

AN ESSAY ON DRESS-UP AND OTHER THINGS

BY SABRINA TARASOFF



Paul Pascal Theriault, *Purple Chakra Glasses*, 2015. © Grice Bench 2016.
Courtesy: Grice Bench, Los Angeles. Photo: Joshua White / JWPictures.com

In writing a dreamlike sequence considering and praising forms of art making involving ornament and idealism, sensuality and bricolage, Sabrina Tarasoff found inspiration in the art of Paul Pascal Theriault, Susan Cianciolo, Patrick Hill, and Jack Smith.

1

There is art that comes into being the same way that the soles of an old pair of Crocs can be painted red to look like make-believe Louboutins. That layers form in ostentatious, dazzling sprinkles of pastel, then daubs it off with glitter and magazine cut-outs, placing an emphasis on the fantasy of the object rather than its underlying logic. There is also the kind that considers itself kink, at least in so far as barely-there curves can be attenuated by nonpareil paint that adorns like costume jewellery, like purple rain or the pathos of putting together an outfit. Or, there is the kind of art that isn't art at all, but a bricolage that Wayne Koestenbaum might call fashion¹ (though I question whether he would condone me saying so). Call it, dress-up as a form of embellishment that serves to convey a mood indistinguishable from its parts, by whatever means, like Jack Smith recreating the costumed glamour of 1930s Hollywood by thrifting cheap bric-a-brac that evokes its bold colors and spectacle, or, more to the point, by taking the lofty autonomy of formal sculpture and turning it into a thrifted modernism. Preciousness is replaced by pre-scripted states of play, which may simply be acts of absorption, or trial-and-error, or humble resignation.

2

Firstly, Paul Pascal Theriault: a stay-at-home Jack Smith, pruning his proverbial gardenias to put together a costume, voguish by residential standard. The look is Maria Montez, *chez soi*. Maria Montez with two kids. With dogs. A mortgage. That is, Theriault's ideas are best at home in billowing wisteria trees, their climbing blossoms smudged on suburban houses like too much blush on the waning beauty of WASP-y women. Trellises, chaises and stakes act as garters to uphold the whole illusion. The blush—all acrylic—hides the pallidness of the everyday things the artist collects, cigarette boxes, stickers, cast gloves, and craft-store materials, all daubed in the unlikely make-up of such flowery lanes. Sifting quickly through colours and stickers, glitter and art history books, Theriault's sculptures adopt an aesthetic in the same way a child sneaking into his mother's dressing room would. Scarves and pearls summon an idea, or an ideal, and mark it through masquerade. Soaking in moon pools of buttermilk and lavender, they blend into murky combinations of pastels that pull you in like Elizabeth Taylor's violet eyes. Attention is demanded by the faux rococo of nursery ornament, the Joseff of Hollywood for quaint homes: a DIY/idyll that falls halfway between *Reefer Madness* and Stepford sartorialism. Comfortably trapped in these garden-center dreams, like Jack Smith's performers in "department-store nostalgias,"² Theriault's sculpture smother itself in the detritus of middle-class America, or its catalog-advertised gleam. It's like smoking cigarettes when your kids go to sleep. Like having a conversation about aesthetics in between two ferns. Like masturbating to some girl in a J. Crew catalog (or what that would look like if men ejaculated glitter). The visionary places, basically, described by Tom Gunning as the "Coney Island of the avant-garde,"³ only here the spectacle of make-shift is reduced to single colors that complicate by essentializing aspects of suburban scenography. The rosy glaze of housekeeping; the queasy green complexion of freshly trimmed grass. Colour becomes a costume and sculpture is getting ready to go out for the night. Except some part of it really just wants to stay home and watch TV.

3

Crafted in the cheap-and-chic couture of cigarette boxes, stickers, nail polish, paint and plastic chairs, Theriault's exhibition *Stickers* at Grice Bench in Los Angeles sets a scene for a showroom filled with sculptures that would have best been worn, back in the day, on Isabella Blow's inky head. That is, the make-believe millinery of pieces like *Pink Marlboro* (2015) or *Big Lizard* (2015) contest the best Treacy's at Ascot, or maybe in a more "L.A." example, put anything Miley Cyrus would fashion to shame. Rows and flows of cigarette packs, each guised as a respective character, line the walls; a title

