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I am a Family Guy: Becoming Friends with TV and Film Characters

Introduction:

“Oh I’m so sorry child! Did I frighten you child? Are you scared? Oh, all right I’ll sing to you. *God is in his holy temple. Hmm Hmm Hmmm. Better?*”
“I’m with professor Aldman’s group.”
“Oh! I’m Hansen! I’m the caretaker here!” (Licks his deformed hand, trying to push back his hair in a formal way)
“Uh...hi”
“Hi. And what’s your name sweet child?”
“I’m Cindy.”

Keenen Ivory Wayans. “Scary Movie 2.” 2001.

This short scene is something I would repeat to myself hundreds of times throughout my years at University of Michigan. It is from the movie “Scary Movie 2.” I first watched this film the summer before entering the new world of college. When I arrived, I was greeted with isolation. It was the first time in my life where I was alone eighty percent of the time. I kept watching this movie to make myself laugh, so I could feel happy again. That was when it started: I began reenacting certain scenes from the movie when I was by myself. I would perform the scene above on my walks to the shower, heading to class after lunch, or even when I was working on my art. At first I was not even aware of how much I was doing it, and I didn’t realize that it was becoming a significant quirk in my warped social life. Over the course of these past four years however, this ‘quirk’ has turned into an actual dependency.

Studying this quirk as my thesis project has made me more aware of its purpose: I use it intentionally to alleviate loneliness. This defies the popular notion that TV and film are purely used to psychologically escape. My reenactments show that I am engaging with this alternate reality by transporting it into my real world, instead of escaping into it. Of course, there is some element of a psychological escape involved in my quirk, but my awareness of this habit means that I am also not escaping at the same time. When watching movies or television, it is easy to passively escape into that world without thought. But with my reenactments, I am engaging with these alternate realities to aid my sense of isolation throughout each day.

“I heard you want to close down the dog park!”
 “Excuse me?”
 “The dog park on Ramsed road, I hear you’re closing it down! Where are my babies supposed to play?”
 “Oh, you mean your dogs?”
 “They’re my children, they need their park!”
 “No real children need their park. Dogs just need to go outside, do their business, then go home.”
 “It’s a gated park. Its not bothering anyone. Why close it down?”
 “Oh please, it stinks to high heaven. Its an absolute eyesore from all the grass that’s been dug up. The dogs are barking and snarling all day long. And when they finally leave, its filled with teenagers, doing drugs. It is a blight, and its going.”
 “You know what you are? You are a hater. You’re filled with hate. And you spread it around to dogs and teenagers and-“
 “And you. Because you call your pets children. So goodbye.”

Jenji Kohan. “Weeds.” 2005.

Junior year rolled along, and I found myself obsessed with everything Celia Hodes. She is one of the main characters from the TV show “Weeds.” I learned more

of her scenes, and reenacted them in my Northwood apartment. The scenes that involve Celia Hodes that I love to reenact most are when she deals with other bitchy housewives. For example, the scene above is when Celia is dealing with another neurotic neighbor about closing their dark park.

Ultimately, the scenes that I choose are quite random. There is no apparent causal relation between why I reenact scenes from “Scary Movie 2” and “Weeds.” Their overall character and story do not reflect my own, indeed, my quirk does not go that deep into paralleling my life with the lives of these imagined characters. Reflecting on it now, I realize that what these scenes do have in common is humor. The movies and shows I choose to reenact are always comedies. In essence, I turn to comedy to alleviate my loneliness. I would never want to be friends with someone who wasn’t weird or funny like me, and my reenactments make me feel like I am bonding with this or that odd or humorous fictional character. They are my friends when I am alone.

I knew that this year was really the moment where I realized this was a full-fledged quirk: a habit that I could not control. Rather than trying to deny it, I tried to highlight it through another form that gives me great solace: my paintings and collages. This was the perfect time too, because I wanted to start thinking about my IP project. It was as though it was meant to be. Initially, I chose to use the show “Desperate Housewives” (another show that had captured my interest) as my imagery to convey this idea.

My thesis project explores the strange engagement I have with television and film, through juxtaposing images of myself with images of certain characters from my favorite TV shows and movies.

Creative Work:

My first attempts to visually translate my idea using images from “Desperate Housewives” involved literally inserting myself into scenes from the show. Some experiments successfully communicated my idea, but overall it was too on the nose. I could play more with the image of myself and the image of these housewives. This led to the idea of blending their facial features with my own, to create creepy hybrids of reality and illusion. It communicated the idea of bringing this alternate reality into my world rather than simply inserting myself into their worlds.



“Gossiping with the girls.”



“Gaby and I.”

However, throughout the next few months developing these experiments, I realized that “Desperate Housewives” was not the appropriate show to use as imagery for my concept. By blending my masculine features with their feminine features, the pieces appeared to be making more of a statement about gender, rather

than purely exploring my quirk. I also realized that I had never reenacted scenes from that show, which seemed odd to me if I was using it to express my idea. “Desperate Housewives” isn’t a show that is strictly comedy, so it goes against how humor is the main factor for my quirk to function.

Because of these reasons, I switched to “Scary Movie 2” as the visual language to showcase my idea. It was the first movie I used to reenact from, which I thought was important. Also, being a satire, they rely on referencing pop-culture to support their alternate reality. The same could be said for my quirk. I chose to use their cover photo as my subject matter, since I thought it was the most iconic. During this time, I was still committed to pursuing the collage techniques I had developed, where I make the material protrude out from the canvas. I thought this aesthetic translated perfectly to the idea of TV and film psychologically invading our real world. But I learned to fully capture this concept, the structure containing this collage had to be dimensional as well. So, I started creating a life-size diorama, where viewers could sit down and look across a table to see these hybridized characters. I would dress up as one of the characters and serve the audience dinner while I reenacted scenes from the movie.



