Going Dutch

Aimee J. Valentine

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

DOCUMENTATION OF THE ONE-PERSON EXHIBITION

A DOCUMENTATION OF THE ONE-PERSON EXHIBITION SUBMITTED
TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN

BY

AIMEE VALENTINE

DEKALB, ILLINOIS

MAY 2021
Certification: In accordance with Northern Illinois University School of Art and Design and Graduate School policies, this documentation is accepted in partial fulfillment of degree requirements.

_________________________
Chair, Graduate Advisory Committee

5/1/21
Date
CATALOG

One-Person Exhibition

By

Aimee Valentine

The following work is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree at Northern Illinois University. The work was produced between September 2020 and January 2021. It was presented in an exhibition from February 15th through February 19th, 2021, in the Annette and Jerry Johns Gallery, Visual Arts Building, Northern Illinois University – DeKalb, Illinois.

List of Work

1. Fresh From the Factory Floor, acrylic and collage on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title, cast resin pickles and eggs, 60”x48”, 2021

2. The One That Got Away, acrylic on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title, 48”x24”, 2021

3. Past Time, acrylic on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title, rubber baseballs, 72”x60”, 2021

4. Alpha Betta Male, acrylic on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title, rubber fish, plastic googley eyes, 52”x30”, 2021

5. Masters of Science: The Specimen, acrylic and collage on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title, cast resin pickles and eggs, 60”x48”, 2021

6. One Night at the Hollandaise Inn, acrylic and collage on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title, cast resin pickle and egg, plastic snakes, 72”x40”, 2021

7. What You Bring to the Table, found objects still life: straw seat chairs, wood table, wooden goblets, magnifying glass, bird’s nest, bird’s egg, plaster hand, variable size, 2021

8. Old World, New Shoes, found hand-carved Dutch wooden clogs, variable size, 2021
**Going Dutch**

**Intentions:**

*Going Dutch* is a narrative exploration of the boundaries of object/subject relationships through image, material, and form. Beds, body parts, containers, food, and domestic appliances appear in the work as symbols of production, possession, and consumption. Objecthood and subjecthood are not fixed states, but flexible and conditional. We engage with perceptions of object/subject daily, according to our own socio-political biases.

I investigate these biases by portraying typical objects as subjects, while typical subjects become objects. I am interested in the ways we interact with our surroundings, and how we consciously and unconsciously objectify others—and ourselves, when we identify as recipients of action rather than actors on the world stage. Role reversals in my work serve to highlight otherness/othering, representation, and objectification.

*Going Dutch* pays homage to the Dutch Golden Age and its contributions to art and scientific discovery while challenging its legacy of colonialism, material acquisition, and traditional gender roles. The phrase “going Dutch” implies the equal splitting of a bill between two parties, yet such equity remains elusive within contemporary culture at large, and within domestic arrangements in particular. The works in this series question whether gender parity can ever exist, given the pervasive perception of women as objects of desire or means of reproduction.

Motifs in the paintings function as signs that challenge an inherited culture of domination, domestication, and accumulation. Despite the critique, stylistic nods to renowned Dutch artists add to a playful and surreal space in which skewed perspectives, collage, and saturated color amplify the tension between public and private spheres, modes of production and consumption, and the fine line between function and fetish.
Historical influences:

Dutch Still Life Paintings

I became interested in still life paintings while conducting research into the Dutch Golden Age as it related to the narrative of my thesis. Still life, as a genre of painting, was popularized by the Dutch in the 16th and 17th centuries and though it was considered a “lowly” genre (as opposed to historical, religious, and portraiture genres), still lifes sold quickly at public markets, especially when they incorporated the growing Dutch fascination with flowers (and tulips, in particular).

Still life paintings typically serve the function of memento mori: life is fleeting, and beautiful things (flowers, fruits) wither and die. But Dutch still lifes have a socio-political message as well; they are often referred to as vanitas paintings, whereupon lavish spreads of exotic foods, flowers, and imported items work upon the viewer to reinforce a sense of national pride while boasting about the expanding Dutch merchant empire (and the some claim the first consumer society).

