

Lonely Mountains

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Abstract

Lonely Mountains

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This thesis examines cuteness as it relates to care, culture, and manipulation. Using both scientific studies and cultural theories, this thesis aims to understand these elements of cuteness and relate them to the artwork discussed herein. Additionally, this paper explores layering as an element of painting that can extend painting beyond the two-dimensional surface of the canvas into three-dimensional space.

Methodology: Layering

My collages began with just a few rules:

1. Instead of using found color shapes salvaged from old magazines or photos, all shapes will be cut from sheets of vellum on which I have painted swathes of acrylic.
2. Each collage should have a different composition within the square piece of paper than the collage that came before it.
3. Make at least forty collages.

Thus I began the process of layering that has become an essential part of my current practice – layering paint atop vellum, vellum shapes atop other vellum shapes and finally these shapes atop pieces of paper. Though the collages were just accumulations of abstract shapes, the layering of flat shapes built space on the page. Creating space through the layering of flatness felt counterintuitive. I was used to creating space on canvas through the use of color, light and perspective. Inspired by this realization, I began using paint as if it were a collage, layering flat areas of color atop one another to create environments (Figure 1, Figure 2). This exploration expanded beyond the borders of the canvas onto the wall and into physical space. In my current practice, forms are cut from foam, painted, and layered on the wall and extending out into the space of the room. Sometimes another shape is cut into the foam exposing that which is behind it. Foam shapes coalesce into an island in the middle of the room or as stacks of shelves in the corner. The work becomes a layered environment of color and light, shape and outline, positive and negative (Figure 3).

Layering leads to piling, to the accumulation of material over time. *Cloud Shelf* (Figure 4) was borne of this piling—sculptures I made but was not ready to let go of accumulated over the course of two years into a completely new work.

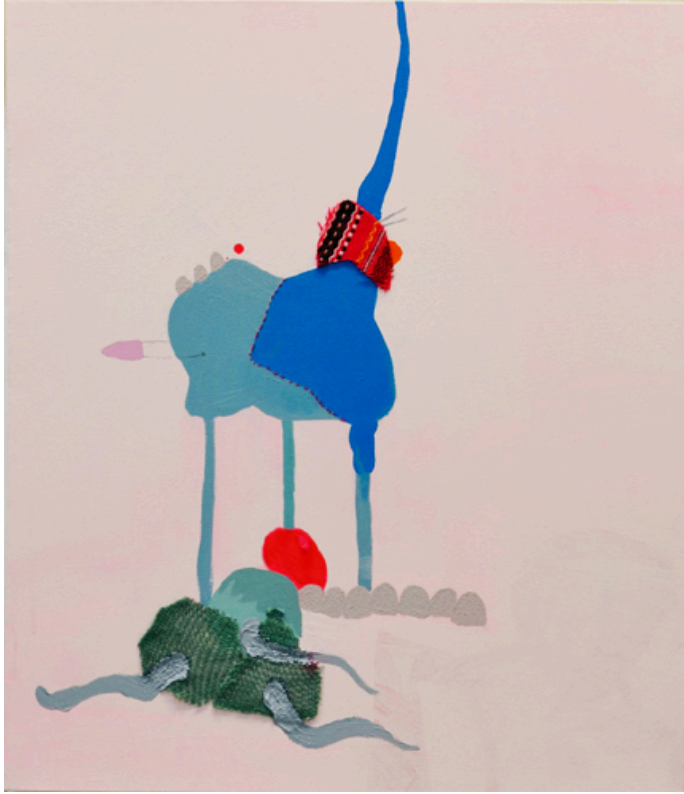


Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

Content:

1.

Alone and lonely. Dull. Flat.

A spark of hope comes with something new and brings a moment of elation.

Up and down, worry and joy, comfort and unease.

Falling

and

suddenly,

inexplicably,

Alone again. (Figure 5)

2.

Care.

It is vulnerable, small, alone,

Give it your protection.

It cannot, and should not, protect itself.

3.

Honestly, it shouldn't have been a surprise that love isn't enough.

4.

