

HOW TO ENJOY NATURE

by

GEORGIA RHODES

B.F.A. MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY 2011

A Report Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art
of the University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree


MASTER OF FINE ARTS

HOW TO ENJOY NATURE

by

GEORGIA RHODES

Approved:



Michael Marshall, Major Professor

5.1.15

Date

in green paint —LawnLift grass paint, the perfect shade for your lawn—is But, on the first, Not on the second, and Too on the third. Each letter is printed on a fold of the fabric, making the viewer look closer to make the connection. This phrase is a reminder to dance that dance always, to be outspoken but not too loud, curious but not too questioning, lest you threaten the status quo. Yet there's also a flip side—that this phrase is a millennial



Album artwork for Courtney Barnett, 2015

affectation, the desire to grow up but still not pay a mortgage. It is in this way that I converse with the art of Courtney Barnett, whose song *Nobody Cares If You Don't Go To The Party* holds the chorus "I wanna go out but I wanna stay home," pointedly summarizing the want to do something with the want to do nothing at all. The track *Avant Gardner* chronicles her experience

with trying assuage the guilt she feels from staying in bed all day by a disastrous attempt at gardening: "Should've stayed in bed today / I much prefer the mundane/I take a hit from/An asthma puffer/I do it wrong/I was never good at smoking bongos/I'm having trouble breathing in." I know I should be outside, I think about it, I try and I fail.

In *Scenery*, an installation of postcards bearing famous



Truthfully, Postcard, screen print, 2015

landscapes and landmarks, I screen printed a transparent veil over the images, clouding them from view except for the phrase "Truthfully, I'm Just Checking My Phone." For some, this might resonate as shame or embarrassment, but I find this to be a simple fact of life, no more shameful than sending a postcard to a friend as some sort of proof. Social media is



Truthfully, Installation shot, 2015

the same thing, just quicker and more democratic, a new way to interact with our physical world. Yet somehow, I still feel bad.

Sometimes the landscape feels like an overwhelming idea, something I see

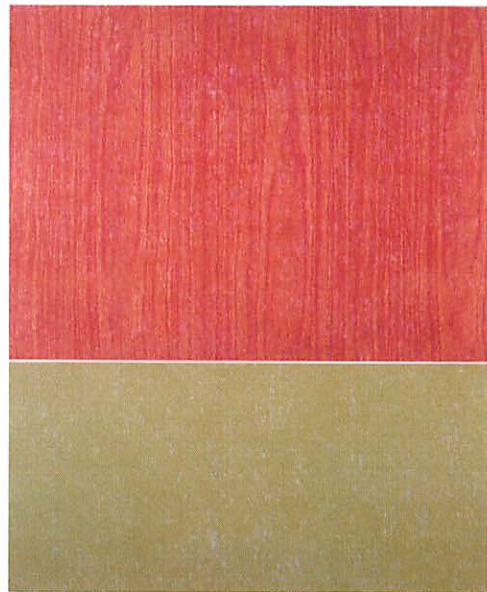


Teresita Fernández
Golden (Onyx Sky),
Gold chroming and India ink on panel, 2014

is supposed to be, and supposed to mean. Formally, there is a stripping back to the basic ideas: sky, horizon, ground. Top, middle, bottom. Both Teresita Fernández and I flatten it out, dissect its parts and put it on the wall. In *Golden (Onyx Sky)* Fernández creates a night sky, dusted with golden stars which meets the ground abruptly, carved from a wood panel and blackened with India ink. Perhaps a meditation

on the inky blackness our night allows, a time full of mystery, an allowance of intimacy in a world full of vastness. In *Landscape* I zero in and pinpoint the part of a landscape where

all the time and somehow also never see at all. I can spend all day outside but I don't know if I'm looking at it like I should, if I'm understanding it like nature intended. Like many do, I tend to try and simplify what I don't understand. It's easier to diagnose your problems when you start at the beginning. There are a lot of artists currently trying to deconstruct this heavy notion, of what the landscape



Landscape, Contact paper on panel, 2014

Everything and everyone - from teabags to picture frames and Facebook memes, tells me to be in the moment but I never am. Sometimes I think back on all the time I've wasted: endless moments just in purgatory, perennially sitting in the back of the car watching the day go by thinking about something else. I'm always years ahead until I'm years behind, wondering what I've missed. I am in a state of constant flux, seeing the sun go down and make its golden way across my lawn as I watch another episode of 30 Rock that I've already seen enough to memorize the next scene but refusing to do go outside and 'enjoy the day'. Instead of enjoying nature as prescribed, I engage with the landscape through a lens, an artistic introspection of wondering how I should.



