

## ABSTRACT

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DECORATIVE SPECTER

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This exhibition reflects a tragic and anticlimactic future. The ultimate outcome of human exploration of the universe will no doubt shed light on the dismal nature of our interpersonal relationships and grand aspirations.

Decorative Specter is an exhibition of sculpture and video that depicts a distant future inhabited by decorative artifacts of long extinct human civilizations. The works in this exhibition are speculative portraits of alien, but eerily familiar puppets. They represent moments within an implied overarching narrative, frozen for study and contemplation. My use of commonly overlooked aesthetics is intended to remind us that other intelligent life will likely spring from an unexpected place and with unexpected results. In the following text I will explain the formal qualities and concepts behind the work.

DECORATIVE SPECTER

by

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## Chapter 1: The Retrogressive Evolution of Puppetry

My art practice is about bringing the strange and improbable to life in a physical form. I am interested in how the art of puppetry achieves this aim while celebrating the limitations of its materiality. A puppet's allure and sense of immediacy is born of simplicity. Limited movement and visible mechanical parts give the viewer a sense of control and, by extension, a deeper connection with the narrative. More contemporary forms of performance like dance, acting, and 3D animation attempt to move beyond physical abstraction and the simplified form by replacing them with live performers and computer generated effects; but these attempts to achieve realism may undermine the trust and sense of participation afforded by a more transparent and vulnerable method of production.

According to Eileen Blumenthal in her book *Puppetry and Puppets*, puppetry is one of the oldest art forms, and has existed in every human civilization in some capacity (Blumenthal 12-28). Puppets were used for religious, social, and political functions. In indigenous cultures of the Americas such as the Teotihuacan civilization of around 600 C.E., terra-cotta attendants with opposable arms and legs were buried with the dead so they could perform their duties in the afterlife (Figure 1). Ancient Egyptians created very similar dolls for their tombs. The dolls represent the promise of a next act, and wait to be performed by a divine hand. Blumenthal points out that early Christian civilizations banned puppetry because it was reminiscent of idol worship, which is problematic in every Abrahamic religion. They weren't wrong, in that to enjoy puppetry is to enter a spiritual state. Here, we get into psychological territory, as what dolls and puppets mystical significance really equates to is a

kind of infant's blanket or, as the psychologist Donald Winnicott called it, a Transitional Object. The puppets do not simply exist in our mind nor are they simply the chunk of wood they are carved from. They are not a representation of our interior or external worlds; rather, the puppet is the experiential bridge between (Winnicott 18). Whether it is an artistic performance for an audience or a religious performance for devotees preparing a tomb for the afterlife, puppets perform the same function. The abstraction of form and the intimacy of a puppet's performance give puppetry a purity. Heinrich von Kleist wrote in *On the Marionette Theater*:

...We see that in the organic world, as thought grows dimmer and weaker, grace emerges more brilliantly and decisively.... Grace itself returns when knowledge has, as it were, gone through an infinity. Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness. That is, in the puppet or in the god (26).



*Figure 1* Teotihuacan Jointed doll, National Museums in Berlin. 350-550 A.D.

In dance and theater, the performer is an external object. When an actor cries hysterically about the death of a lover we can sympathize. Even if the actor fails to produce tears, or the script is melodramatic, we can generally force ourselves to remain engaged. But the worse the performance the more difficult staying engaged becomes. That is because we become aware of the actor's other life offstage. The actor, or object may have been pretending to exist in that illusory intermediate state between the viewer's inner self and the external world, but the actor is an object apart. In Butoh, a post WWII Japanese form of absurdist dance, the dancer inhabits its own body like an infant born with an adult's body. While early performances dealt with the decline of traditional Japanese social mores and the violence of war, current practitioners do not define it by its original societal context, rather they define it as using the body in a provocative way that addresses all contemporary social



taboos (Vélez, *Dance of Darkness*). More than in any other type of dance, Butoh dancers move with the most inhuman and exaggerated grace that is similar to that of a puppet. Like puppetry, it is supposed to appear devoid of self-consciousness, so they seem to move without fear of what they might express. Every movement is a surprise and their eyes read as cold and dead, or as von Kliest might put it, the cold dead eyes reflect the infinite (Figure 2). But, where the performance does generally succeed in reducing the body to its raw components and producing a general sense of anxiety, the content centers on the considerable effort to do so rather than the concept or narrative. A puppet starts with the grace born of physical abstraction, and regardless of the profundity of the performance, effortlessly maintains its sense of immediacy in service of the concept or narrative.



Figure 2 Still from *Dance of Darkness* (03:18). Sept (Firm), 1985.

