LET'S PLAN OUR ESCAPE

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INTRODUCTION

I have one sister, Jenny, and most of our childhood was spent living in the country. With few other peers nearby to play with, we were best friends. Over time, we grew to be a very imaginative duo. I have many memories of playing pretend. It started early on.

My earliest recollection of this activity is a happy one that is most likely triggered by a photograph of Jenny and myself. We are standing in front of the fireplace. Jenny’s arm is around my shoulder and mine is around her back. We are both smiling. The photograph provides a three quarter view. We are each wearing a ruffled bonnet. Under Jenny’s is a red yarn wig. The bonnets are tightly tied around our chins. Our faces are decorated with exaggerated freckles in a classic three points in a triangle fashion. We are wearing red, long sleeved frocks overlaid with white jumpers that have green diamond appliqués around the waist. Underneath these rompers we are sporting white knickers. Some may think that we are supposed to be Raggedy Ann, but those in the know (people, especially women, born in the mid 70s to early 80s) would recognize the garb as belonging to Strawberry Shortcake. Our mom fashioned these costumes for us on her sewing machine. She always nurtured and fostered our desire to pretend to be other characters or people and the creativity that came out of it.

I imagine that most children play pretend, but I find it hard to believe that many do to the extent that my sister and I did. For instance, I remember one time in particular where we were pretending to be Rob and Fab of Milli Vanilli fame for many weeks. During that time we went on a camping trip with our dad and stepmother. For some reason we had it in our heads that Rob and Fab hailed from Jamaica (most likely their long locks). For days we talked with Jamaican accents—around the fire, at the beach, walking the dog, in the tent.
Our father became furious. He lashed out in anger begging us to stop carrying on with our behavior. We were forbidden from speaking in Jamaican accents for the duration of the trip. I don’t recall for certain, but I imagine that we remedied the situation by pretending to be someone different, someone American. He would never know. People usually didn’t.

I remember carrying out the pretending into my time away from my sister, knowing in the back of my head that we had made a pact to be so and so for an extended period of time. It always provided a bit of relief to know that although I was in school (for example) that I wasn’t like the others. I was different. I was someone else. Reflecting upon these experiences as an adult leaves me with many questions. Is this behavior healthy? Was there something about myself that I didn’t like? Was I trying to escape the reality of life or the reality of self? All that I have read about pretend play indicates that it is a positive behavior that strengthens many skills. Surely I must have developed many skills (haha), because my sister and I carried on these activities well into our teens, perhaps longer.

Later on, the desire to escape reality through pretend play always coincided with a desire to go back in time, or return to innocence. I find that throughout my adult life I have continued this way of thinking. I escape the present by looking to the past with fondness and imagine the future as a recreation of elements from this deceptive recollection.

ARTISTIC PRACTICE

As an artist, the work that I make is often an effort to understand these behaviors. I am interested in recreating an idea, something that is neither here nor there, and making it a reality—something tangible. Themes of past work have included: memory, thought process, time, nostalgia, role-playing, humor, innocence, and guilt. To express these ideas
I often utilize pre-existing imagery and content from personal belongings, children’s books, movies, and television.

I often describe my work using terms or phrases such as nostalgia, longing, the illusory nature of memory and imagination. My work is a reflection of self. I have a desire to escape and I am nostalgic, which results in melancholy.

Escapism is defined as the tendency to seek, or the practice of seeking, distraction from what normally has to be endured.¹ I am caught in a constant process of attempting to recreate the past while imagining the future, both of which become unattainable, idealized visions that act as a diversion from engaging with the present and ultimately lead to unmet expectations. Throughout time, nostalgia has been thought of as a disease. In his 1688 medical dissertation, Johannes Hofer described nostalgia as “the sad mood originating from the desire for return to one’s native land.” Nostalgia caused those afflicted to lose touch with the present. Afflicted patients often confused both past and present and real and imaginary events.² Additionally, the nostalgic had an amazing capacity for remembering sensations, tastes, sounds, and smells…³ Melancholy, or melancholia, was also once classified as a disease. “It produced such physical and emotional symptoms as vertigo, much wit, headache, much waking, rumbling in the guts, troublesome dreams, heaviness of heart, continuous fear, sorrow, discontent, superfluous cares and anxiety.”⁴ “Often mistaken for a mere misanthrope, the melancholic was in fact a utopian dreamer who had higher hopes for humanity.”⁵ It is uncanny to reflect upon these age-old medical descriptions because I find so many aspects myself in them. It is suggested that a homeopathic

³ Ibid., 4.
⁴ Ibid., 5.
⁵ Ibid.
treatment for such maladies is a metaphorical journey. Creating a body of artwork seems like a good opportunity to take such a journey.