Alison Bechdel, Still from *Dykes to Watch Out For*, 1985

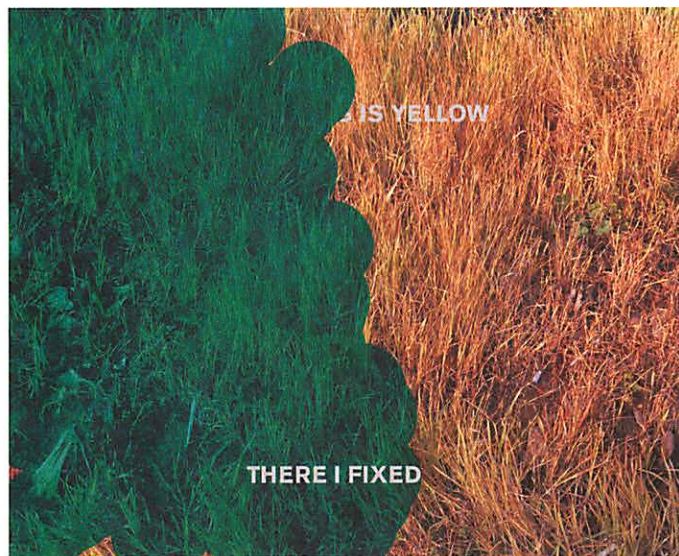
Relegated to the realm of a pastime that will most likely kill you, we often pretend to hate television, believing its rotting our brains and murdering our children's intellect. It's easy to blame television for our own shortcomings, despite the minor foible we could consider it. I would argue that to consign our so-called 'guilty-pleasure' feelings of television watching as minor foibles is a mistake. Television is an enormous part of our culture, making it important whether we like it or not. It's doubly important to the avoidance or erasure of minorities in our visual world—now you see them, now you don't. Seeing black faces and feminine mystique and same-sex sex is important, because if we don't see it, it doesn't exist. The Bechdel test was designed by artist Alison Bechdel first as a sort of game, but out of its necessity a seriousness was created and now we are able to see in plain view how many conversations, or rather how few conversations, in television and movies are from

and/or about the white male perspective. As television enters into another Golden Age, the American population is afforded many more opportunities to see what's happening in and what the real world actually looks like. It's Tatiana Maslany, acting in half a dozen roles on *Orphan Black* which completely obliterates the standards of the Bechdel Test but in the opposite way. It's in the empire that Shonda Rhimes has built (yet still is relegated to the role of the "Angry Black Woman"). It is in the new and criminally underrated *Black-ish*, which pokes fun at the rarity of seeing a successful suburban Black family by comparing the scene to looking at the lion pride in the zoo.

Working within the power of visuals, often the ability of photographs allows a person to converse about how if something isn't seen, it doesn't exist. This is what particularly draws me to photography, being able to tell stories, tell truths, lie completely—the psychological implications of reading a photograph. Photography as a medium allows the luxury of the implication of truth to get at what I'm really interested in, which is guilt and neurosis, especially as a female. As a woman, inundated with advertisements, articles and inherited expectations, I panic about almost everything. It is extremely difficult for me to work around the notion of always wanting to please, to be liked. I want things I know I'm never going to get. I want what the magazines say I can have if I buy what they are selling. This self-defeating attitude feeds back to the anger, the desire to make myself heard. Women are often at the forefront of being told "you're doing it wrong" either by a commercial letting you know you're poisoning your family with Capri-Suns, or by your boss who tells you that "you're coming on a bit strong" when you ask for that raise. Or even by your own mother who is watching you iron that blouse incorrectly. My experience, in art and in life, is no different. *How to Enjoy Nature* is essentially a meditation on the inability to do the right

thing, to be judged, quickly or inherently, and the impossibility of decision-making when being bombarded with information that is telling you, consistently, *you're doing it wrong*.

