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## **Everyone Does Weird Shit When No One Is Looking: The Shared American Experience, Absurdism & the Mundane**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this thesis paper is to describe my current studio practice and research. Using humor and play, I invite the reader to question the reality of what it means to be a contemporary American. Through shared and personal experience, I examine the dualities between adolescence and the misconceptions of adulthood. I describe my use of absurdism, participation and material choice to discuss our culture of affirmation and distraction. Finally, I conclude that there is a lot of humor and uselessness to be found in the mundane.

Everyone Does Weird Shit When No One Is Looking: The Shared American Experience,  
Absurdism & the Mundane

by

Candice Malyn Corgan

BFA, Southeast Missouri State University, 2013

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

Syracuse University  
May 2019

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## SHITTY PARTY

The older I get, the more I become aware of what I thought being an adult should be, is far from that. I had the belief that with age things would progressively get better and better. I was wrong. In the series *Shitty Party*, I use ordinary party supplies to create objects and images that examine misconceptions about adulthood. Using humor and play, I invite the viewer to question the realities of what life as a contemporary American actually is. Through everyday materials, DIY construction and too many steps to get to a simple gesture, my work creates a dueling dialog of optimism and bleakness; an analysis of iconic good ole' American fun. Questioning what is truly to be celebrated.

Inherently, humans search for meaning in their existence. We want answers to the daunting existential questions of how or why? As an artist, I search for meaning in nothing. Something not far from what we all do, search for meaning in a meaningless universe. Absurdism is the acceptance of this. Creating meaning for one's own life and knowing that none of it matters in the end.<sup>1</sup> But not necessarily in a nihilistic way; more in a thoughtful or useful manner. In my work, I look to things that don't matter - or do matter but shouldn't - and use collective experience to critique the Contemporary American actuality. An unveiling of it's pointless concerns and distractions; questioning what truly should matter, but ultimately won't help.

*The world is fucked, to say the least, but at least we have ways to make ourselves useless.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nagel argues that "*it does not matter now that in a million years nothing we do now will matter.*" Our actions now will not be relevant then, so naturally they do not matter now. Nagel, Thomas. "The Absurd." *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20 (1971): 716.

<sup>2</sup> Not a quote, just a side rant. Additional commentary. Me, now, 2019.

Do you remember the simplest joys of innocence? The pure excitement from a new experience. To have no real-world woes. I'm sure you remember how exciting it was to have or go to a birthday party. Paper decorations and half inflated balloons set the stage for an awesome break from the mundane. Things we use once and then toss out. The one day out of the year that was all yours. I remember counting down the days. Three months out I would be like "Hey, guess what? 92 days until my birthday, ya'll." Birthdays were the best. When I was eight, I was lucky enough to have a party at *Chuck E. Cheese*. Specifically, I remember being amped up about getting to decorate my cake while my friends watched and waited. It was a thing they did. Something I anticipated after going to a few parties there before. The cake was basic, round and white, but they let you decorate it. Although, the only color frosting to decorate with was a translucent red gel like substance you squeezed from a plastic bottle. The cake wasn't even that big or impressive or probably even that distinct in flavor. It was amazing.



Research/found image, not me, but you get the idea.

In the background was that shitty animatronic band of trademark characters, who's bodies twisted and rocked back and forth. There was always one creepy character with a lazy, delayed eye. You got to run around, scream, eat crappy pizza, play arcade games. They gave you a plastic clip on token dispenser that attached to your waist like a utility belt. You used those

tokens to play games, which gave you tickets based on how well you did. If you got enough of those tickets you could cash them in for cheap plastic toys. A young, formative experience that allowed small children to practice their social and economic transactional skills in a playful setting. It was everything an American child could ask for in a party establishment - looking back there were some sad truths about what the future would hold.



Chuck E. Cheese research images: Munch's Make Believe Band, pizza, token dispenser

*“Blow out your candles and make a wish.” A lie. A ritual.*

As an adult, birthdays from a distance seems like great fun. You have hope. You're an adult now, you can do whatever you want. Maybe there will be a party. Perhaps a day alone doing everything you want. That can be amazing. You build anticipation. But then the day comes, and there are no fireworks. No warm, fuzzy feelings. You don't wake up early with excitement in your eyes. You expect the world to give you something that never comes. Although we still cling to the fantasy, as an adult, birthdays are lackluster. Unless there is some grand gesture - a wild surprise party - but even then, really you probably just want to go home. Unless it's at your house, and then you hope people don't stay too late. Birthdays as an adult are just never the same. And maybe the memory is just a fantasy. Distorted. Unobtainable. But really it seems like all aspects of adulting relate to this false sense of expectations. A build-up of hope, only to be crushed by reality. A prank that somehow gets you every year around the same time.