I draw the outline of a mountain range and cut it into pieces. The shards fall to the ground as I attempt to suspend them in the air, to stop the free-fall and let the pieces float. (Figure 6)

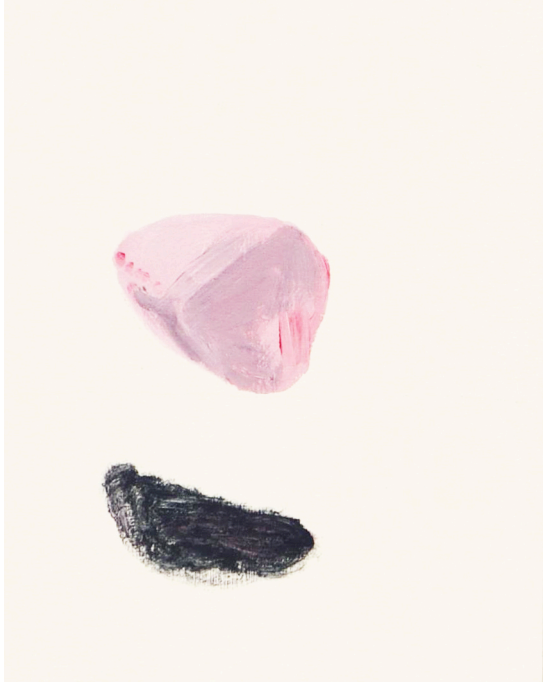


Figure 5.



Figure 6.

A. Care, Cuddles, Suffocation: A Brief Discussion of Cuteness

Something cute is “attractive in an endearing way.”¹ The cute object is pleasing to look at, and it engenders feelings of care and tenderness in the viewer. Cute things are often huggable, soft, fluffy, fuzzy, round, pudgy, clumsy, innocent, youthful, small, weak, vulnerable and dependent.

Scientific scholarship on cuteness began in 1943 when Konrad Lorenz, an ethologist and zoologist², described the characteristics of infants that compel adults to care for and nurture them until they can fend for themselves, what he termed the “child schema.”³ The schema included a relatively large head, large eyes, chubby cheeks, and clumsy movements. When observed by an adult these characteristics would “trigger an involuntary desire to nurture.”⁴ His view defines the cute response as not only an automatic biological response but also as a response that will always produce parental behaviors in the viewer.⁵

Since the 1970s, behavioral psychologists have expanded upon Lorenz’s studies to paint a more nuanced picture of the cuteness response.⁶ Researches have the response to also be learned and not solely innate, as Lorenz had argued. Additionally, they have found cuteness to elicit a play response--the subject’s desire to make silly faces on coming into contact with a baby, for example--in addition to a care response, in the viewer.⁷ As the amount of scholarship on cuteness continues to grow, it is clear that the affective response to cuteness is not a simple one.

¹ “Cute.” Def. 1. *Oxford English Dictionary*. N.p., n.d. Web.

² Gary D. Sherman and Jonathan Haidt. “Cuteness and Disgust: The Humanizing and Dehumanizing Effects of Emotion.” *Emotion Review* 3.3 (2011): 248

³ Joshua Paul Dale, Joyce Goggin, Julia Leyda, Anthony P. McIntyre, and Diane Negra. *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*. New York: Routledge, 2017. 3.

⁴ Dale, Goggin, Leyda, McIntyre and Negra 3.

⁵ Sherman and Haidt 248.

⁶ Dale, Goggin, Leyda, McIntyre and Negra 3.

⁷ Sherman and Haidt 248.

Another physiological aspect of the cute response is cute aggression. The cute response is often coupled with feelings of violence toward the cute subject with sayings like, “it’s so cute I could eat it up” or “it’s so fluffy I want to die.” Researchers have termed this reaction cute-aggression. Their studies suggest that people with higher expressions of aggression in response to viewing photos of infants return to emotional equilibrium more quickly than those with a lower aggressive response. Thus they conclude that these negative emotions in response to cuteness help in moderating and alleviating the intense influx of positive emotion from looking at something cute.⁸

Cuteness “may best be understood as an appeal—intentional or unconscious, made by an animal- or human-like entity—that seeks to trigger a particular affective response.”⁹ However, the response is not consistent across all individuals. People do not always agree on what should be characterized as cute. What is considered cute varies across cultures as well as from person to person within a particular culture. This complication coupled with the proliferation of cute objects increasingly available across the United States allows us to look beyond scientific research of cuteness and to theorize the cute as a relevant aesthetic category in contemporary American culture.¹⁰

Sianne Ngai takes the position that cute is a relevant aesthetic category in her book *Our Aesthetic Categories*. She explains, “The experience of cute depends entirely on the subject’s affective response to an imbalance of power between herself and the object.”¹¹ The vulnerability of the cute thing in relation to ourselves triggers our affective response. “Something becomes

⁸ Christopher Hooton. "So Cute I Could Eat It: The Science behind 'Cute Aggression'." *Independent.co.uk*. N.p., 14 Nov 2014.

⁹ Dale, Goggin, Leyda, McIntyre, and Negra 4

¹⁰ Dale, Goggin, Leyda, McIntyre, and Negra 4

¹¹ Sianne Ngai. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard UP, 2015. 54

cute not necessarily because of a quality it has but because of a quality it lacks, a certain neediness and inability to stand alone.”¹² The small, cute, weak object looks out at the viewer, lonely, and demands her consideration and her care. And the viewer answers it willingly.