Stories that use analog special effects and puppetry are not characterized by what the effects fail to achieve, but what they force the viewer to achieve in overlooking their shortcomings. The movie *Jaws*, released in 1975, represented a major breakthrough in the

thriller genre. It was so terrifying in its day that it was said to have caused mental health disturbances in viewers. To create the shark, they designed and built five elaborate life-sized mechanical puppets. These puppets were all lovingly dubbed “Bruce.” Capturing the footage was a problem because Bruce was constantly malfunctioning (Manukas, *The Making of Jaws*; Figure 3). Shots that feature Bruce are unconvincing where natural movement is concerned; yet, Bruce still terrifies audiences. The failure of Bruce to achieve realism is not considered a failure at all. The audience is not looking for perfection they are looking for physical effort in the telling of a story. Puppetry and all analog special effects work within physical limitations and, therefore, edit possibilities based on feasible necessity. The same cannot be said of 3-D rendered special effects and animation.



*Figure 3 Still from Jaws: The Inside Story (29:53). Biography Channel, 2010.*

What the introduction of 3-D animation has done to liberate the imaginations of film makers and animators is both amazing and disquieting. There is more experimentation because there is less cost associated with failure. Three dimensional animated movies like *Sharknado*, released in 2013, produced sharks in 3-D rendering packages, which eliminated

the engineering concerns encountered in the production of *Jaws*. The animators produced slick computer generated sharks, then whipped them around in a virtual environment like algorithmic pool noodles (Figure 4). Although the movie was obviously made in jest and was poking fun at CGI, it was a perfect example of how the lack of limitations can alienate the viewer. How the sharks were designed, rigged, textured, and animated is not evident at any point. While at first glance the sharks appear to be creatures of this earth, their representation and construction is that of another universe entirely, one with alien algorithmic laws. One might argue that this offers more potential for realism, but that is not the case. Even if an animator managed to use 3-D animation and compositing to produce a completely realistic film, the alien magic would still be apparent in the digitally rendered effect's implausibility. How was it made? If its magic, who's magic? You certainly don't need to credit Mother Nature for enabling the creation of a mechanical puppet, but if a software company created the laws of a production's universe, perhaps a 3D rendering software package like Maya deserves more credit than the production company or artist. All of this assumes that the goal of the production company or artist is to tell compelling stories.

One understanding of 3D animation is that it exists to capitalize on the viewer's attention rather than to entertain. The spectacular method of production and the viewers' attention has become more important to film producers than the narrative it drags along with it. Three dimensional animation is a new form of image driven capitalism where the viewer is hypnotized by self-reflexive animation and advancements in 3D rendering capabilities (Gurevitch 445–465). As Gurevitch points out, an example of this is the first *Toy Story* movie by Pixar, when Buzz Lightyear stands in front of a TV watching an advertisement for himself. He is a realistic 3-D rendering of a toy watching a 3-D rendered screen which

displays an equally realistic 3-D rendering of his inanimate toy self being played with. What the scene does not spell out for the viewer is that they are the third toy watching the first two in this infinite regress. While the rendering capabilities timestamp and make the movie more obsolete with every advancement of the technology, as long as the viewer is presented with better and better rendering, the hypnotic machine continues to function . In other words, the viewer continues to perform as puppet for the animators.



Figure 4 Still from *Sharknado* (29:53). Syfy, 2013.

I discuss the inferiority of other performance arts and 3-D animation not to suggest that they are not valuable forms of entertainment, but to suggest that one of the oldest methods of storytelling is so effective that it exists on an almost spiritual plane. I believe the most effective visual storytelling involves physical abstraction and an absence of the human body or overtly digital content. Anything physical elevated to this purpose will not be hindered by its technical sophistication or lack of intelligence. It can be a mechanical shark, a marionette, a wooden doll, or even something as mundane as a paperclip. Using an unlikely

combination of materials and processes I hope to overwhelm the viewer with the potential for life to arise from unexpected places and with unexpected results.

## Chapter 2: Decorative Specter

Decorative Specter is an exhibition in which I depict definitions of beauty and comfort as having outlived us. Like a vestigial limb is evidence of a creature's origins, I intend for the puppet like creatures in this series to display evidence of their outmoded human origins in the form of mundane domestic decor. Domestic aesthetics are cultural agents of continuity, struggling to maintain a familiar shape while providing a sense of comfort. Here I've created a universe where, in the wake of humanity's extinction, the slow reexamination of beauty is brought to a halt. Some of our last held definitions are suggested to have mysteriously transformed into physical building blocks of life, resulting in the animation and independent evolution of decorative artifacts.

The puppets in this series are strangely attractive stand-ins for the emergence of artificial intelligence. In the book *Homo Deus* by Yuval Harari, he talks about how algorithms are already hijacking our behavior patterns and narrowing employment opportunities. He points out that Art might be the last field available to humans as AI bests us in every other. But even this currently indefinable representation of the human experience could one day be mastered by algorithms (722-770). In this series, the material quality of the puppets is the result of mastering human aesthetics and embodying their final definition of beauty.