Through sound and persuasion, I invite the audience to interact with *Solitary Surprise*, a participatory sculpture comprised of an air compressor, a foot pedal, plastic tubing and blowout party noisemakers. The jarring hum of the air compressor grabs the participants attention, offering an understanding of how the piece works. To make assumptions. And even though they have an idea of what will happen, there is a moment of anticipation. Surprise even. By stepping on the foot pedal, thirteen noisemakers blow out mimicking the experience of a surprise party with only yourself. When released, the noisemakers in an unsynchronized manner, roll back into themselves. There is no noise from the party favors. The only noise is the obnoxious sound of an air compressor. This interaction plays on excitement and expectations. While you get a joyful interaction, there is still a sense of sadness. Isolation. Loneliness. A lacking in what was expected to come. A feeling of let down that there is no party sound, but at least you can orchestrate the colorful things move.



Candice Corgan, *Solitary Surprise*, air compressor, foot pedal, plastic tubing, blow out party noisemakers, variable dimensions

## **Failed Expectations...Things Make Us Feel Good**

The contemporary American young adult has grown up with similar set of expectations about how their life “should” play out. A collective feeling like we have been lied to about what adulthood will be. A deception of standard future expectations. We grew up alongside the rise of the internet, were fed bogus expectations about the future and left feeling cheated. A generation, like many, that were told that life only gets better and then it just plateaus. At a very young age, we are told the key to success and happiness is to go to college, get a degree and get an amazing job. Maybe have a family. Then you graduate, jobs are few and far between and now you have debt that will take at least a couple of decades to pay off. And for what? To work a meaningless job. To have a mundane routine. To get excited about buying a fancy coffee table and pissed when we stub our toe on it.<sup>3</sup>

*Is this really all life has to offer? A nine-to-five and device to distract ourselves with.*

Along with *Solitary Surprise*, *Pizza Truck* is a sensory sculpture that evokes smell and denial. A hand truck is placed in a gallery with three pizza boxes bungee strapped vertically. The pizza and boxes are replenished daily, so that the smell of hot, fresh pizza fills the room. Without seeing the physical pizza, you can smell its aroma, see the grease soaking through the bottom of the boxes and imagine how sad that pizza must actually look tilted on its side. Withholding vision and taste, *Pizza Truck* gives the audience a false sense of hope and desire. A feeling that

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<sup>3</sup> A “chain of justification,” to “an elaborate journey, leading nowhere.” What does it matter when we are all going to die one day anyway. “...one studies and works to earn money to pay for clothing, housing, entertainment, food, to sustain oneself from year to year, perhaps to support a family and pursue a career - but to what final end?” Nagel, “The Absurd,” 717.

we will be rewarded, but a reality that nothing is a guarantee. Using absurd humor, the combination of these everyday materials create a dialog of wanting what we can't have.<sup>4</sup>



Candice Corgan, *Pizza Truck*, hand truck, pizza, cardboard, bungee straps, smell

The meaning of life is even more meaningless than ever. We login, engage while we disengage, and we filter out what we don't want to hear. Expectations lead us to believe we must spend our lives working hard, getting an education before we know what we really want to do with our lives and then as soon as we graduate we should get "the dream job" so we can work from our early twenties until we die. We are led to believe that we must make as much money as

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<sup>4</sup> "Something absurd... must be present in whatever is to raise a hearty convulsive laugh. Laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing." Kant, Immanuel. *Kant's Critique of Judgement*. Translated by J. H. Bernard. 2nd ed. London: Macmillan, 1914. 161.

possible. Money buys us things. Things are nice. We can show those things to other people. Those people will see our status by the current value of those things. And then those things go out of date, out of style, so we will need to save up more money to get the next thing. We throw things out before they are even useless.<sup>5</sup> Or maybe we don't want things, but we have to break our backs our entire lives to support our family. Spend more time away from them to help care for the ones we love. All of this is neat in all, but it's 2019, is this really all life has going for it. Is working your life away worth the time we have allotted?

In my recent work, I created a series of graphic, printed images. Combining common American food with the pleasures of adulthood, *Ashtray* is an oversize screenprint of a cigarette put out on a partially eaten slice of pepperoni pizza. Desire and disgust contend. The image is isolated and has a photographic quality. There is an absurd care to such a seemingly meaningless image. But something so grand. The audience can create their own narrative as to what events lead to such a sad, yet relatable arrangement. Maybe someone was in a hurry and only have time for a bite and a quick smoke. Maybe they were at a gathering with great drinks and conversation, so much so that they used a nearby plate to discard their waste. Or maybe something entirely different.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, everyone's favorite, *Kraft Singles Slice*, a print of America's beloved grilled cheese ingredient. A childhood cherished memory that is as an adult is absolutely disgusting, but somehow too nostalgic to deny its importance. Both of these images deal with the push and pull between adolescence and adulthood, but also the bizarre allure in convenience of the American consumerist. The processed crap we all grew up with and the unveiling that has left us questioning its importance as an adult.