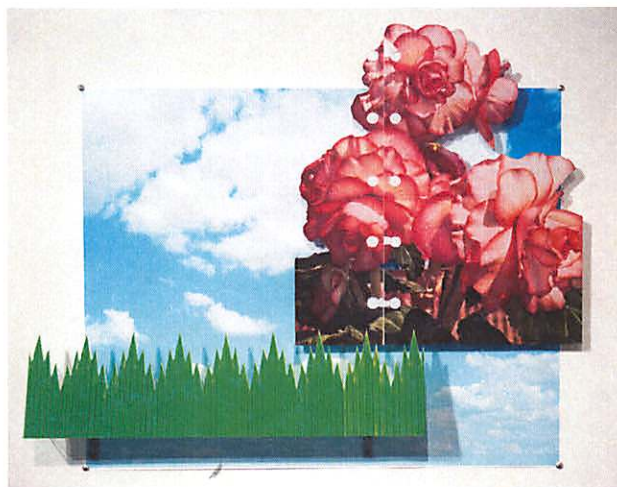
"The notion of shaming neighbors into decent behavior by example has been a persistent theme of horticulture writers and advertisers," writes Virginia Scott Jenkins, author of *The Lawn, A History of an American Obsession*. We pretend not to like television, similar as to how often we pretend to care about nature a lot more than we really do. If we loved it that much, we wouldn't be growing lawns. But when you're trying to get people to behave, to follow your code, you've got to start somewhere. I am working within the idea of landscape as a metaphor or even as a medium for this feeling of impossibility, and how that works within the idea of a judgment call of the popular mind. We've used the idea of the front lawn as a symbol for decency for over two hundred years, allowing ourselves



Grass, Electronic .Gif, 2014

to judge our neighbors on the length of a grass blade. I compare this in my artwork to a judgment on pop-culture and the idea of perfection. In the piece *Duct Tape* a photograph of grass, yellowed from the sun, drought or other elements of nature, is erased away by means

of the electronic .gif. It replaces itself with the same scene but with a green filter, allowing the grass to become green as our expectations. The text, initially reading "THIS GRASS IS YELLOW" is changed to "THERE I FIXED IT." This obsession with perfection based on perceptions of an idea is mirrored in the piece *Choose Your Own*, a sculpture made of what could be considered a perfect landscape: a large picture of a blue sky, dotted with fluffy white clouds, is attached to the wall. A large, pink rose rises off the picture, attached to an acrylic sheet. In front of the rose is an enlarged scan of sushi grass, attached to acrylic and made into a shelf, completing the idea of a landscape made up of "perfect" elements.



Choose Your Own, Archival Inkjet Prints, Acrylic Sheet, 2015

I find myself most interested in communication via humor or perhaps irony, to lead in with a laugh and then maybe make you feel uncomfortable, like viewer is not quite in on the joke. Perhaps it is the viewer who is being judged. In essence, this idea relates to that of snap judgments. Recently, in an article about the rampant, unyielding sexism present in academia, the author Miles Kimball, a professor at the University of Michigan, quotes:

"Even if, in our slow thinking, we work to avoid discrimination, it can easily creep into our fast thinking. Our snap judgments rely on all the associations

we have—from fictional television shows to news reports. They use stereotypes, both the accurate and the inaccurate, both those we would want to use and ones we find repulsive.”

This quote frames the tautology or paradox of why I argue television is important: what is seen on the screen is often what is believed, i.e. if stereotypes are being fed, they are being believed, and parroted back in every day life even if daily life happens to be a highly respected economist, as the author of the above piece is. I can think about my own habits and feel a lot of things: guilty, lazy, anti-intellectual and usually, finally, flippantly unapologetic. The crux of this idea lays in the piece *T.V. Time*, a triptych of blue-hued photographs of star trails engraved with text. The first image, taken in an hour-long episode of television, reads “JUST ONE WITH DINNER”. The following image is similar, exposed



T.V. Time, Archival Inkjet Print, Letterpress, 2015

for the same amount of time and reads “OKAY ANOTHER ONE AND THATS IT”. The last image, exposed for the remainder of an evening of succumbing to television, reads “OH FUCK IT”. The trade off for a night of television is the enjoyment of spending time outside, watching the stars move across a glowing night sky.