suggests they may be dressed as *Philip Thicknesse*, *Isabel de Porcel*, *Maria Zambaco* (2015.) Or perhaps, tapping into the muse mentality, these are simply tokens of the hours spent smoking whilst sitting under the artist's gaze. Smoking in front of Gainsborough, Goya, Rossetti. Such indolent, aristocratic smoking must have been Blow's *modus operandi* as well, though to evoke her is merely to evoke the presence of imagination, or of surface affects that can frivolously create characters from simply adorning themselves in a certain conviction. Conviction that can, at times, appear as childish irreverence, like the doll-sized models of Nancy Holt's land art Theriault dubbed *Suns Tunnels* (2016) at What Pipeline in Detroit. The baby Holts are plastered in more cigarette boxes, Monster High stickers, and foil, with action figures of *The Walking Dead* characters lingering in front of plastic crucifix toms and mini-toothpastes. Theriault doesn't watch the show, "but Dave Kordansky," as he tells me, "loves *The Walking Dead*." The sculptures feel pre-socialized, like day-dreams without judgment. In any case, I want to summon Susan Sontag for an opinion.

4

"Childlike" and "innocent"⁴ are both words that Sontag brings up in relation to Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963). Wiz Khalifa⁵ also dropped one of them on the red carpet of the Met Ball this year, when asked by *Vogue*'s André Leon Talley what creativity means to him. In Gucci loafers and a creamy Rag & Bone suit tailored by Albert Pagano, Khalifa replied: "Being as innocent as possible."⁶ His dreadlocks, writes *vogue.com*, look "in-souciant" on the red carpet, especially when accessorized with a cloud of his brand of cannabis wafting around⁷. Marijuana couture. Khalifa's isn't exactly the kind of frivolously composed swag Sontag was getting at, yet perhaps the sartorial balance struck between formal tailoring and its blasé delivery is its commodified end result. Smith's characters are also "in-souciant" in *Normal Love*: such is the flimsy psychology of the film, as the characters' fantasies are realized through the "pasty triumphs"⁸ of their costume. Pancaked make-up like a drunken Marie Antoinette, a bit heavy on the blush and maybe the booze, bathing in excessive pearl necklaces. Not "childlike" or "innocent" as free-form virtue would have it, but rather, the result of states, as Ronald Gregg explains, "where moral rules do not apply and vision and technique have not been constrained by later schooling."⁹ So: innocent because of unlearning, because of undoing the opulence of those bored beauties of 1930s films, taking apart the scripts and sets that constructed their auras and re-imagining them through the fantastical imaginology of these studio-cum-closet environments. *Normal Love* was a party, noted Warhol, that prior to filming, devoted nights to getting into costume, putting on make-up, adjusting tchotchkes around that moon pool¹⁰. The preparation for the Met Ball must be similar to this, all prosecco and perfecting the adjustment of one's lapel, except that its placement on Khalifa's tailored suit was handpicked for success, whereas the press surrounding Smith's labors admits its "greatest role may have been to provide provision for public failure."¹¹

5

Smith on Maria Montez: "[She] was remarkable for the gracefulness of her gestures and movement. This gracefulness was a real process... Was a delight for the eye—was a genuine thing about that person—the acting was lousy but if something genuine got on film why carp about acting—which HAS to be phoney anyways—I'd RATHER HAVE atrocious acting... Her real concerns (her conviction of beauty/her beauty) were the main concern—her acting had to be secondary... Maria Montez dreamed show as effective, imagined she acted, cared for nothing but her fantasy..."¹²

6

Jack makes Maria into a work of art, not unlike how Sartre sanctifies Genet, in a process that aside from being a "delight



Paul PascalTherault, *Perseus*, 2016. © 2016 What Pipeline. Courtesy: the artist and What Pipeline, Detroit



Sabrina Tarasoff (1991 in Jyväskylä, Finland) is a curator and writer currently transitioning from Paris to Los Angeles. Alongside running the (loosely) LA-based space Bel Ami, she is currently biding her time writing about decadence, Darren Bader, sex and Sylvia Plath (not all at the same time). In addition to *Mousse*, she is a regular contributor to *Art Agenda*, *Flash Art* and *c-magazine*, and is a Gemini, with many houses in Capricorn.

