utilitarian. Being quite comfortable behind a sewing machine, I realized it is a great tool for making contour line drawings. The narratives are sewn with black thread onto a white fabric. The fabric has a slight crinkle to it, which helps bring the viewer closer to the piece, and they can see the stitching. The black and white format is a nod to comic books and graphic novels, and

allows for simplicity. Some pieces use colored thread to bring attention to a particular area in the narrative, such as the hot pink bunny ears, nose, and whiskers drawn onto the *Mona Lisa*.

In addition to the sewn narratives, I am constructing my creatures into actual dolls. Much like Ugly Dolls™, my dolls are plush: handmade from substantial fabrics, such as wool felt, fleece, and corduroy. The main body of each doll is usually a solid color, accented with patterned cotton fabrics, or decorative hand stitching. I intend for these dolls to accompany the sewn narratives in the gallery, some posed around the pieces, others available to play with. There is a sense of comfort amongst the mischief, as the handmade quality of the dolls is evident, and they are quite playful. In addition, the handmade quality is important to me, as things these days get more technical and virtual and sometimes the little things get lost.

The location I chose for my narratives was the art museum. Two factors come into play with this decision. First, like cartoons, I wanted to address a large audience of adults. Being an artist, I chose well-known art historical pieces, such as the *Mona Lisa*, so more people could be engaged with my narratives. Second, the art museum, and the pieces I chose to play with, are classified as high art. Not only does my work use doodles and cartoon references, but my pieces are sewn and handcrafted. In juxtaposing these low art characteristics with the high art subjects, I am using parody to ask questions of the status of the art historical pieces and the actual sewn narratives.

Inside the art museum, my creatures find some of the most famous art historical pieces, and interact with them. Each character has certain traits, which may be used to accomplish their wayward goals. Some characters can fly around to avoid security systems, others might be afraid of water and warn others of a spill. In one piece, two creatures, Emery and Reginald, break into the museum like spies. Since Reginald can fly, he is able to use a can of aerosol spray to find the hidden lasers, so Emery can rappel down to the *Mona Lisa* and draw bunny ears and whiskers.

Clearly, these are inappropriate actions, however the intent is to be playful and humorous, a parody of the original work. Marcel Duchamp laid the groundwork for this, with *L.H.O.O.Q.*, where he added a mustache and goatee to a postcard of the *Mona Lisa*. While Duchamp's actual intent may never be known, his actions with *L.H.O.O.Q.* and readymades were at the forefront of the debate of high and low art. The *Mona Lisa* image is often used to describe something as being superior and of high taste, but by using postcards with this image, we begin to question the image's relationship with the low art status of the postcard (Baron 1). By using this image, through the act of sewing, I am attempting to elevate craft with high art, much like using the postcard with the *Mona Lisa* image in *L.H.O.O.Q.*

One thing that is clear about *L.H.O.O.Q.*, it is a parody. Parodies come in many forms, yet they all share a common structure. In its simplest form, all parodies take from an original and infuse creativity within, causing the audience to react (Posner 68). Marcel Duchamp took the *Mona Lisa* and infused his creativity, creating parody. The intent varies among all parodied works, but these elements are consistently present. In fact, parody could not occur without these criterions. The combination of these elements upset the "balance between form and content of the original and so focuses upon the familiar duality of form and content lying at the center of most inquiries into the aesthetic perception itself" (Kiremidjian 233). Our aesthetic experience relies on form and content, and when the balance is shifted, we begin to question how form relates to content, and how we experience the aesthetic. This relates to the layered meanings in parody; it can be thought of as hidden messages within the work. Parody is rooted in the taking of the original, and infusing creativity, which upsets the balance in form and content, and the audience reacts. This is the basic structure of parody, and as a form of deconstruction, parody is loaded with meanings.

Parody is a derivative work, since it is taken from an original, which means the artist has spent a great deal of time and effort getting to know the subject. This can be seen as a “form of homage” to the original work on part of the parodist (Kiremidjian 234). What sets apart the original from the parody are the critical differences due to the creativity on the part of the parodist. These differences can be humorous, ironic, playful, or a form of ridicule, but we should remember that even “ridicule is a form of criticism” (Posner 70-1). “Seriousness and purpose” can be in a work that is playful or ironic (Hutcheon 186). This is often the case in parodies that are trying to provide “context for something” that would otherwise be insignificant (Caesar 70). In fact, some parodies use the original work, instead of a target and turn it into a weapon for cultural critique. The original work becomes the “standard of excellence” the critique is based on (Posner 70). This is how I intend to use parody in my narratives. The famous works from art history used in my narratives are the “standards of excellence,” and have been, rightly so, for a long time. These pieces capture the sublime, and have been revered for generations. So when Emery is drawing bunny ears on the *Mona Lisa*, his “vandalism” is intended to be humorous, but also to question the mystical qualities and elevated status of the *Mona Lisa*. Certainly, parody is entangled with the sublime, the original. Phiddian explains, “Parody is not serious or even polite in the face of claims to the sublime, but it is not just a joke. Indeed, it is logically and philosophically opposed to the absolutist claims and mimetic frauds sublimity depends on” (692). When I ask these questions of the exalted high art pieces by using low art materials and subject matter, I am not providing any answers, simply asking questions. This is how a conversation can begin about the status of high and low art objects, materials and resources. Another question I would like to pose in my narratives is why do these classic art historical pieces still possess so much mystique and cultural power, or do they still do so, despite overwhelming reproductions. What will the next work in the art museum be, or does great work