Upon revisiting these works, I began to understand their further function as early critiques of conspicuous consumption, though the term did not come about until the 19th century, when Thorstein Veblen wrote The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions (1899). Further, I realized that the “stillness” found in Dutch still lifes is not one of “yin” stillness. The objects within the compositions—and the paintings themselves, as objects to be collected—actively congratulate, perpetuate, or critique Dutch consumer culture.

For examples of true “stillness” in historic still life paintings, I would turn to traditional Chinese and Japanese paintings of fruit and flowers which connote quietness and simplicity rather than indulgent ostentation. But since this series is about the colonialist trickle-down effect of commodity, accumulation, and objectification, it seemed fitting to incorporate some of the tropes of Dutch still lifes into my paintings.

In Masters of Science: The Specimen, a collected bird’s nest filled with fresh eggs sits atop a white-linen tablecloth, next to a crystal decanter of vinegar (elixir of preservation), a pickle (preserved), and a silver egg cup housing a cracked egg. The still life is disrupted by a male Dutch hand (with traditional sleeve) entering through a time
portal window (with Dutch shutter) to poke at the contents of the shell (a glossy pink brain, resembling sorbet). On the left side of the table sits a carved wooden chair. On the right, a knife (with patterned handle reminiscent of Dutch tiles) divides the panel. The knife blade is collaged with three photographs of a woman standing under a colonnade, poised and still. Further right, a bookshelf full of specimen jars topples toward the ground. To further emphasis the painting as a collectible object representing collectible objects, the frame is painted gold and embellished with cast resin pickles and eggs.

**Literary Genre as Framing Device**

Studies in creative writing and literature left me with a broad knowledge of literary movements and genres, just as early experience in art history gave me an understanding of art genres, mediums, and movements. Each movement and genre, whether literary or visual, comes with its own set of guiding principles or ideologies. I use these principles to shape my stories and direct them within a given format.

When researching Holland, Michigan, I learned that it has the largest Dutch American population in the U.S., with a deep reverence for its European history while simultaneously functioning as a typical, contemporary Midwestern American town. In considering the way the town oscillates between Old World ideologies that elevate tradition, religion, farming, and exploration with New World ideologies that value consumer culture and individual ambition, it made sense to write a novel using time-travel as a device for investigating themes of chance, choice, and change. Research into Old World/New World gender roles brought up issues of marriage, domesticity, child-rearing, and other expectations placed on women (both then and now). This led me to further filter the narrative through the genre of romantic-comedy, which emphasizes marriage as the ultimate happy ending for female protagonists. I structured the story to reflect (and undermine) tropes of the rom-com genre while exploring the ways time-travel provides opportunities for personal reflection and shifting perspectives.

**Surrealism**

My art practice is heavily influenced by the surrealist movement in art and literature. Duchamp, de Chirico, Ernst, Chagall, and Magritte inspire my imagery, and
surrealist writers from Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, or "workshop of potential literature") such as Queneau, Calvino and Perec inspire my narratives through the use of constraints to prompt innovative writing.

In one approach to conveying the element of time-travel, I juxtapose references to three artists (Magritte, van Eyck, Bosch) from the Netherlands (or nearby) who worked in different eras and styles on the same panel. This painting, *Fresh From the Factory Floor*, critiques the long-standing perception of woman’s primary role as a reproductive body (baby-making factory), and contains references from my book, such as the theme of local farming (old world) versus industry (new world), which is presented through characters who are sheep farmers or workers at the pickle-making factory of Holland, Michigan. Five other paintings follow, each employing an internal logic while incorporating surreal elements and symbolic devices.