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<sup>5</sup> "... the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt." Nagel, "The Absurd," 718.

<sup>6</sup> "...laughter constitutes an appropriate response to the 'absurd' tension between human aspiration and disappointment." Plant, Bob. "Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter." *Philosophy* 84, no. 327 (January 2009): 115.



Candice Corgan, *Kraft Singles Slice*, CMYK screenprint, 18" x 19"

*We are mindless zombies, starved of attention and hungry for immediate gratification. Instagram, give me the support I need to get through the work week. Mondays are the worst and everybody's working for the weekend - Netflix playing in the background, iPhone in hand, Grubhub on the way.*

We live in a world of distraction and affirmation. We would rather look at our phones than talk to a stranger, or even have to make eye contact with one. We hang out in the same space, but stare at our devices without saying a word. MacBook Party! Curating our lives to post to strangers and acquaintances, so they see the positive aspects of our lifestyles and never the downfalls. Unless we want sympathy because one of our first world problems are damaged and now we have to deal with that. We share with our friends and families what we want them to see, and then we get excited when a stranger gives us likes. Unless they like a really old post and it's also at a weird hour of the night. But when we feel down, we crave that validation. And we help

out others by doing the same. Unless we dislike them. Then we look, but we never double tap. And we feel good about telling others we miss them from a distance, knowing damn well that we won't actually make time to see them in person. We go to work and then do nothing, day in and day out.<sup>7</sup>

*And who am I to complain. My grandpa worked on a farm his whole life. He never really had a choice in his career. He did that until the day he died, and he seemed genuinely happy. Then again, he got cancer from pesticides, so in the end his job killed him. And was it even his passion. Then again, he had a big, loving family and did everything he wanted with his simple life. Then again, none of his nine children went on to be farmers, so no one took over the family trait he provided them. Then again, his daughter raised me, along with two boys, working her ass off as a night shift nurse. When I was "grown-up," she went back to college to get her masters to have a better paying job. Then again, she isn't respected as much as a doctor and still isn't satisfied with how life has panned out. And she raised me with the same false expectations and now is super confused as to what an artist does for a living and asks me weekly if I will have a job. She says she "lights a candle for me every week." Is anyone truly happy? Even with a dream job and shiny new things, is that all it means to be a contemporary human?*<sup>8</sup>

Adjacent to these prints of American icons, *Balloons I Find Important* is a series of screenprints created from found images of foil party balloons off the internet. Specifically, ones that have the photographer's reflection in them. Typically, they fall into two categories: those who try to make something cute for the internet and those who were clearly hired to photograph balloons for a party supplier's website. Each have a similar aesthetic - clean white backdrops or attention to the details surrounding the balloon - then no regard to what the reflective surface is revealing. The point of photographing the balloon was for its graphic quality or product advertisement, yet the photographer's oversight has left their mirrored body and chaotic space in the final image. They clearly worked hard to create a sterile or trendy environment. But

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<sup>7</sup> "Human life is full of effort, plans, calculation, success and failure: we pursue our lives, with varying degrees of sloth and energy." Nagel, "The Absurd," 719.

<sup>8</sup> "Leading a human life is a full-time occupation, to which everyone devotes decades of intense concern." Nagel, "The Absurd," 720.

somehow, they missed this detail, or didn't care enough to eliminate the problem. The best is when a photographer does attempt to use clever tricks to disguise them self. You see efforts such as a hand holding a white foam board with a hole cut out, so their camera can peek through. Or a head peeking behind an object in the room. That's some fancy DIY shit right there. These illusions of joy end up revealing unwanted mundane spaces. Exposing false hopes. A comedy to the tragedy we call life.<sup>9</sup>



Candice Corgan, *Balloons I Find Important II*, CMYK screenprint, 16" x 16"

## My Favorite Part of the Worm

In my practice, use and function of materials are on the same level of importance as concept. When I make "a thing," I specifically choose materials based on the context of the work

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<sup>9</sup> "...a sense of humor doesn't simply provide us with occasional moments of refreshment in life's struggles, but gives us an approach to life as a whole." Morreall, John. *Taking Laughter Seriously*. SUNY Press, 1983. 121.

and how that material can further drive my concept. Multidisciplinary is important. Materials must be used for specific needs. I am very thoughtful when it comes to what specific materials will be used within a work. My practice deals with the mundane and how humans interact with the world, therefore the materials and processes I choose come from the everyday and call on participation.