need to be in the museum to be revered? Craft has firmly planted its foot in the contemporary art world, and it will be interesting to see if distinctions between high and low art remain, change, or disappear. By being opposed to sublimity's standards, parody can be an effective tool in cultural critiques. In order for these critiques to happen between parody and its audience, the audience must be familiar with the original, or parodied, work, which is why the art historical pieces I used were chosen.

Parody cannot function without an audience. Parody begins and extends conversations and raises questions; it cannot do this without an audience. The most effective parody happens when the audience is familiar with the original work (Posner 70). Often, such parody circulates around classicism or popular culture, as both are generally rather well known, or understood, by a large audience. When the work is accessible, the audience can begin the process of deconstructing the parody and discover the hidden meanings. This knowledge base of the audience is important for them to recontextualize and respond to parody. Through some of parody's tactics, such as irony or humor, the audience becomes informed and understands how to respond to the parody. However, these tactics may also introduce some of the audience to the original work for the first time. Sometimes the audience responds to the parody by reinvestigating the original, or for some, they have an opportunity to experience the original work for the first time. Most importantly, because parody seeks to be recontextualized, it demands an active audience. When parody invests in its audience, the audience becomes invested back. Most postmodern art operates in the same way as parody, by revisiting history, and requiring an active audience. I took this idea, quite literally, to be an important factor in my MFA show. To encourage a literal active audience, the plush dolls of the characters from my narratives will be available for clean hands to play with. A special play area is constructed with ottoman-dolls for people to sit on to encourage interaction with the dolls. One doll, the enormous

pink *Monstro*, has different facial features, which the audience can rearrange and play with. This interaction was an important factor to consider when preparing for this show, as parody is the key element to my narratives, and parodies require an active audience.

Together, the sewn narratives and handmade dolls work together to bring influential aspects of childhood into my adult life, as well as highlight my interests and thoughts on the contemporary art world. My personal aesthetic of cartoons, toys, comics, and craft has shaped my journey to my MFA show. My ultimate goal of working with a narrative has been achieved through the use of parody and humor. Being someone who can be more interested in the question than the answer, I like how parody allows for conversations to happen and questions to be asked. The irony of using low art materials to ask high art questions in a high art setting is part of the idea behind the title of the show, the oxymoron that is *Fuzzy Logic*.

Bibliography

- Baron, Robert A II Mona Lisa Kitsch as Symbolic Form.” *Mona Lisa Images For A Modern World* May 2008. 11 April 2010 <http://www.studiolo.org/Mona/MONASV04.htm#KITSCH>.
- Caesar, Terry. “‘Impervious to Criticism:’ Contemporary Parody and Trash.” *SubStance*, 20.1 (1991): 67-79. 25 October 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3684883>.
- Groening, Matt. *The Big Book of Hell: A Cartoon Book*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990.
- Hung, Shu, and Joseph Magliaro, eds. *By Hand: The Use of Craft in Contemporary Art*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007.
- Hutcheon, Linda. “The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History.” *Cultural Critique*, 5 (Winter 1986-1987): 179-207. 25 October 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354361>.
- Kiremidjian, G. D. “The Aesthetics of Parody.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 28.2 (Winter 1969): 231-242. 20 October 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/428572>.
- Kline, Stephen. *Out of the Garden: Toys, TV, and Children’s Culture in the Age of Marketing*. London: Verso, 1993.
- Mitchell, Tracey L. “‘Kids’ Stuff:’ Television Cartoons as Mirrors of the American Mind.” 1995:4-22. *Education Resources Information Center*. 18 Feb. 2010 <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED386771>.
- Mittell, Jason. “Cartoon Realism: Genre Mixing and the Cultural Life of The Simpsons.” *The Velvet Light Trap* Spring 2001:15-28. 18 Feb. 2010 (11 April 2017) <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE|A133947278&v=2.1&u=monash&it=r&p=ONE&sw=w&asid=ff740cf63dc3654d3e5a2b232fc39b92>.
- Meyrowitz, Joshua. “The Adulthood Child and the Childlike Adult: Socialization in an Electronic Age.” *Daedalus* 113.3 (Summer 1984): 19-48. 18 Feb. 2010.
- Phiddian, Robert. “Are Parody and Deconstruction Secretly the Same Thing?” *New Literary History* 28.4 (Autumn 1997): 673-696. 21 October 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057449>.
- Posner, Richard A. “When is Parody Fair Use?” *The Journal of Legal Studies* 21.1 (Jan. 1992): 67-78. 20 October 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/724401>.







CLEAN PLAYED TO PLAY