*Structural concepts:*

Language, as a technological tool for expressing story comes with a tradition that is impossible to ignore. Humans are drawn to mythmaking and to stories, and Joseph Campbell expounded upon this in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1973). Stories, from their beginnings as visual language on cave walls, to oral tradition, to writing systems, are a creative expression of the human experience. The constant evolution of story language is not without its pitfalls, however. In *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image* (1998), Leonard Shlain, a medical scientist, explores how our once image-based world shifted to become a text-based world, and how “black and white” letters (and one-sided thinking) came to dominate the contemporary brain at the expense of color, image, and complex thought. In other words, the kind of language we use to tell our stories matters.

Jane Austen was my first serious introduction to both literature and the female experience in story. Fittingly, Austen’s works of the late 18th century were among the first widely published texts to be labeled “novels,” a category of fictional writing which appealed primarily to female readers. Even today, women are the largest consumers of
novels. It follows logically that when I began telling my own stories, I would choose the medium of writing.

My thesis painting series takes its narrative from a time-travel novel I wrote in 2018. The novel, *Tulip Time*, was written in a linear fashion despite its subject matter. The protagonist, a Dutch-American woman living in Holland, Michigan, travels into her own past in a parallel universe and experiences what her life would have been had she made different (conventional) choices about marriage and children. In the end, she returns, having changed. While the premise is simple and follows Campbell’s Hero’s Journey template, the difficulty comes in translating the concept of time-travel. By beginning in “the word” and translating it to “the image,” something is lost, and something is gained.

I wanted to find a way to compress time visually. We typically view time as linear, and so it makes sense that we would convey time through the use of sequential images or scenes—but for a narrative about time travel, how could non-linear time be presented?

Comics language is full of time codes. It relies on the use of icons, gutters, panels, and text. Comics readers intuit much of what happens on the page; there is a back-and-forth exchange between image and text, narrative can be scanned simultaneously, and time and space are condensed.

The question then became, can a story take place within a single image, or is the sequential element of comics necessary as a means of conveying time (time, being significant in the unfolding of a story, and without which, you merely convey a single “scene” within the story)? Can a single picture tell a story of more than a thousand words? Or must paintings limit their narrative scope?

Illuminated manuscripts often employ the forms of comics by using drawn panels to separate scenes on a single page, allowing the story to be read from top to bottom. Similarly, stained glass windows rely on lead lines to create divisions in time (for example, following moments in the life of Christ) that worshippers can read from their pews.

Naturally, then, when I first tried to tell a story within a single painting, I used vertical lines to separate scenes into “panels” and indicate the passing of time. This
reflects the technique used by Hieronymus Bosch in his late 15th century triptych, “Garden of Earthly Delights.” The scenes resist flowing into one another because they take place across three connected panels. In addition to panel lines creating division, time is further indicated by the change of landscape (from green garden to mud), light (from day to night), population (from two humans to multitudes), and mood (from dreamscape to nightmare).

Kurt Vonnegut’s approach to time travel in *Slaughter-House Five* (1969) is more complex. The protagonist experiences time as key points of re-entry into his past, a metaphor for the persistent triggering of PTSD into reliving personal episodes. In a postmodern move, Vonnegut makes room for the simultaneous experience of time, and of multiple selves.

How can this be represented in a single painting? How do you break with tradition, fracture space, and convey simultaneity, time, and multiplicity? Duchamp uses industrial motifs to multiply, move, and fracture the individual in “Nude Descending a Staircase” (1912), while other surrealists (Magritte, de Chirico, Dali) employ symbolism to evoke a visual experience of non-time or beyond time. Symbols and motifs become guideposts for the viewer in paintings the same way that icons and emanata are guideposts for readers of comics. My series uses visual language such as windows, doorways, mirrors, screens, and lenses to reflect, refract, enlarge, or split the moment. The element of collage is another chance to layer meaning (and time), and distorted perspective clues the viewer that things aren’t “quite right.”

