

MEGAN ELLEN MACDONALD

UNNATURAL
ORDER





Kitsch and the Aesthetics of Comfort

*“Life without kitsch
becomes unbearable.”*

—Friedensreich Hundertwasser

In perhaps the most famous essay on kitsch art, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” the American art critic Clement Greenberg suggests that truly radical art must reject figuration (reference to the real world) and wholeheartedly turn towards total abstraction. Only then, he claimed, can modern art remain pure, unadulterated, and unique. To support his argument, Greenberg championed the paintings of abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, whose massive paintings contained no central focal-point and emphasized flatness.¹ He thought it crucial that artists fight back against the decline of taste in the West, against anything that looked like kitsch.

Kitsch became a popular term among street vendors in Munich, Germany during the 1860s to describe those who painted or drew inexpensive pictures that resonated with the working class. Today, kitsch is defined as mass-produced art that carries little to no intrinsic value or worth—it is deemed to be boring, ugly, unsophisticated, saccharine, and even morally corrupt. Or so it is said.

The paintings of Megan Ellen MacDonald fight against such generalizations by adopting the aesthetics of kitsch to break new ground in contemporary painting. Her work looks closely at the persistent critical debates around kitsch and fine art; namely, “low art” vs. “high art,” “bad taste” vs. “good taste,” and “emotional” vs. “intellectual.” Her paintings are evidence that kitsch does not need to be appreciated ironically, that the attack on kitsch stinks of cultural elitism and an ignorance of the bliss that enchanting things can bring. In this sense, her work closely follows what art historian Rosalind Krauss challenged Greenberg on – that art isn’t just about surface or purity, that it can be contaminated by the personal, the irrational, the absurd, and the messiness of everyday life.²

We remember that Andy Warhol experimented with kitsch by placing low and high art on par with each other through silkscreen prints of soup cans, Brillo boxes, and celebrities. By using mass-produced objects or icons in a factory setting, Warhol made the everyday monumental, even beautiful. Later, Jeff Koons took Warhol a step further – his kitschy balloon dogs and massive ceramic figurines became synonymous with capital, that the medium itself was money. In Koons’s hands, kitsch was both immensely popular and widely accepted among the art establishment. It had gone the way that Greenberg feared.

MacDonald's subject matter is often autobiographical in tone. In her words, "my paintings derive directly from my experience as a woman both in everyday life and in the context of being an artist."³ These themes delivered through kitschy imagery are hauntingly familiar yet wondrously strange. To construct her paintings, MacDonald creates her own figurines and tableaux using 3D modeling software. The compositions are assembled in 3D - similar to how one would traditionally construct a still-life of objects - and are then lit and rendered into a final image. The digital image is then translated onto canvas using oil paint, though loosely - occasionally the end of a painting has little connection to the preliminary digital image. And much like 17th and 18th century history and still life paintings, MacDonald paints preliminary sketches of small, individual objects to understand them better, to get a sense of their character for use in larger paintings.

Her recent work demonstrates the presence of kitsch objects such as picnic tablecloths, sugar candy, vintage teacups, plastic flowers, cinnamon hearts, and ceramic figurines. In paintings such as *Changing of the Seasons* (2021) and *Guilty Pleasure* (2021), such figurines are appropriated then stylized. On one hand, the swan, a traditional symbol of grace and beauty; on the other, the fawn, a symbol of innocence and vulnerability. Each are executed with a near-digital slickness and neon varnish. This unusual coloration and fiery saturation are reminiscent of what painter Vladimir Tretchikoff, the "King of Kitsch," made popular nearly seventy years ago. What MacDonald imparts to the viewer is like a collection of words but it's up to the viewer to assemble them together to make a story. To this end, she rallies against any sense of absolutism or finiteness in her paintings—a part of their charm is their ambiguity, their out-of-placeness.

MacDonald's painting *The Fisherman* (2022) is inspired by John Hicks Whale's painting *Marsh Birds* (1878) which resides in Glenhyrst's permanent collection. John Hicks is the nephew of celebrated Brantford artist Robert Reginald Whale, who was known for applying European techniques to Southern Ontario subject matter. *Marsh Birds* shows skilled technical prowess but neglects linear perspective. Here, the viewer is positioned in the marsh alongside soaring redwing blackbirds yet their flight patterns appear off, as if they're floating in space. A crane stands in the foreground but its anatomy is exaggerated, so much so that its neck is nearly as large as its torso. The anatomical inconsistencies in the painting are likely due to the fact that John Hicks based his paintings on taxidermized animals rather than photographs.