Throughout *Shitty Party*, when I worked with printed images I have employed the process of CMYK. This process does two things in my work. First, it flirts with the idea of being a photograph without actually being one. Tricking the eye; being deceptive. Secondly, it mimics commercial printing. The type of printing process used in everyday objects we interact with - newspapers, magazines, cereal boxes - basically all printed adverts. Most images we see in our day-to-day are created using a similar CMYK process. Seems only right to use that same language in my work about the mundane. Printing these by hand, as opposed to digitally, is also important. This is not only because of my background as a printmaker, but because of the absurdity of the finished piece. The effort and time spent to essentially create something as a digital image and then taking that even further through a process of four separate layers to screenprint onto a heavy, archival paper. *Shitty Party* has the same thoughtfulness in all its material choices. Alongside that, my formal background in printmaking informs the way that I think about making and general rules have formed from that.

### *Works on Paper*

If it's an image, it has to be hand printed. Unless it's a shitty iPhone photo, then it could be hand printed, but it makes more sense to be digitally printed. But if it is printed by hand, it must be flawless (too an extent. I am only human and human error is unavoidable. But I was



trained as a fine art master printer, and I can never escape perfect craftsmanship. Mark-making can be loose, ink must be full, and registration has to be consistent.

### *Use it if it exists*

Why make something by hand when it already exists? Yes, I am formally a printer, but if some printed object exists there is no reason for me to recreate it for the sake of archival purposes. Unless there is some conceptual thought behind the need to be recreated. In *Pizza Truck* I use the same generic pizza boxes to hold fresh pizza each day, no matter where the pizza comes from. These boxes were sourced from a restaurant supply distributor and not created by my hand. I could have created my own pizza boxes, but there is no point when the ideal examples already exist. If an object exists why fabricate it?

### *DIY is Everything*

I make work about the mundane and its absurdity, so the materials I use must be and do the same. If it's an object, it must be constructed from everyday materials or ready-mades and built through easily accessible means. If it has a mechanical component, I have to be able to DIY engineer it's components from sourcing machines that already exist. In the *Krazy Straw* series, I was linking together acrylic straws to make what I call "the world's largest crazy straw." I wanted to blow bubbles in a glass of milk across the room, but my breath could not create enough pressure. So, for each of these straw installations, I retrofit devices that produce air, such as air compressors and fish tank air pumps, to mimic a human's breath. Why engineer something when you can just alter what already exists?

### *Duct Tape...or Hot Glue*

Duct tape should be a part of any artists practice and I stick by that. Every contemporary artist should use it, but I do specifically because it is the #1 DIY fixer-upper. It can solve any issue. Hot glue works well too. Must be something from growing up with a mom who used hot glue as a janky way to fix anything that broke in our home. Like no one would notice that vase was broken by that cloudy blob protruding from every crack. Also, those strands that come from hot gluing that are the bane of everyone's existence. There must be a metaphor about life somewhere in that.

### *Participation*

When possible, the audience should be offered the opportunity to interact. If I want to talk about how humans interact with the world, then I must invite them to participate with my work. Interaction gives the viewer an alternative entry point into a work. They become invested, which then allows them to think more deeply about what the piece is doing or trying to convey. These interactions then feed into my research for future works. In my earlier graduate school work, there is a clear line of progression between interactive works. Each piece influenced the next, from covering pillars with sticky paper to motion sensor cameras. First, I thought I was fucking with people, now I realize people should fuck with things.

### *Coexisting*

One completed work feeds into the next. They are all created with the same intent, therefore works can be shown separately as well as in combination. I view my installation and sculptural work equal to my print work. There is no hierarchy. It is important for me that image,

object, and installation can interact on their own or in combination creating a specific experience for a viewer.

### *Staring at Strangers*

Observation is key in my research. I gain most of my material through watching how people move and think. Strangers play a huge role in my practice, and at times are entirely important to how an installation functions. Observational research can be in the form of staring at strangers from a distance, amateur iPhone photography, learning from previous interactive/participatory works and asking questions about shared experiences.

### **Conclusion**

My work highlights the absurdity found in the mundane; using humor and play as an entry point to discuss bleak realities about our contemporary culture. In my practice, I look at the fine line between the dualities of joy and boredom. Dreams and reality. Hope and failed expectations. Through playful interaction and humor, I analyze a culture of affirmation and distraction. Using my own experience and byway of observational research, I draw references from the contemporary American experience. There is a lot of humor to be found in the absurdity of the everyday.<sup>10</sup> I look to how humans interact in the world. I use absurd means to approach the bittersweet. I search for mean in nothing.

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<sup>10</sup> "The experience of absurdity is what makes us the kind of creatures we are" Plant, "Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter," 132.

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