



In all seriousness, Cute

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Introduction

My life is completely saturated with cute. My closet, a swirling mixture of pastels and plush fabric, is filled to the brim with frilly dresses and Japanese harajuku-inspired outfits.¹ My collection of stuffed animals is boundless, and the only entity who has dared venture the pile has been my rabbit, known by her eyes the size of overgrown blueberries and fur so soft it is as if one was petting a formless cloud. From how I dress to the atmosphere I surround myself with on a daily basis, I am constantly immersed in this world of cute. Only recently had I begun to investigate this connection between this fascination with cute and my continual struggle with major depressive disorder.

I have always tried to work with the idea of cute in my artwork over the years, but was faced with constant rejection or discouragement from those I looked to for advice. Few people took my work seriously. My stylistic choices and interests were constantly being challenged by those I went to for support and inspiration yet each time I tried to change to fit their criteria, I wound up eventually returning to my original style. I could not understand why I couldn't just leave this adjective that was deemed “wrong” behind. Then I realised, why not embrace “cute” and explore why it is so important to me that I cannot abandon it. There had to be a reason why the people who I looked up to were afraid to investigate into this topic that was bizarrely rejected, despite its endearing nature. There is a purpose behind cute, and a reason why the adjective is accepted during childhood, but rejected societally in adulthood despite the fact that the endearing nature never stops. If nobody else was going to embrace tie investigation, I would.

¹ Harajuku Fashion is a style of clothing based out of the Harajuku district in Tokyo known for its various avant-garde aesthetics, many of which are overly “cute”.

Scientific Research

Studying into the psychology of “cute” has also brought forth some reasoning behind its relationship with the human mind. One basic example explaining the acceptance of “Cute” and its impact on mental health is the fact that the University of Michigan brings in therapy dogs to campus every semester around exam time. It is part of the school embracing the importance of student mental health along with their physical health, and has been met with immense gratitude on the part of the students. Interaction with animals is one of the simplest forms of “cute therapy” and petting soft animals has been proven to increase serotonin, the “happiness” chemical, levels in the brain². The chemical also reduces stress which not only improves mental health but the reduction of stress is known to improve physical health as well. Something deeper connects humans and “cute” together than what we initially think.

There is a large sociological aspect behind human’s reaction to cute as well. The clear differences in acceptance of cuteness in adulthood is present between Eastern Asian countries and the United States. While countries such as Japan have a place for cute in parts of their societies such as art and music, it is almost non-existent in the adult world of the states and is pushed away as something merely “for children”. This suggests that there is no explicitly factual reason why cute is “bad”. Like any other thing that differs between societies, things are rejected or accepted because someone in power claims an opinion at some point, and because of their impact on their followers it is accepted as ideal despite little concrete reasoning why. Without

²Weaver, Jane. "Puppy love: it's better than you think." NBCNews.com. April 08, 2004. Accessed April 10, 2017. http://www.nbcnews.com/id/4625213/ns/health-pet_health/t/puppy-love----its-better-you-think/#.WOuUR1PyvGI.

someone to question the reasoning behind these decisions, they are simply accepted and their benefits or downsides are blindly accepted.

Discoveries

At the start of the project I had a basic understanding of what kind of relationship cuteness and empathy had.

1. Cute is considered any subject matter that is endearing and often has aspects such as warm, soft, and induces some type of affection.
2. Cute is closely related to ideas of empathy.
3. Empathy is the ability to both share and understand the emotions of oneself and others.
4. There is a relationship between the willingness of humans to share an expression emotion in front of other humans and cute.

In summary, cuteness is a shortcut through emotional walls between people. This is a good thing, right? So then why is cuteness rejected? Throughout my project I had found a few theories as to why.

Theory one: Cuteness = Easy mode

Cuteness breaks down emotional walls so easily, people view it as “cheating”. Cuteness is a shortcut to empathy, as its harmless, friendly nature causes a feeling of trust which lowers the emotional guard between people. As Denis Dutton, a philosopher from the University of Canterbury, explains "Cute cuts through all layers of meaning and says, ‘Let's not worry about complexities, just love me’ . . . That's where the sense of cheapness can come from, and the

feeling of being manipulated or taken for a sucker that leads many to reject cuteness as low or shallow."³ Cuteness makes the mask we use to hide how we truly feel from the rest of the world too easy to break through. It makes us feel vulnerable, and so we reject it, but it is important to allow some emotional vulnerability in your life. One cannot extend their emotional understanding with themselves or others without allowing some risk of rejection or feeling out in the open. Cuteness catalyzes people's willingness to express themselves openly and gives them a chance to grow from vulnerability.