**CURRENT EXPLORATION**

Recently, I have explored sense of place and the paradox of escapism by using a mixed media approach to create an installation that incorporates my love of memory and nostalgia with my vision for the future. Through this research I gain further understanding of this longing while attempting to connect myself with the present through artistic process and creation. I have constructed a campsite to act as a metaphor for both escapism and the melancholy of longing. The campsite, designed to allow for a “metaphorical journey”, also functions as a therapeutic device for dealing with the loss of my father. Several years ago he made the decision to end his life. As a memorial to his death, each Father’s Day since his passing, my sister and I have made a camping trip. We travel to the same State Park that our dad would take us to when we were younger. While there we reminisce, almost as if pretending to be our past selves, in an attempt to recreate our experience with our father. The installation is meant to be the ultimate incarnation of these combined experiences.

**DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS**

Titled “Let’s Plan Our Escape,” the installation is comprised of elements that call to attention its constructed nature, exemplifying the illusory nature of the perception of reality. Through the combination of three-dimensional imagery and text, humor, metaphor, and irony become devices for the critical analysis of the complexities of not only my personal history, but also understanding my place in contemporary culture. In this culminating work, comedy and sincerity coexist with a level of ambiguity, which creates pause for this

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6 ibid., 14.
contemplation. This collection is comprised of two components: memorabilia—recreations of actual and imagined ephemera, and broken narrative—personal thoughts and stories.

Upon entering the gallery, the viewer is confronted with a darkened space. An organic boundary of artificial trees envelopes the installation, making it seem more intimate and enclosed. The floor is covered with green indoor/outdoor carpeting. The sound of mechanical crickets and a crackling fire repeats in the background. The scents of campfire smoke and pine needles fill the air. Immediately, it is evident that you have stepped into a nighttime camping scene. The campsite consists of a tent, a campfire, and a canoe near the shore. Low light is used to indicate that it is late. Key elements are lit with colored lights, much like lighting designed for the stage, to create a sense of drama, make believe, and fantasy. The cool tone of the ceiling lights approximates the coolness of the nighttime sky. Conversely, out of the fire shoots a glow of warm red light. The tent is lit from the interior by a television to indicate a presence. Along the ground there are many pine needles and pinecones, an attempt at providing both a tactile and olfactory sensory trigger. Centered above this setting is a flashing neon sign that reads, “Let’s Plan Our Escape.”

“SHIP OF FOOLS”

In this impressionistic scene, a canoe acts as one of the main characters. Perhaps this vessel itself best exemplifies the paradox of escape. The life-sized watercraft is
rendered useless due to the fact that it is constructed from felt, foam, and thread. This is a ship that will get you nowhere fast. The form is floppy and lifeless. Additionally, it is docked at an artificial (plastic and glowing) suggestion of a body of water. This defeated vessel, complete with floppy oars and lifejackets, is intended to function as a self-portrait, representing my unfulfilled desires to commune with nature. Misguided dreams of escaping into arcadia are confronted by reality, which in turn refutes their actualization.

Why do we see nature as a refuge from the drudgery of our daily lives? When I recollect past camping trips, or mini escapes into nature, it is revealed that the grass is not always greener on the other side. Arguments over pitching the tent, mosquitoes, leaking shelter, finicky weather, poison ivy, sunburns, sand in the butt crack, muddy shoes from launching the boat, and other natural phenomenon often lead to discontent. However, these realities do not prevent me from longing to rusticate. I, like my father before me, want to live in the middle of nowhere. The animals will be my friends. For quite some time I have dreamed of owning a canoe. With said canoe I would paddle old, hidden rivers in the warmth of the sunshine, exploring the land like a modern day Sacajawea. I have realized this wish for a water vessel by constructing its analogue, the defeated canoe—"Ship of Fools."