Because the narrative explores the clash between traditional and contemporary values, I disrupt motifs present in historical Dutch paintings such as still life vignettes, floor tiles, and beds. The paintings can be read singularly, or together. Like time, they can be arranged from beginning to end—or shuffled. Depending on their staging (such as a satirical take on a traditional museum gallery, complete with “gold frames,” as they were during the show) the entry into the story is variable. Once again, the language used to express story matters, and every iteration causes a change in translation.
Philosophical and aesthetic concepts:

Subjecthood and Objecthood

Linguistic standards inform my perception of subject and object. Grammatically speaking, a subject is the person, place, or thing that performs the action (verb) in a sentence, while an object is the person, place, or thing that receives the action. It is in the performing or receiving of action that subjects and objects are determined (which is not necessarily related to their inherent nature as persons, places, or things).

We routinely refer to “things” as objects, yet if they perform an action, they are imbued with agency, and become subjects—if we see them as such. For example, we may consider a silver candelabra to be an object, since it sits statically on a dining table unless someone moves it. Yet it may perform the act of holding/elevating candles, without which, the candles would have no support. Given a task, the candelabra becomes a subject. Similarly, we may refer to tapered candles as objects since they are inanimate and require a supporting structure (candelabra) as well as an external force to light them. Once “activated,” however, candles perform the work of lighting and warming a space. Object becomes subject through performance.

And what if the “performance” is aesthetic? What if the silver candelabra sits on the dining table unmoved for years, and never supports candles? Can it become the subject if its performance is in beautifying the space, if it “acts” upon the viewer by reflecting light or simply “being” beautiful on its own? Or is it our act of looking which makes it beautiful (and “objectifies” it through gaze)? Can the candelabra, unseen by our eyes, still perform an aesthetic act? And if it does not act, or receive action, what is it? Does it even exist?

Investigating these questions has led me to portray typical “objects” as subjects in my work, while typical “subjects” often become the objects. Things and people, action and reception, are interchangeable in the ways that they function in society or are seen to function. Role reversals in this series serve to highlight otherness/othering, representation, and objectification.

Pickles, for example (organic in nature) which are farmed, manipulated by humans through the process of brining/preserving, and mass produced through industrial means, are portrayed as both subjects and objects in my paintings. As objects, they are
decorative. They are cast in resin and permanently attached to frames or they sit statically within a still life. As subjects, they quietly nap on a chair while holding a newspaper, or fly through open windows, or cross the imaginary boundary between outer space and a hotel room.

Do they become the subject when they perform recognizable acts (napping, flying)? Or is their subjecthood relative to their surroundings? Compared to a bed, a flying pickle appears more active. Compared to a chair, a napping pickle appears to be the more performative of the two. But this is only a matter of perspective. Consider the following:

A) The pickle (subject) naps (verb) upon the chair (object).
B) The chair (subject) supports (verb) the pickle (object).

Who is to say what is the subject, and what is the object? We define these terms based on our own perceptions, which are themselves full of socio-political biases. Instead of seeing things as one or the other, we might try considering them as neither and both.

I am interested in the ways we interact with our surroundings, and how we consciously and unconsciously objectify others—even ourselves (when we become recipients of action rather than actors on the world stage). To this end, humans often appear in my work as objects (as faceless symbols, as separated into mannequin parts, as reflections, as specimens in jars, as cut-out and collaged elements, and as objectified/othered beings). This is juxtaposed with the activation of environments through distorted perspective and scale, and in affording the things commonly perceived as objects subjecthood.

**Representation, Reproduction, Commodities, and Objects**

Part of the problem in adopting the object/subject binary is that we view objects (receivers of action, whether persons, places, or things) as under the control of subjects (actors). In a patriarchal society, Man considers his role to be the Primary Subject or Actor, whose ambition is checked only by acting forces equal or superior to his own [Nature, God, other men]. Everything and everyone else, then, exists for the purpose of being acted upon by himself. This leaves women, children, nonhuman animals, and the environment vulnerable as objects, and thusly up for grabs. But what of Man’s equally
recognized “subjects” (other men)? If they can be made into objects, or “othered,” then they can be acted upon. It follows, then, that perpetuating the view of other men as things, as beasts, as numbers on a spreadsheet, or as women diminishes them through objectification. From this foundation, war, colonialism, slavery, and the industrial complex are natural consequences.

Edward W. Said addresses this destructive othering in Orientalism (1978), with critical theory that dissects the propensity of Western hegemonic structures (political, social, economic) to propagate highly caricaturized representations of Eastern cultures and peoples with the goal of dominating them through objectification. His work was one of the first examples I’d read that detailed the importance of representation in literature, and while he speaks specifically about the East, the theory is applicable to representations of all marginalized or othered populations. Of particular interest is Said’s observation that, over time, othered groups internalize caricatured representation of themselves to the extent that they begin to participate in their own oppression. In other words, representation has the power to destroy from without as well as from within.

This is an especially important note for marginalized populations in the United States (the U.S. having superseded the hegemony of the European continent since the 20th century). When we see caricaturized images or narratives of ourselves created by people in power (whether within media or politics), we will (and have done) internalize these narratives to the extent that we believe them, and act accordingly. Women’s bodies and social roles have been long demeaned, manipulated, and exploited through representation and as a result, many women actively or passively participate in our own oppression.

It is difficult to know when to “work within the system” and when to “work against the system” but it is certainly easier to work against the system when you have a modicum of power. This power can simply be in recognizing one’s value (in the system) as a commodity. Women as commodity (sexual, reproductive, aesthetic) is a theme present in my work, and I emphasize females as nonpersonal collectible objects, with useful or desirable body parts and functions. Women are represented in my work as baby-making factories, as one-night stands, as trophy wives, and as domesticated beasts of burden.
Representing women in this manner could be seen as perpetuating oppression or could be (hopefully) viewed as a critique of the system. A sense of ridiculousness and of humor is an important factor in these representations since they are working in the genre of satire. Using surreal elements in the paintings adds a bizarre slant; just as it is weird/wrong/ridiculous to see flying pickles and a Bible bigger than a bed, it should be weird/wrong/ridiculous to view women in these commodified roles. Funny/strange images offer the viewer an opportunity to wonder and reflect.

**Technique and process:**

I have always been curious about the materials artists use to express ideas. Are material choices based on tradition, function, convenience, or something more ineffable—such as whim, feeling, or chance? When considering the world of traditional painting, the overwhelming choice of materials has been oil on canvas. This makes historical sense: oil paint is derived from ground pigment mixed with slow drying binder, allowing artists to work with and build the paint over a longer period. Likewise, canvas is practical; it is accessible, lightweight, and can be stretched, rolled, and transported easily. Why then, when I created this series of paintings, did I resist established tradition—choosing to paint in acrylic or house paint, on found objects—rather than choose to work within it?

I think the answer is in the word “tradition.” I consider myself nontraditional (which ironically puts my practice in line with a long tradition of nontraditional artists). Whether working in printmaking, painting, photography, or any other image-based medium, I am looking for a side-door into the practice. This is not to say that I’m looking for an easy way in, but an alternative way.

If a child’s imagination and a handful of crayons can transform a cardboard box into a spaceship, then why shouldn’t an artist’s imagination and simple tools transform devalued objects into something that expresses their own unique vision? Like a magpie, I began collecting cast-off materials in hopes that they would someday serve a new purpose as art.
Part of this practice is in reimagining a new future for “dead” items. This is an exercise in creative thinking. Part of this practice is acknowledging that humans (even artists) are wasteful and attempting to rectify this in some small way by making use of materials headed for the landfill. Part of this practice is training myself to look, and to be open to the element of chance—what will I find today? Finally, and less lofty, part of this practice is convenience. Why should I build something from scratch, whether it is a painting substrate, a frame, a figural object, an installation, or even a box, when I can find something already made that will serve my purpose?