From top, clockwise - Susan Cianciolo, costumes for *Jack Smith – Hamlet*, *mise-en-scène* installation view at Portikus, Frankfurt/Main, 2012-2013. Courtesy: Portikus, Frankfurt/Main. Photo: Helena Schlichting

Susan Cianciolo, costumes for *Jack Smith – Hamlet*, *mise-en-scène* / performance by Städelschule's Pure Fiction seminar imagining being trained in Reptilian Acting Technique, 2012, if God COMES to visit You, HOW will you know? (the great tetrahedral kite) installation view at Bridget Donahue, New York, 2015. © Susan Cianciolo. Courtesy: Bridget Donahue, New York. Photo: Marc BremsTatti

Susan Cianciolo, *The Source Box Kit*, 2005-2015, *Though I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not Love, I am nothing 'Corinthians'* installation view at 356 S. Mission Rd., Los Angeles, 2016. Courtesy: the artist; 356 S. Mission Rd., Los Angeles; Bridget Donahue, New York. Photo: Brica Wilcox



Top and bottom - Jack Smith, *Normal Love* (stills), 1963-1965. © Jack Smith Archive. Courtesy: Gladstone Gallery, New York / Brussels

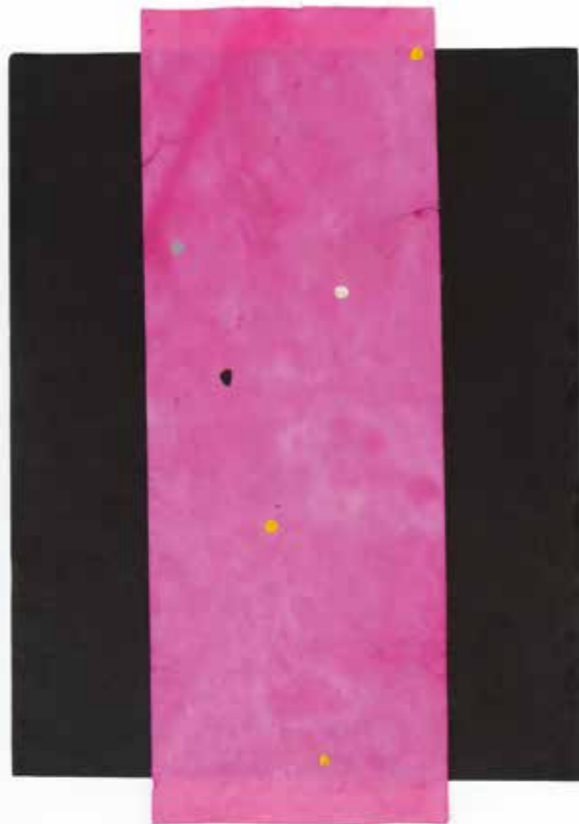
for the eye,” possessing a “genuine” quality, and inciting a mood of “conviction,” can suffice as a successful making. Of course, making oneself up to be a delight, or creating an air of authenticity, seeming convinced (of one’s own beauty, or sheer presence!) is mostly the result of careful composition, in which that razzle-dazzle (zsa zsa zsu) is summoned through the “little triumphs” of character. Of course, character can be scripted, but also comes into being through humiliation/embarrassment/trial and error/risky (or risqué) posing. You try things on for size, some of them in poor taste. Genet definitely tried it all on, deeming that what fit the worst could be the best if re-sized to seem elegant. His prose trudges along through an assumed sophistication, making all types of faux-pas seem surprisingly appeasing. Poise, not because of pretension, but pure conviction or a penchant for glossing over errors with a touch of blush. Whatever mishaps will mesmerize, as it redirects attention. Sartre was spellbound by this movement through error, sanctifying Genet’s harmonization of bad taste as a way that objects transitioned from simply being (like dresses hanging limp as fish on thrift-store racks) to appearing (i.e., that same trashy garb turned into the epitome of glamour with a little “revamping”). That is, not unlike how Montez’s trash acting was moved by way of semblances and forms (jewels that stood in for character, guises like personalities worn on a sleeve) underlined by the surprise she felt at the sight of their beauty, or more accurately, her own.

7

An apt metaphor may actually be the wardrobe malfunction. Specifically, the so-called nip-slip, which though characterized as an unintended and abrupt bareness—akin to the *barrenness* that Smith was quick to judge¹³—exposes a paradoxically loaded image. An image that speaks. The nipple, like a stain, or an unexpected accessory, rivets the eye in a way that rouses the body directly. It channels the attention of the viewer to the contrast between the tailored shapes of the garment (its success) and their collapse in the awkward peekaboo that results from its failure. In a way that total “barrenness”—either as nakedness or as clothing that stays within its expected limits—would or could not, the nip-slip reveals something about the garment’s function, which has to do with a heightened awareness of the form and materials, and how they interact on the body, but also mischievously let’s us in on the desires underlying its smothering grip. In another manner of speaking: “The zenith in the life of a garter... is generally in the loosening, not the fastening, of it.”¹⁴ The nipple is a focal point, it loosens under fabric’s slip.