Originally I had planned on naming the ship “Heartbreak.” After in depth contemplation, I became concerned that the audience would view the scene purely based on the romantic sense of the word. Although this portion of the installation is partially
inspired by personal relationships, this is not intended to be the main focus of the exploration. One day I came across the phrase “ship of fools.” I immediately thought of my canoe. I don’t recall if I heard it in a song or read it in a book, but I decided to research the phrase; what I found was fitting. A quick internet search reveals that many famous recording artists have written songs around this theme: Erasure, Robert Plant, The Doors, World Party, Bob Seger, Grateful Dead, Soul Asylum, John Cale, Scorpions, and my personal favorite, Yngwie Malmsteen. This led me to believe that this name would allow an access point for the audience. The allegory of the ship of fools has also recurred throughout western art history. Hieronymus Bosch’s painting, “Ship of Fools.” is based on Sebastian Brant’s late fifteenth century book, Narrenschiff (Ship of Fools). Brant’s satirical allegory tells the story of a ship of fools that sets sail for the paradise of fools, a destination that is unknown. Similarly, Bosch’s painting depicts a group of revelers (eating, drinking, playing music, swimming in the nude) aimlessly adrift in a small boat. “Fools are prey…to boundless desire, wild gesticulation, mood swings and an infinite capacity for excitement and agitation.” In this instance the ship acts as a metaphor for escapism. I don’t want to sail on the ship of fools for the rest of my life. This constant longing to escape the things that I don’t enjoy in life in order to find a non-existent utopia results in heartbreak. Is this something that my Dad experienced as well?

“This search for the non-existent utopia is evidenced in the piece “Gullible.” It is a fishing pole reminiscent of a child’s wooden toy. Hanging from a fluorescent pink line are white wooden letters that spell out G-U-L-L-I-B-L-E.”

This fishing pole is suspended from the ceiling near the canoe as if a non-existent fisherman is operating it. The white letters glow in the rays of a black light. The scene is rather ghastly, almost uncanny. “The uncanny is such a powerfully distressing feeling because it combines the aesthetic with the psychological, giving the sensation of dread or horror a compelling literary or visual form.” If not suspended or eerily lit, it is likely that the fishing pole would not evoke such a psychological reaction. The piece is mysterious, yet easily comprehended. We have been reeled in “hook, line, and sinker.” True happiness and idyllic living are naïve ideals that are realistically unattainable.

THE FIRE PIT

To the right of the shoreline lies the fire pit. It is constructed of an electric fireplace (much like one from my childhood home), logs, and papier-mâché rocks. The fire contains both a glowing orange light source and a motorized apparatus that brushes against the plastic “coals” to create a crackling sound. The smell of campfire smoke mysteriously emanates from this artificial representation.

Five camp stools are placed in a circle around the fire. They are simply constructed of wood and fabric to be facsimiles of a hunting stool that my dad used when I was a child. Each stool’s seat is topped with a fringed cushion that is screenprinted with a word or phrase: WE DECIDE…WHICH…IS RIGHT…AND WHICH…IS AN ILLUSION. To the

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viewer it may be unclear where the message begins and ends. This ambiguousness demands contemplation on part of the audience. With each element of the scene designed to be pseudo functional and interactive, the fire is inviting you to sit down. Hanging over a handcrafted felled limb rack’s now lifeless top branch is a “towel” that reads from one side: LIFE’S A BEACH, and the other: THEN YOU DIE. Next to one of the stools lies a handcrafted crate that contains individual works that are intended to be handled by adventurous audience members. “The Foxfire Book” is an example of the items contained within. Modeled after the popular 1970s guide to Appalachian life, this book reads slightly differently: “The Foxfire Book--wishful thinking, log cabin building, midwestern crafts and vegan foods, planting by the signs, animal watching, moonshining, and other affairs of plain living.” These elements of sustainability are some things that I am looking forward to in the future with both naïveté and skepticism. I want to live the simple life, but who knew the simple life would require so much hard work? Leaning against the crate is an interactive shotgun with an engraved metal plate that reads, “WHO’S THE HUNTER? WHO’S THE GAME?” This item resembles a wooden toy, but symbolizes the means of my father’s demise. This combination of joy and sorrow is exhibited throughout the entire installation.

Hanging above the fire is a flashing neon sign; it reads “LET’S PLAN OUR ESCAPE.” The flashing pulse of light creates a sense of tension and urgency. This
advertising element is used to emphasize the commoditization of life experience. Hurry up and have an experience before it's too late, or, yes, you too can achieve happiness by experiencing the American rite of passage known as civilized camping.