But this final definition is no longer governed by human assertions of taste. One of the influences I drew from in making these puppets was the Garbage Pail Kids trading cards. The cards spoof the stuffed dolls that were popular at the time, Cabbage Patch Kids (Figure 5). The Cabbage Patch dolls are cute in their balance of disturbing bodily abstraction and endearing facial features. Cuteness is a quality that suggests a balance of opposing extremes,

like both familiar and unfamiliar, needy and self-sufficient, or shapen and misshapen (May 29-30). Existing at neither end of a spectrum makes both extremes seem unreal, and imbues the dolls with a kind of magic. A nebulous void is born of the indefinite. Cuteness is not simply kitsch. Objects that possess the balance of cuteness are icons of culturally defined taste. Where the balance is struck we are subconsciously comforted by the familiar vantage point from which we dream. If the appearance of Cabbage Patch dolls were to lean further into distorted representations of human anatomy they would begin to lose their cuteness and introduce anxiety. Garbage Pail Kids trading cards tip the balance of cuteness with Cabbage Patch like characters depicted in revolting states of bodily distress (Figure 6). Losing its balance, taste is seen for the subjective assertion that it is. The materiality of the works in this exhibition also tips the balance. The puppets adhere to a mix of quaint decorative and science fiction aesthetics, but also possess unsettling anthropomorphic qualities. Pursuing comfort while exploring the unknown is a charming contradiction. But the subtle disharmony born of references to the frail human body challenges the polar alignment of its dream like aesthetic.



*Figure 5 Cabbage Patch Kids dolls. Coleco, 1982.*



Figure 6 Garbage Pail Kids. *Oral Laurel*. Topps, 1987.



Mounting Ararat



Figure 7 Noah McWilliams. *Decorative Specter: Mounting Ararat*. 2021. Courtesy of the Artist.

Mounting Ararat is a kinetic sculpture that depicts the landing of a spacefaring decorative life form on Earth, thousands of years after the extinction of humans (Figure 7). Mount Ararat is the location in the Torah where Noah's Ark is said to have run aground after the flood waters receded. This piece is also about a violent extermination of all life on earth. A thick crust of plagued human flesh covers the planet's surface, and is in the process of consuming what appears to be the last resource available, itself. To escape infection, a mass of human thumbs reaches out to be subsumed by the alien vessel, who's incorporation of flesh in its decorative design promises a familiar safety and comfort.

There's an obvious connection between the two life forms, but I also tried to suggest a historical schism between the hand and the handmade. What's become of the human hand is now at the mercy of an estranged and independently evolved decorative aesthetic, which out of hunger or recognition probes the protruding thumbs with equal enthusiasm.

Humanity's expansion across the globe has been achieved through a cooperative manipulation of its surroundings (Sapiens 47-57). One such tool is obviously technology, but on a deeper level, more dubious abstract concepts should be credited such as cultural aesthetics. Where these abstract concepts overlap from person to person, people form tribal groupings (Winnicott 18). What follows is the manipulation or complete extermination of other groups and natural resources.

The obese thumbs in this sculpture are suggested to be the last remaining living entity on the planet (Figure 8). They may or may not be responsible for what happened to the planet's surface. This is intended to be a critique of globalism, colonialism, and a general lack of an established equilibrium between individual groups and the planet's resources.



Figure 8 Noah McWilliams. Close up of the human flesh in *Mounting Ararat*. 2021. Courtesy of the Artist.

Padded, quilted, jointed, and safety capped like the bedroom of a toddler, the decorative traveler represents the embodiment of soothing abstract thinking processes humans once used to justify planet wide devastation. The suggested irony of the explorer's homecoming is that it may or may not be there to perform the same manipulation of what it discovers.

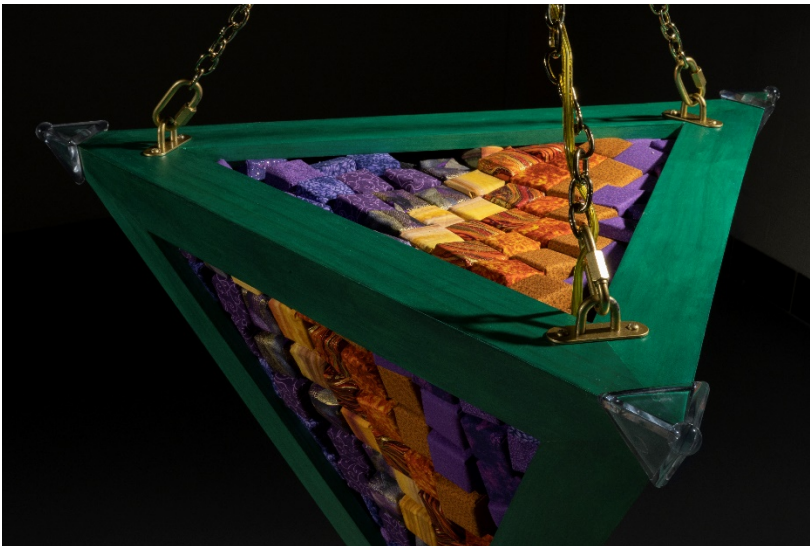


Figure 9 Noah McWilliams. Close up of the quilting and safety caps in *Mounting Ararat*. 2021. Courtesy of the Artist.