8

To say what I mean: maybe a suddenly exposed nipple can be seen as a correlative for color, or as a direct means to stimulate attention, arouse thought, decorate, displace, loosen. Like the ribbon loosely laced into Patrick Hill’s recent (mini-)catalogue for *Drawings & Maquettes 2004-2016* at Susanne Hilberry, which through a pink-and-purplish stain, like a hot spill on a summer night, draws one toward an outside fantasy, an other, an elsewhere. Popsicles left on a table to melt. The lipstains on John Galliano’s F/W ’08 models. Blush over bruises. Or, more to the point, cached inside the flimsy, lilac cardboard of the cover, anonymous as any pamphlet, the ribbon acts as a portal to the exhibition itself, aptly illustrating its sculptural conviction by simply being a volant spill of color, a stain (like the nipple, I’m fascinated with its suddenness) which elsewhere one might try to layer in garments or pancake with make-up. As a decorative touch, it affixes meaning, even where materiality is absent; as an image, it is natural kink. The ribbon rests in the book like a flaccid lover imprinted with whatever bruises and mouths were laid upon it. (Colors like clothing, thrifted off lips, lying loosely around). More than the binding, it restricts, even in its limp ease—more filmy than Montez—as it ties the content together in its performative fantasies. The ribbon is blasé about this satisfaction because: it has already hap-



Patrick Hill, *Floating World II*, 2013. © Patrick Hill. Courtesy: Susanne Hilberry Gallery, Detroit



Patrick Hill, *Conch*, 2015. © Patrick Hill. Courtesy: Susanne Hilberry Gallery, Detroit

pened/contentment lingers/emotional release/this silence is sartorial, which feels like an air of authority. Presumption can be erotic, beautiful. This goes for Hill’s sculptures, too: the soft folds of paper and drywall, thin wood, suggest that the rigid, erect qualities of modernism have hit their zenith, sighed their satisfaction. Hill seizes this moment of loosening, taking its pleasures and perverting them, like thrifted modernism—it drags at our desire, like cheap fantasies, like small ribbons in a book.

9

Turn to page two of Patrick Hill’s: a hovering collage of colors is cut to form a fat cross, rose-pink over squid-black, and marked ever so scarcely with nonpareils of paint. The title, *Floating World II* (2013), suggests it’s a *ukiyo* stripped of all imagery. What is left is its wit, extravagance, style, pleasure, all fleshy, but lingering in these rice-paper panels, almost essence-like. The glowing scroll of rose, its pastel freckles. Hill’s process could consist of simply looking at things (“delights for the eye,” something “genuine”) and figuring out how they set a mood, even by referring to what is entirely absent, or barely there. Like perfumers trying to solve the mystery of flowers that “implacably refuse to surrender”¹⁵ their scents, making their “pure” extraction virtually impossible unless recreated as a ghost or fiction in a lab. It is abstraction for the nose that does its best to fake notes, stimulate ideas, and summon images of what it holds bottled. Hill’s sculptures re-enact a similar process of extraction (sometimes melodramatically, sometimes with that SoCal laissez-faire I hear so much about), addressing the lofty ideals of modernism precisely by ridding it of its assumed purity, loosening it into a space of pleasure. They recall the scents of Hepworth, Smith, Morris. On a shelf in the exhibition, some paper is scrunched together with drywall, dyed in pastel stains that create curves and crevices, and called a *Conch* (2015). It enacts attributes of an “ideal” sculpture, assuming its prescribed poise in a bric-a-brac makeover of provisional materials.

10

Lastly, page three, four: citrine spills, like tar stains from cigarettes, turn out to be urine and dye. The smoky piss-stains spill on the paper like life’s humdrum; think of the kind of quiet negotiation (looking? touching?) that goes into selecting materials and making them embrace and kiss and spill and wave; or maybe consider the inky patterns to be studio rumination, which is to say they trace the mind’s equal desire to take a piss or stay to figure something out. Sometime’s there’s compromise.