THE TENT

Beyond the fire is the shelter of the tent. The tent interior is not entirely accessible to the audience, although it becomes somewhat of a focal point because it is lit from within.

Just as the canoe is a self-portrait, the same can be said of the tent. The installation is very personal. The things that are not revealed to the audience are housed within the safety of the tent. The tent is modeled after a two-person pup tent that my sister and I would share with the dog (fitting) when we would go camping with our dad. I am sure we spent a number of nights sharing secrets in Jamaican accents in this sleeping space. This lit shell serves as an actualization of my memories of time spent with my sister while camping. The light in the tent, which is emanated by a television, could be compared to that of a lighthouse. Just as lighthouses are a symbol of safety or a safe haven, they are also seen
as lonely or isolated structures. Although I will long keep the memories of being young and having fun with my sister, and I (we) struggle to recreate them in the present, those moments will never return.

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

As an artist, I understand the importance of research as a means of locating movements and other artists whose work I find inspirational or correlative to a particular body of personal work. The work of Sue de Beer, a young, contemporary artist, has been exhibited internationally and featured in the 2004 Whitney Biennial. In a 2007 interview, Ken Pratt describes the complexities of de Beer’s work: [It seems as if it comes from a] “distressed internal state and yet my perception of you -and the work- are layers of serious discourse peppered with a deeply bemused dark humour.” De Beer’s work is often described by critics as immature; not only because of its teen angst based content, but also because of the appearance or aesthetic of the sets, props, and installations that are constructed for her videos. They are crude and almost child-like or naïve in appearance. I believe that both of these characteristics are exhibited in “LET’S PLAN OUR ESCAPE.” I want the work to appear simple and accessible at first glance. Dark or deadpan humor is used as an act of subversion to inspire further contemplation. Is it real? Is it not? Is it serious? Is it a joke? I like the idea of everything being a bit mysterious or unclear. This confusion is a reflection of my own feelings on the topics at hand. One of de Beer’s seminal works is a video installation titled, “Black Sun.” “Black Sun’s title is taken from French philosopher Julia Kristeva's essay collection (subtitled Depression and Melancholia), which

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discusses, among other things, the yearning sadness that drives us to find a substitute love object to compensate for a loss or wound. “LET’S PLAN OUR ESCAPE” is an analysis of this desire. What is missing that must be replaced? Is it something as obvious as a father figure, a detachment from nature, or is it a general malaise toward contemporary society? How does one return to innocence when it isn’t real or cannot be found in one’s lifetime? In any case, it is oddly comforting to know that there are well known exhibiting artists, such as Sue de Beer, with similar backgrounds and interests making work that, as a young(ish) woman, I can relate to. Although it is not my desire to be derivative, it is always worthy to find artists who are making work that corresponds to my own. It allows for the opportunity to examine both works in a newly informed light.

There is a trend in contemporary art, as is referenced by a recent issue of Art Lies magazine, to return to the rural. Art is no longer reserved for the cosmopolitan. Many artists come from rural roots, as is the case for myself. I don’t believe that my own desire to examine ideas of nature as a therapeutic device to be a symptom of a

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paradigm shift in contemporary art, but possibly a symptom of this place in time. It seems fitting in these uncertain economic times to revisit, not only “simpler” ways of living, but also the nostalgia of the road trip and camping. A look through any current camping magazine reveals advertisements that encourage readers to “recapture the magic of road trips past.”

“LET’S PLAN OUR ESCAPE” is my way of doing just that. Although I am not naïve enough to believe that viewers will come away from this body of work with a complete understanding of the personal history involved, I do believe that they will bring to it and apply their own personal experiences. Taking the objects common to the traditional campsite and recontextualizing them in the gallery setting allows for further rumination on the implications of our relationship to nature as humans and our seemingly innate desire to seek out the rural as a place of escape from everyday life.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, I found both the creative process and experience of the completed installation to be cathartic. Over time, I became more honest with myself, and therefore the audience, about the impetus for the work. Through the use of campsite imagery I am telling a personal story, one that has no resolve. By creating a concrete representation of a situation, I am hoping to alleviate my yearning to understand an irrecoverable past, while finding solace in the fact that some questions have no answers.

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Works Cited


Image List

5. “Let’s Plan Our Escape” Neon, flashing transformer. 42 x 24”.