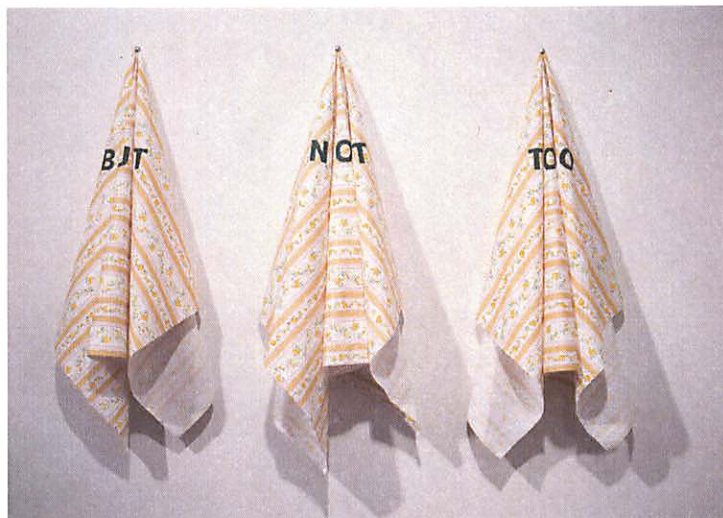
As one can imagine, this incessant dance between doing what you want, doing what you think you should be doing and doing what others think you should be doing (let's



Roadtrip, Archival Inkjet Print, 2014

Roadtrip. The bottom third of the photograph shows the passenger door and dashboard of a car, the view from the windshield showing a scene of pine trees. What you notice first is a large tree or perhaps bush of yellow flowers shoved, nonsensically, through the passenger window, coming in

from the top right of the frame. In answer to this absurdity, I do what anyone does when they feel absurd, or confused, or embarrassed—I get angry. But, it's important



But Not Too, Pillow Ticking, Lawn Lift grass paint, 2015

not get too angry. In the piece *But Not Too (Another Flawless Remix)*, three pieces of yellow pillow ticking fabric are draped and pinned to the wall with upholstery pins. Written

a tree meets the grass, a thin white line separating the two. This blocking off creates the elements of a landscape. Only the colors and painted textures offer any allusion to reality. This simplification of a balance, of a relationship I find so tenuous, allows me to contemplate and understand, perhaps from the comfort of my own couch. It is in this flattening that I am allowed to spend time with nature safely, and alone, on my own terms. Lilly McElroy flattens the landscape only to destroy it—pushing her way through a picture of a 'pastoral



Lilly McElroy
Still from *A Woman Runs Through a Pastoral Setting*
2013

setting' into the reality of her image. "It is through these performances that I attempt to develop authentic ties, to give the cliché new and personal meaning," writes McElroy in her artist statement. I think that's all any of us really want, to find a way to have an authentic experience, a real tie to ourselves, our world.

In *Jack*, a window is photographed from inside a house, looking out into a neighborhood street. Through the layering of flora that comes up near the window, the setting sun can be seen, marking the time of day often known as 'golden hour' where the leaving light sets the world ablaze in beauty. But reflected in the window is the image of



Jack, Archival Inkjet Print, 2014

Alec Baldwin's character from *30 Rock*, his expression mildly disapproving and showing the viewer that the sunset is not being viewed really, but a television episode is. This image makes a direct connection to what I feel is the simplest way in which a person might feel their

Netflix habit is ruining their life. Sometimes we laugh to keep from crying, and sometimes we skip communing with nature to watch another episode of our favorite show. The question of whether one is more important than the other is one that needs to be more carefully considered. Often the judgment immediately lands on the side of nature, a jury agreeing that to spend time outdoors is time better spent. This can be argued perhaps, by the example of Tina Fey, creator of *30 Rock* and alum of *Saturday Night Live*. The latter show being one in which she became the first female head writer. Her quick wit and razor-sharp delivery of jokes that she often wrote herself has inspired a legion of young women to find their way in male-dominated fields. Her mockery of high school cliques and stereotypes of young women was highlighted in her screenplay for 2004's *Mean Girls*, which immediately became a cult classic. To say that Tina Fey is a force is to belittle her imprint—Tina Fey helped change the world for representation in television, an impact which has no real way to record but can be assumed weaves out like a spider web, influencing all that it touches. Spending time with Fey and her comrades has been time better spent. Regardless, I feel the

guilt, even if I can rationalize my choice.

It is curious now, as to whether our choices will always be compared to what we could have done with our time, if the wrong choice was made. Will guilt and fear always be present when making simple choices, decisions between taking a walk or enjoying a show? I consider this in my artwork, raising issues that I feel are universal and ambiguous enough that I can leave a lot of room for projection. I play with the idea that something on first glance can seem negative but upon further reflection doesn't have to necessarily be that way. However the audience finds themselves oriented around my work, I want plenty of couch space for personal interpretation and examination, reflection. Whether or not they share my guilt is irrelevant; others can start from a more unapologetic standpoint if they want to examine their own ideas and habits, their own stereotypes and judgments, if they are just interested in asking themselves, *am I doing it wrong?*