Perhaps the cute thing is not as innocent as it appears. The willingness to respond to the subordinate object’s appeal,

“produces the sense of being strong-armed or manipulated by cuteness, a secondary feeling that can paradoxically undermine the aesthetic power of the original feeling. The subject confronting the cute object thus experiences a sense of both mastery and surrender, explicit relations to force that the cute leitmotif of violence helps cast in sharper relief.”¹³

Thus cuteness is not simple nor solely positive or pleasurable to experience for the sense of being manipulated often follows close behind the initial affective response. What at first appears to be a powerless object with no agency, the cute object gains a certain power in the subject’s willingness to give affection to it. Indeed, essayist Daniel Harris notes, “Pity is the primary emotion of this seductive and manipulative aesthetic.”¹⁴ The charm of the cute entices the viewer causing her to desire more cuteness. So, “Although the gaze we turn on the cute thing seems maternal and solicitous, it is in actuality transformative and will stop at nothing to appease its hunger for expressing pity and big-heartedness.”¹⁵ The power differential between the viewer and the cute object allows the subject to pity the poor, vulnerable object and to continue to seek out that vulnerability in the objects of her affection.

¹² Daniel Harris. *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2001. 4

¹³ Ngai 98

¹⁴ Harris 4

¹⁵ Harris 6

Cute, according to Ngai, is a “vernacular aesthetic”¹⁶ that functions both as a response to stimuli as well as a value judgment. Unlike the aesthetic category of the sublime, which is implicitly positive, the value of a cute judgment is ambiguous. “That’s cute” is a statement most of us hear daily, yet its meaning changes based on context and tone. This equivocal status of the cute also gives it power.; power to confuse, to belittle and to cherish.

Other theorists take a more positive approach to the proliferation of cuteness in American culture. Since cute affect is often accompanied by play, the abundance of cute objects could be thought of as an avenue for momentary escape from the reality of adulthood. It represents “The desire to enter, if only for a moment, a state of being that renders the world unthreatening and playful.”¹⁷

B. *Lonely Mountains*:

A green and a yellow sloped form sits on the floor in the corner and the paint casts a pale glow on the mountain outline behind it. Above it, the negative space of a shelf carves mountain forms in white onto the wall. The shelves themselves are curved like a mountain range but project themselves perpendicularly from the wall in an orientation that is cloud-like. More mountain forms sit on the shelf and cast soft, colored shadows about them. The subtleties require a close look in order to be noticed; the viewer must establish a relationship with the cute mountain forms to really see them. Per *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, “feeling that something is cute creates a relationship to that object.”¹⁸ Though *Lonely Mountains* is an

¹⁶ Sianne Ngai. “Our Aesthetic Categories.” Red May Seattle. The Alice, Seattle. 14 May 2017. Lecture.

¹⁷ Dale, Goggin, Leyda, McIntyre, and Negra 5

¹⁸ Dale, Goggin, Leyda, McIntyre, and Negra 18

environment that surrounds and engulfs the viewer, each individual object is intimate in scale (Figure 7-10). This allows for a relationship between the individual viewer and the individual object that requires closeness.

Mountains, those huge, breathtaking landforms, are difficult to grasp. One can never experience the entirety of a mountain at once. Rather, we see one side of this huge form at a distance and become lost in its vastness as soon as we approach it or step onto its slope. To me, they are the embodiment of the sublime, awe-inspiring and powerfully grand. In creating soft, mountain shaped sculptures that can be embraced and contained within my hands I attempt to bring the mountains to me. Is a vulnerable mountain still powerful? Can a cute mountain exert influence on others? If I am like the soft mountain, can I be like the sublime mountain?



Figure 7.



Figure 8.



Figure 9.



Figure 10.

Image List

Figure 1. *Meeting Place*. Acrylic, thread and fabric on canvas. 2016.

Figure 2. *Untitled*. Acrylic, fabric and collage on canvas. 2016.

Figure 3. *Lonely Mountains*. Installation view. 2017.

Figure 4. *Cloud Shelf*. Mixed media sculptures on wood. 2017.

Figure 5. *Untitled (Falling or Floating)*. Acrylic on panel. 2017.

Figure 6. *Mountain Sprinkles*. Marker on cut paper. 2017.

Figure 7. Collection of ceramic objects from *Cloud Shelf*. 2017.

Figure 8. *Falling or Floating*. Installation view. 2017.

Figure 9. *Falling or Floating*. Installation view of paintings and *Mountain Sprinkles*. 2017.

Figure 10. *Tree Hugs*. Acrylic on canvas. 2017.

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