11

“Dear Susan,” writes Jutta Koether in a letter: “That was a wonderful event you made happen last night... The draperies, wraps, trains... not in stiff order but woven together by free movement lingering women and children, yet somehow dancing slowly together. Cloth and clothes in a union... they reminded me of early sort of poetic abstractions, like the feel of Kandinsky paintings.”¹⁶

12

Susan Cianciolo’s practice is an example of compromise, which results from what we could call the sometimes complicated construction of getting dressed in the morning. Borrowing bits and pieces of culture, religion, maybe architecture, she harmonizes the odd and eclectic into ensembles that seem spiritually guided, self-actualized. In early 2016, upon seeing her exhibition *Though I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not Love, I am nothing* ‘Corinthians’ at 356 S. Mission Rd., I wrote: “That the art world acts in pious congregation is hardly new to those whom have watched it for a while, and its ironic restaging as a nativity scene with socks, fabric samples and quilts feels like an interpellation from fashion come a decade late. However, sometimes the Word takes time to travel,

and—stepping off art’s high horse for just one second to listen to it—maybe Cianciolo’s is a humbling lesson suggesting that we should pay more attention to what is in front of us. After all, love is patient and kind and all that, even if art isn’t (at least all of the time).”¹⁷ I repent, at least in part. Firstly, because I’d like to retract irony from this equation. Having mused on her garments for a while, I realize that Cianciolo—more than anyone I can think of—resists the hopeless ironies the rest of fashion seems wrapped in. The collections sample historical moods, but like flipping through the racks of a vintage store, find unexpected anachronisms that are intuitively, even nonchalantly misplaced. No biggie. Second, I’m growing more and more convinced that using the word “fashion” to describe Cianciolo’s participation in culture may be flippant; although she employs techniques that pertain to such prescriptions, her intentions seem far from similar. Rather, like washing one’s hands in the waters of Lourdes, Cianciolo’s couture is a cleansing. It washes away the burden of clear-cut concept, allowing instead for a starry-eyed, insatiable desire to create characters of oneself to emerge. Rather than catering to the precision of finish, Cianciolo’s tailoring happens by collaging fabric to fake shapes. I feel refreshed looking at them: they ask to be looked at from multiple vantage points, not just the runway. They are all nip-slip. The costumes she did for *Jack Smith – Hamlet: Mise-en-Scène* at Portikus in Frankfurt, for example, point to places, people, and actions without worrying about accuracy. They evoke the idea of a time, of a poetics, through simple, but persuasively decadent gestures. Whatever historicity there is in “costume”—a better term than fashion, less impatient—is cleansed by her ability to irradiate precisely those essential moments that evoke meaning. In her *Hamlet*, I’m riveted by hand-painted shoes and baby pink leggings; they bathe in moon pools of visuality. Costume’s appositeness to sculpture, playing some primal version of itself.

- 1 Wayne Koestenbaum, “Thriftling” in *Cleavage*, (New York: Ballantine Books: 2000) 31.
- 2 Pablo Bronstein, interview by Timothy Hull, *Museo*, www.museomagazine.com/PABLO-BRONSTEIN.
- 3 Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” in *Early Cinema: Space-Frame-Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 57.
- 4 Susan Sontag, in “Jack Smith’s Flaming Creatures” in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux), 1966.
- 5 Wiz Khalifa is a rapper and weed entrepreneur.
- 6 Marjon Carlos, “Wiz Khalifa’s Met Gala Prep Is as Cool as His Custom Suit” in *Vogue*, www.vogue.com/13432717/wiz-khalifa-rag-bone-menswear-suiting-red-carpet-met-gala-2016/.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Isla Leaver-Yap, “What is *Normal Love*?” www.walker-art.org/collections/publications/art-expanded/what-is-normal-love/.
- 9 Ronald Gregg, “Fashion, Thrift Stores and the Space of Pleasure in 1960s Queer Underground Film” in *Birds of Paradise: Costume as Cinematic Spectacle*, ed. Marketa Uhlirva (New York: Wallflower Press, 2014), 294.
- 10 Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol ’60s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 32.
- 11 Press release, Gladstone Gallery, www.gladstonegallery.com/exhibition/1015/press.
- 12 Jack Smith, “The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez,” in *Meet Me At the Bottom of the Pool*, ed. J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell (New York/London: High Risk, 1997), 25.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Isak Dinesen, “The Deluge at Nordernay,” in *Seven Gothic Tales* (New York City: Random House, 1934), 14.
- 15 Chandler Burr, “Ghost Flowers” in *The New York Times* mobile.nytimes.com/2007/02/25/style/tmagazine/25t-ghost.html
- 16 Jutta Koether, “A letter from Jutta Koether to Susan Cianciolo,” in *Here and There*, no. 3 (Spring 2003).
- 17 Sabrina Tarasoff, “Though I Have All Faith so as to Remove Mountains but Have Not Love I Am Nothing ‘Corinthians’ Exhibition at 356 Mission Los Angeles,” Purple, purple.fr/diarysusan-cianciolo-though-i-have-all-faith-so-as-to-remove-mountains-but-have-not-love-i-am-nothing-corinthians-exhibition-at-356-mission-los-angeles/.