Theory two: Cuteness is “too feminine”

Cuteness is associated with femininity, which in a masculine-dominated world is viewed as inferior. Traits that are socially valued in men such as toughness, roughness, and power are usually considered opposites to traits associated with cuteness, such as gentleness, softness, and, in turn, weakness. Thankfully, as time goes on, these perceptions are slowly being changed as masculine traits in females and feminine traits in men are becoming more socially accepted, and yet cuteness is still not taken seriously by science or society. It is still associated with weakness and passiveness when cuteness is simply another strategy for access to emotional mindfulness.

Theory three: Logos and Pathos

In a world surrounded by facts and science, emotional arguments are valued as lesser despite their effectiveness and necessity. Though it is important to back up arguments with numbers and facts (logos), it is important to understand that some arguments cannot be enumerated or objectively explained (pathos). Among these logos-immune topics is that of mental illness. When struggling with mental illness, such as depression, you cannot simply logic

³Angier, Natalie. "The Cute Factor." The New York Times. January 03, 2006. Accessed April 10, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/03/science/the-cute-factor.html>.

your way out of it. Understanding and, in turn, managing mental illness requires emotional understanding of yourself and the ability to express this understanding to others. Mental illness does not follow logic and you cannot solve it through pure intellectual discussion and numbers alone.

Cuteness has great potential to positively touch people's hearts, yet it is rejected by people in order to protect their emotional walls. From stress relief to deeper understanding, it is a catalyst for emotional mindfulness. The societal rejection, along with an inherent need for the positive effects created by cute, has forced people to act like they are "above" cute subject matter even though people still react with joy when they get to experience it. Our subconscious craves cute stimuli. Liking "cute" is simply part of being human. This is one of the reasons behind how viral cute animal videos are, as it allows us to get a "cute fix" any time we like as long as we have access to a smartphone or computer. People will seek cute media out, despite its rejection.

Figures of Inspiration

Chiho Aoshima is an artist from Japan who does large scale endearingly cute illustrations inspired by shoujo manga⁴ to investigate darker themes such as sexuality or death, geared towards an adult audience. She uses cute as a way to keep her images irresistible to approach, despite the fact that many of her works contain topics such as death or a girl being eaten by a snake. Her work covers dark topics that I want to avoid, as I want my work to hold a more positive after effect on the viewer. She also is in Japan, and their view of "cute" differs greatly

⁴ A type of Japanese graphic novel focusing on young women both as characters and audience, often with very cute artistic style choices.

from the western world, so the contexts of cute between her audience and mine will be quite different.



Figure 1. Aoshima, Chiho. 2008. *Divine Gas*. Source:

<http://www.kumicontemporary.com/view/divine-gas-chiho-aoshima.html>.

Lindsey Stirling is another prominent influence in my work. She is a modern violin artist, bringing together electronica music with classical violin to create a high-energy fusion of musical styles. Her themes focus on ideas of hope and self empowerment, and she has positively impacted lives across the world with her songs, selling three albums and has toured all across the globe. I wish to translate the positive energy and emotional effect in her music into my own work, despite the difference in artistic mediums.

Japanese pop star, Kyary Pamyu Pamyu takes various anxieties people experience during the transition between childhood and adulthood, and mixes it with harajuku themes to create a toy-parade crossed with electronica aesthetic within her music. Her songs and videos are full of high-energy and cute imagery, and yet her work is focused on an adult audience. A majority of her songs encourage adults to hold onto the ideas of cuteness and self-love despite what the rest

of society says for the sake of oneself. In Japan, where a hyper sense of community and conformity are traditionally encouraged, her work challenges the norm. I draw her aesthetic ideas and whimsical thematics into my own work, and knowing that she has grown in popularity despite her cute socially rejected subject matter means that there is a place for “cute” somewhere in the adult world, one just has to locate and then express it.