Unlike many artists practicing today, I don’t place a premium on carefully crafting, building, or manufacturing an original work on a molecular level. Quite the opposite. I feel that the world is already overbuilt and over-manufactured. Newness is overrated, and it doesn’t have a story. In adopting a discarded piece of wood on which to paint, I am choosing to reclaim it, and hoping to give it a better life.

There is a distinction between my practice and the world of ready-mades. Duchamp’s “Fountain” of 1914 and other ready-mades are typically presented as-is, relying on the context of the gallery to lend them aesthetic value as art objects. Instead, found materials enter my process in the planning stages or as a means of resuscitating work gone awry.

For me, the use of found materials is not a slight to tradition but embraces a truly traditional concept: “wabi-sabi.” Wabi-sabi is an ancient Japanese aesthetic which values imperfection, use, and age in granting authenticity to an object. The question then became, is the inclusion of found materials important for the audience’s understanding of the work, or just mine?

Considering this question alongside what are considered to be traditional art practices and standards, I began the Going Dutch series with a specific process in mind: to juxtapose a highly traditional art practice (painting) with a newer, devalued painting medium (acrylic), and to integrate found materials whenever possible. This approach directly served the narrative of my series, an exploration of Old World and New World ideologies as they clash and merge in contemporary culture.
Going Dutch

Aimee Valentine
MFA Thesis Exhibition

February 15th-19th, 2021

Northern Illinois University
Annette and Jerry Johns Gallery
330 Gilbert Drive, DeKalb IL, 60115

Gallery Hours M-F 11am-5pm
Going Dutch Image List

*Fresh From the Factory Floor*
acrylic and collage on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title, cast resin pickles and eggs
60”x48”
2021

*The One That Got Away*
acrylic on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title
48”x24”
2021

*Past Time*
acrylic on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title, rubber baseballs
72”x60”
2021

*Alpha Betta Male*
acrylic on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title, rubber fish, plastic googley eyes
52”x30”
2021

*Masters of Science: The Specimen*
acrylic and collage on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title, cast resin pickles and eggs
60”x48”
2021

*One Night at the Hollandaise Inn*
acrylic and collage on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title, cast resin pickle and egg, plastic snakes
72”x40”
2021
What You Bring to the Table
still life with found objects: wood table, straw seat chairs, wooden goblets, magnifying glass, bird’s nest, bird egg, plaster hand
Variable dimensions
2021

Old World, New Shoes
found hand-carved wooden Dutch clogs
Variable dimensions
2021
L to R: Old World, New Shoes; Artist’s Statement; Fresh From the Factory Floor
Fresh From the Factory Floor
acrylic and collage on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title, cast resin pickles and eggs
60”x48”
2021
*Old World, New Shoes*

found hand-carved wooden Dutch clogs

variable dimensions

2021
The One That Got Away
acrylic on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title
48”x24”
2021
*Past Time*

acrylic on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title, rubber baseballs

72”x60”

2021
*Alpha Betta Male*
acrylic on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title, rubber fish, plastic googley eyes
52”x30”
2021
Masters of Science: The Specimen
acrylic and collage on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title, cast resin pickles and eggs
60”x48”
2021
One Night at the Hollandaise Inn
acrylic and collage on panel, reclaimed wood, gold spray paint, laser engraved title, cast resin pickle and egg, plastic snakes
72”x40”
2021
L to R: Past Time; Alpha Betta Male, Masters of Science, One Night at the Hollandaise Inn. C: What You Bring to the Table
L to R: *The One That Got Away*, *Past Time*, *Alpha Betta Male C: What You Bring to the Table*
detail, *What You Bring to the Table*
magnifying glass, bird’s nest, bird egg, plaster hand
2021
L to R: Old World, New Shoes, Fresh From the Factory Floor, The One That Got Away, Past Time, Alpha Betta Male, Masters of Science, One Night at the Hollandaise Inn