*Sick Brick*



Figure 10 Noah McWilliams. *Decorative Specter: Sick Brick*. 2021. Courtesy of the Artist.

This floating cloud like form appears to have soaked up a last impression of the human way of life before its extinction. The creature displays diseased elements of architecture and clothing design, symbols of a blind pursuit of comfort and its unintended consequences (Figure 10). The form is a dispassionate index, celebrating human achievement and humanities downfall in equal measure. Suspended in weightless flight, this monolithic creature is seemingly immune to the effects of gravity, but not the illness that plagues it. It is free but shackled by a material lack of self-awareness and fragility, much like human



achievements seem potentially limitless, but are in fact governed by animalistic needs and desires.

*Banner of Linging Cush*



Figure 11 Noah McWilliams. *Decorative Specter: Banner of Linging Cush*. 2021. Courtesy of the Artist.

This video is meant to be a declaration of a newly sentient decorative creature's freedom from human service (Figure 11). The banners represent a new era of thinking comfort objects, and symbolize their new found ability to participate in aspects of life that they were once excluded from. Despite the two flags appearing to be flat because of the fringe tassel, the imagery within remains photorealistic in its depiction of this new life. While

the abstraction of symbolic forms was common in human cultures, the products of those extinct cultures now declare their independence from flat abstraction.

The flags resemble two film stills from an Eadweard Muybridge like investigation of movement (Figure 12). Each frame depicts one of the extremes of the subject's repetitive escalator like movement. Within each "still" frame of the animation, the separate instances of the subject are themselves subtly moving, twitching with impatience. The rejection of stillness toys with a sense of immediacy inherent in puppetry. A puppet only lives during its performance, and the impending death lends its every movement importance (Blumenthal 11).



Figure 12 Eadweard J. Muybridge. *Movement of the Hand, Beating Time*: Plate 535 from *Animal Locomotion*. MoMA, 1884-86.

In the video, the puppet's appearance in a red bodily space through a kind of portal or orifice is intended to be proof of its autonomy. The internalization of plush decorative materials, welcome or not, represents an inversion of our relationship to the decorative. The

now sentient comfort objects are no longer tools for pursuing comfort, so one is depicted pursuing its own interests in what used to be our domain.

## Chapter 3: After the Crafterfuture

This body of work is the most labor intensive project I have embarked on to date, and is the standard by which I will judge my future projects. Formally and conceptually I have sharpened my focus over the last seven years of schooling. I have always been a detail-oriented artist. As a former professor once told me, I sew my buttonholes twice. Early in my career, I was unsatisfied with my illustration practice, because I felt like the surrealist imagery I was using needed to be brought to life in a more substantial way (Figure 13). When I began art school at 32 and started to experiment with sculpture, it was a struggle reconciling the funky nature of my illustrations with the daunting world of "serious sculpture". School allowed me the time to sort out through trial and error the difference between emulating historical definitions of sculpture, and reach my own conclusions. I now produce highly detailed, playful, and illustrative soft sculpture and video that is not governed by a specific material specialization.





Figure 13 Noah McWilliams. *V-RUM V-RUM*. 2019. Courtesy of the Artist.

The current focus of my practice is bringing fantastical imagery to life in a three-dimensional form. I'm fascinated by the aesthetics of storytelling, specifically what is signified by references to the human body in depictions of the inanimate. Anthropomorphism in media such as cartoons and animated films is usually pretty overt. This allows the narrative to progress without a stream of opaque hidden meanings grinding it to a halt. In my work, I intentionally bring the narrative to a halt so we can analyze the subject's more subtle

anthropomorphic qualities. Beauty of form and choices in materiality come together to produce truncated portraits of dysfunction. References to the body are subtle and exist to add an element of doubt in the authenticity of the subject's presentation. It is about vulnerability and the narrative it can produce.

My future work will continue to explore materiality as a means of probing the physical body's relationship to storytelling. In past exhibitions, I have explored the body's relationship to things like computer science, religious ritual, and environmental conservation. I plan to continue in that vein with absurdist, slightly macabre imagery that disarms and confronts the viewer on a visceral level.

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