Figure 2. Nakamura, Steve. 2013. *Nanda Collection* Album Cover. Source: <http://gurafiku.tumblr.com/post/53518858829/japanese-album-cover-kyary-pamyu-pamyu>. The line art of Ryoko Aoki has influenced my visual choices in my work. Her

illustrations focus greatly on line. Her artwork makes the outlines of objects speak for themselves; she rarely includes any shading or coloring in her art. I want to draw this focus of line and simplicity into my own work. Her emphasis on the details of an object's shape, edge, and negative space are a great way to visually simplify an object without confusing what something is.



Figure 3. Aoki, Ryoko. 2010. *Pink mushroom*. Pen, pencil, watercolor on paper. Source: <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Pink-mushroom/F289A3BF117A5F89>.

Chinatsu Ban's artwork has also drawn me to explore more abstract environments for my subjects. Instead of a scene, her backgrounds are often simplified gradients of color, making her images exist in a non-space. Her style is very simple and round, and her works have a playful sense of humor to balance out its nonsensical undertones. The lack of details coupled with the quirky narratives create a dream like image. I drew inspiration from her visual choices to draw in this playful, dreamy aesthetic to work alongside some of the darker subject matter, such as depression, that occurs within my drawings.



Figure 4. Ban, Chinatsu. 2004. Mt. Fuji. Acrylic on Canvas. Source: <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Twin-Mt--Fuji/C8F4AE958E8A93A7>.

Process

I started my project with subject studies. At the time I was not sure what path to take with my project, so I explored color schemes and subject matter across many smaller studies (Figure 5) to find how I wanted to investigate cute, and what further aspect of it I wanted to research.



Figure 5. One of twenty initial subject studies.

I decided to focus my attention on the relationship between fine art and cute, or better yet: the lack of, by investigating the changes that happen if we swap the styles of classic artworks to a more cute style. I took famous works of art such as the *Mona Lisa* (Figure 6), a ballerina piece by Degas, and *Marilyn Diptych* and redid them in a cute style. When viewed, the disconnect between what people expected the piece to be and what it actually was made it funny. This was consistent between my peers, professors, and the various other people I shared my work with. The cuteness completely erased the dark nature to some of the themes of the original work and brought about a positive reaction from viewers. I knew I was going in the right direction, as this was exactly the response I wanted from the work. Something was still missing, however. There was something lost between when I sketched my ideas in my notebook, and when I generated them on the computer and printed them out.



Figure 6. The “cute” Mona Lisa

I decided that the computer’s artificiality was removing a sense of intimacy in my work, and so my attention was directed towards my sketchbook for direction in where to go next. Cuteness was my go-to visual language when I wanted to sketch down an abstract concept or express some object without taking into account as I make the object what style it is in. I decided to further explore my own depiction of the world through cute, and so I began to make works based on my stream of consciousness. Stream of consciousness refers to the dialogue of thoughts within one's head, unedited and often seemingly disconnected to the outside viewer. I got the idea from the book, *As I Lay Dying*. In his book, William Faulkner uses a stream of consciousness format to explore the mental states of the characters in the story as they go

through various tragedies. It turned the story into a psychological study. I took this idea and began making works based on my own self in order to explore this “reality of cute” that I have created in order to navigate through the reality my depression generates.



Figure 7. The first of seven stream of consciousness works.

My works became mixtures of various objects, thoughts represented by creatures, flowers, colors, and random objects, placed together to represent mental thoughts with little filter. Most who view the works once finished would find a narrative difficult to decipher, however as I did the work each thought, or object led to another in some way. For example, a flower reminded me of a time of year, which led to thoughts on an event that happened at that time of year, which leads to a food that I ate at said event.. This could cause something like a bud

of lavender to be mentally linked to a dinosaur, though the nature of the connections are so quick in my head that, without explanation, they are only translatable to me. It reflects human thought in the way that our minds are complex and move so quickly it is difficult to understand connections without large amounts of contextual background in real time. Despite this obscure connection, the works became very dream-like and despite a lack of directional filter, were still connected by the thread of “cuteness”. This suggests that cute has become an inherent language with which my brain expresses ideas.



Figure 8. One of seven stream of consciousness works.

As the project continued, I kept making these small mental snapshot pieces. I used crayons to color, both for the simplicity to save time and because their round, nubby shape,

bright colors, and fond memories that go along with them. We all used crayons as kids and have positive memories with them, where we created and shared our creative ideas without worry of judgement from society. I want to awaken the joy of expression and childhood curiosity that has since been lost over time to the viewer. I also chose a notebook-size image format for the pieces in order to make each piece quick and in-the-moment, but also to make each experience with the works more intimate. The size invites the viewer to lean in close and analyze the individual objects of the work in order to fully understand what is going on in the image. I hid small objects such as elephants within the leaves or birds in the flowers as minor rewards for thoughtful investigation of the images. Emotions are a private issue that people are more comfortable with when they are discussed as such. Our society has lost this value of emotional vulnerability, and so people must relearn to talk open hearted again, even with our own selves.



Figure 9. One of seven stream of consciousness works.



Figure 10. One of seven stream of consciousness works.

I moved on to experiment in a larger format. I created a work on canvas, *Goldfish Blessing with Tea* (Figure 11), experimenting with how crayon sits on canvas and to see how well the energy of my first works translated to a larger format. Because pen and pencil did not work on canvas, gestural line work disappeared from the piece. Instead, I defined edges with a sharp black line of paint. I was unable to layer the crayon as much as I wanted to and, although the piece visually worked out in the end, lost much of the depth and detail that the smaller pieces had. Overall, as a material exploration, the piece was not a success but I liked how the larger format had a greater presence than the smaller works and the contrast between the black paint and the colorful crayon demanded further experimentation.



Figure 11. One of three large stream of consciousness works, also referred to as *Goldfish Blessing with Tea*.

I then created another work on matt board, which preserved the pen lines far better than the canvas. For the composition I took two pages from my notebook containing mind map notes from a writing class, and directly translated their visual organization to the work before replacing words from the notes with images from my stream of consciousness. I found that the work affected its own content as one object (the mermaid) affected my thoughts during the process enough so that a common theme of sea creatures occurred throughout the work. Most of the works so far were generated from random thoughts that made them thematically different from the rest of the objects, but in the mermaid piece specifically it wound up with a continual theme of ocean creatures and invertebrates. Cuteness as a mental process strategy works in a similar

way. If I start a work with images that are cute, they will continue to influence my mind as I work on the piece making the rest of the objects around them cute. Objects that already exist in the image affect what topics or images the brain creates through the work's generation. Cuteness is a thinking habit.

While working on the third piece, I was considering the possibility that the use of cute as a coping mechanism is one of the reasons why cute videos about cats, bunnies, or other cute animals go viral on the internet without fear of public ridicule. The internet allows privacy and discretion when exposing oneself to information on the internet, giving those who need a coping mechanism such as cute access to it without fear of judgement from those around them. Use of the internet to gain access to cute media functions similarly to how people use internet meme humor to cope with stress. All this thought process is evident through the subtle use of cute meme references in the piece.

Summary

Through my works, I used introspection and started to discover how I used cute as a language, and navigate my own relationship with it. Though viewers should not understand the pieces narratives in full, the reactions I have been getting are that of fascination. Perhaps the lack of full understanding of the objects' relationships but knowledge of their function and basic context creates curiosity which leads to further interest. My works tap into the desire to investigate and learn that humans lose as they go through the process of "growing up". Though the individual subjects depicted are not always cute in reality, my style turns the object cute and makes them more approachable. They have become a way to talk about reality when dealing with a perceptually skewing illness such as depression.

The final three works became focused on introspection and the subconscious, explored through the visual strategy of cuteness. I focused on my own mind, and analyzed how my own thoughts are processed through the work. The discovery of how the subconscious organizes visual information and cuteness was revealed to be an object visualization strategy for my brain. No matter how the thoughts were processed they always came out with one consistent visual trait: they were always cute.

Conclusion

As long as societies reject cute, there will be an entire world of mental illness coping strategies that people will be too discouraged to address. Cuteness is not a cure-all for mental illness, but as long as something so easily obtained and safe to use can be used to help people struggling with stress or depression, it should be explored to its fullest potential. If society is to reject a coping strategy so fervently, those affected negatively deserve to have a definitive reason why. Until cuteness becomes accepted as a valid subject as both an aesthetic choice and coping mechanism, I will continue to argue for its merits and make work encouraging people to accept it as an important part of being human and taking care of one's own mental health.

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