Opposite page left: *Guilty Pleasure* (2021), oil on canvas.
 Opposite page middle: *When All's Said and Done* (2022), oil on canvas.
 Opposite page right: *Bait* (2022), oil on canvas.
 Below: *Crabapple* (2021), oil on canvas.



MacDonald's *The Fisherman* pays homage to John Hicks's work through its subject matter and by bending the rules of anatomy - the crane's neck twists and turn in impossible ways and the trout are charmingly artificial. These fish are repeated below the water's surface in the same way that blackbirds dot the painting at bizarre angles. In its day, Whale's painting would have been a strong example of kitsch for its naïveté, its mass appeal, and its gaudy simplicity. Nearly 150 years separate the paintings and kitsch is at the vanguard of contemporary painting - MacDonald embraces its aesthetics to dispel the myth that colourful, sentimental, and endearing paintings lack criticality or sophistication. This is part of what makes them fascinating and inherently relatable.

However, kitsch can be sinister. Greenberg warned against the hazards of kitsch art and literature being coopted by "dictators" like Joseph Stalin for he saw it as an ideal method of delivering propaganda to the people. For Greenberg, "Kitsch keeps a dictator in closer contact with the "soul" of the people."⁴

Though, as we've seen, the everyday value of kitsch extends beyond aesthetic formalism and political authoritarianism. For example, my grandmother Helena was born to Polish-Ukrainian parents and grew up on a small farm in Northern Saskatchewan. She was poor and her early life was hard—there was little to eat and minor illnesses caused the death of her mother and brother. At the age of 16, she moved to Toronto and found a job manufacturing munitions during World War II. She came from little and started collecting trinkets and knick-knacks because she finally could. They made her feel good. Is it so different than looking at a painting?

She could spend time with these kitschy things, get to know them, and eventually they became woefully familiar. They were like the clothes she wore - Royal Doulton figurines, a llama sculpture made of seashells, factory-made paintings, chia pets, and porcelain giraffes. When she died in 2018, no one in the family wanted to claim them; their meaning and value were deeply individual.

It was simple. She loved giraffes, so she surrounded herself with them. "A picture should be something pleasant, cheerful, and pretty," wrote artist Auguste Renoir, "There are too many unpleasant things in life as it is without creating still more of them."⁵



MEGAN ELLEN MACDONALD (b. 1990) was born in Belleville, Ontario and graduated from OCAD University in 2013 with a BFA in Drawing and Painting. MacDonald's paintings challenge the pre-established aesthetic hierarchy by creating a visual language out of things considered both diminutive and feminine. Her still-life arrangements - first created using 3D software and "documented" as paintings - depict intimate and destructive relationships between objects as an exploration of what it means to embrace both femininity and power. MacDonald has exhibited paintings in Canada, Europe, and the United States. In 2021, her debut US exhibition "Modern Love" opened at Hashimoto Gallery in Los Angeles, California. MacDonald currently lives in Toronto, Ontario.

Image: Calvin Chung via unitlondon.com

Essay written by Matthew Ryan Smith.

Brochure published in conjunction with the exhibition *Megan Ellen MacDonald: Unnatural Order*, curated by Matthew Ryan Smith and presented at Glenhyrst Art Gallery from March 26th – May 22nd, 2022.

Published by Glenhyrst Art Gallery
Brantford, Ontario Canada N3T 1H4
www.glenhyrst.ca

Cover image: *Little Death* (2021), oil on canvas.

Inside cover image: *Changing of the Seasons* (2021), oil on canvas.



Notes

1. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 3-33.
2. See: Jonathan Jones, "Clement Greenberg: the art critic who refuses to flatline," *The Guardian* (11 March, 2011), web.
3. Mercedes Grundy, "Please stop trying to eat your computer screen — these are actually just sweet time-lapses," CBC (6 April, 2018), web.
4. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 19.
5. Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History*, vol. 2, 3rd edition (2008), 1033.