Portion of diorama (front view)



(side view)



Digital mock-up of final installation

However, I learned that this idea seemed to get away from the essence of my quirk. Since it is an installation, it conveys more of an aspect of pure escapism into this media landscape, rather than showing my unusual engagement with the characters themselves. All of the different elements in this installation only seemed to distract from that idea. My quirk simply deals with forming genuine relationships with these characters. So then I thought: what characters would I like to know, and bond with?

I realized I would love to be friends with the characters from the TV show “Family Guy”, and experience their world. Since “Family Guy” is a cartoon, juxtaposing their imagery with myself makes a clearer statement on how I am interested in hybridizing reality and illusion, or the realm of the virtual. Using this show conceptually relates more to my realizations about the function of humor in my quirk, rather than “Scary Movie 2.” I reenact scenes from television and film to make myself laugh. Humor alleviates my fear of isolation. As a show, “Family Guy” echoes my own behavior, as it constantly references contemporary popular culture to reinforce its own alternate reality. After all, the basic story of “Family Guy” essentially deals with a normal family interacting with a false reality where they form relationships with characters that reflect and reference pop-culture. I would compare my quirk to this exact same situation: I am bonding with characters that relate to pop-culture.

“Hi sweetie, how was your day?”

“Well I was an astronaut for a better part of the morning and then a firefighter for the rest of the afternoon so its been a long one.

What’s for dinner?”

“Play-dough spaghetti.”

“Oh.”

“What?”

“No, no, nothing. Its just, that’s what we had last night. (under his breath) And that’s all that we had last night.”

“Uh, what is that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know Olivia, maybe its that we are in a sexless marriage. We have yet to have sex!”

“Do you even know what sex is?”

“That’s not the point! Its some sort of cake right?”

Seth MacFarlane. “Family Guy.” 1999.

My initial experiments using “Family Guy” imagery were similar to the ones I did using “Desperate Housewives.” Eventually, however, I discovered the most successful approach to convey my idea was to insert my body into the silhouette of the characters from the show. This method showcases both the qualities of the characters and myself. I used the distorting tool on Photoshop to morph my features so they would fit in to the character’s features, as a way to make myself look even more like them. In the end, I created six images using this technique for each of the main characters from the show.

Now, I had to replicate these digital mockups with paint. Painting is my strongest medium, and IP is also about showcasing the things I have learned most during my time here. What is more, when I translated these images into paintings, they would be going through another veil of interpretation. I needed to be strategic about how I painted the image, so it could best translate my idea.

Ultimately, I painted the “Family Guy” imagery with washes of oil paint, giving it a softer impression. The setting for each image the Family Guy characters are in is not as important as the characters themselves. I wanted to make sure the portraits are the focus. For the skin tones, in contrast, I heavily applied thick amounts of paint. I also realized I needed to add more paint to certain parts of the “Family Guy” imagery so they could convey the graphic qualities of the show. Unlike the skin tones, which had expressive brush strokes, these parts were carefully painted, so as to make them look as flat as possible. Conveying a sense of flatness was important when expressing the show’s cartoon qualities. In the same vein, I also developed criteria for the kinds of contours I would use throughout the work. The

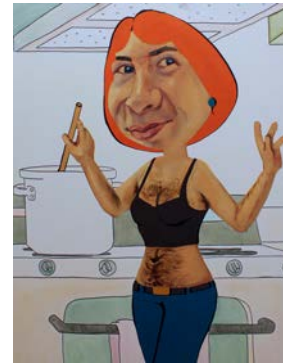
parts that have washes of paint, the contours would be a flat line. For the moments of flat saturation, on the other hand, I would use an extremely sensitive line, defining the shape in an exaggerated way. And then for my skin tones, I used no line. Creating this element of negative space in the painting makes my forms jump out from the canvas even more. Having the illusion of the characters being in the extreme foreground in this way relates back to the notion of bringing these fictional people into my reality when I am reenacting their scenes.



Original Image



Digital Mockup



Finished Painting

Context:

The artist Alice Neel relates formally to the visual techniques I have employed in these paintings. She too, playfully combines contour with mass, illustrative marks with expressive marks, and light washes with heavy applications of paint. That is what makes her portraits so expressive, because her subjects are interacting with such an animated reality. I love the idea of expressive figure painting because it serves as a reminder for the appreciation of our human existence and experiences.



Alice Neel. "Self Portrait." 1980. www.aliceneel.com

I also became interested in one of the Stamps Speakers this past semester, Kent Monkman. He juxtaposes imagery from art history with his Native American culture in these sublime landscapes. Like me, Kent Monkman combines an aspect of pop culture with an element of himself, in this case, his heritage. I appreciate how he graphically makes these distinctions, by having the characters from art history look flatter against a realistic setting. It is a playful and comedic interpretation of reality intermixing with illusion.



Kent Monkman. "The Dance to Overcome the Earth." 2011. www.kentmonkman.com

Conclusion:

Overall, I have realized my thesis project makes a statement on my dependency on pop culture as a way to form my identity. Finishing these six paintings has made me excited to do more of this kind of work. I want to use imagery from other cartoons or video games, and see how it becomes affected with this method of hybridization.

It was an interesting experience on the opening night of the I.P show, because I was standing in front of my paintings, reenacting some of my favorite scenes in front of total strangers. I was proud that night, because I felt as though I was revealing this intimate detail about myself to the world. Like I said earlier, this entire process of investigating my weird habit has made me see it as a good thing. I am happy this quirk is a part of my life, and I wouldn't want to have it any other way.

Performance for the opening night:

