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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO
Greeley, Colorado
The Graduate School

BEAUTIFUL KITSCH: KITSCH TOLERANCE AMONGST THE EDUCATED

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Tiffany D.E. Yonts

College of Performing and Visual Arts
School of Art and Design
Program of Art Education

August 2018

This Thesis by: Tiffany D.E. Yonts

Entitled: *Beautiful Kitsch: Kitsch Tolerance amongst the Educated*

Has been approved as meeting the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in
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Education

Accepted by the Thesis Committee:

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ABSTRACT

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This is an arts-based research project using Rita Irwin's A/R/Tography methodology to explore kitsch tolerance within an academically educated populace and defend kitsch as a valid contemporary art form. Through the creation of a body of artwork, survey, and conversations with the target demographic, this researcher attempted to puzzle out the relationship between kitsch and academically educated people, a group traditionally not associated with kitsch. I created a body of artwork in an attempt to blur the lines between high and low art using techniques, materials, and subject matter, particularly using a lens of beauty, from both categories to see how the aforementioned artwork would be rated in a survey geared toward the academically educated. I found that academically educated people have a varying tolerance for certain kitsch items as well as varying opinions about what makes something kitsch and not kitsch. Ultimately, I discovered several contradictions within the opinions of the survey takers whereby personal connection and emotional impact were rated very high as a motivator for beauty ratings, but not seen as an indicator of kitsch. Indeed, a modern definition of kitsch is ever elusive, and the pursuit of it was very informative of my artistic and teaching practices.

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CHAPTER I

Herding Mosaic Cats

It is a warm and sunny April, and the spring art show is well underway in the high school library. Parents beam and marvel at the artwork their children have made. The art educators are proud and congratulatory. Students mingle in and out of the milieu carrying plates full of cheese and crackers with the unmistakable scent of Swedish meatballs wafting through the air. It is a joyous and celebratory occasion.

As I meander through the towering display standards packed to the brim, with my daughter in tow and totting my own dish of delectable edibles, I spot the activity table vacant. Curious, I investigate what creative pursuit has been set out to encourage the general populace to participate in the jubilant artistic atmosphere. To my delight, I find the table filled with evenly saturated, solid colors that dazzle my eyes. The intoxicating smell of rubber cement fills my nostrils. I have caught wind of that inspirational moment every artist loves, and my brain and body know what is coming next.

The temptation to sit down is too compelling, and I do not fight it. My daughter sits next to me as I look at the myriad of options I have in front of me. I pick up a vibrant grass green, and I begin to cut an almond shape out. The feel of the scissors in my hand is heavy as the blades slice through the paint sample paper like butter. I cut another. I paste them both down on black mat board. They have become two eyes. Then, I grab a

bubblegum pink triangle someone has left behind just waiting to become something other than what it is. I hastily paste it down, too. No longer is it a discarded pink scrap, but a nose in a thus far indiscernible face. My hands are a working blur. I am in the state of unconscious decision-making. I am fully in the creative mode.

Time passes, people pass by, and slowly the ambiguous face turns into a stoic looking feline taking a moment to poke its head above the grass. I pause only to acknowledge my daughter, who is also making artwork, and to make short, but polite conversation. "Yes, I am enjoying myself," I say. "Thank you, I like it, too." Before I know it, the art show is over. We are one of the last few people left. I wonder where the time went, but looking down at my grinning mosaic creation, I know exactly where.

The euphoria I feel for just creating for the sake of creating lingers. I am so enthralled with paint tile mosaic that I brazenly raid the art supply cabinet the next day and begin my second cat collage. While I work on feline number two, I discover that the magical phenomenological event I had at the art show does not persist in the drudgeries of everyday life. The new lackluster art making experience, however, has nothing to do with me. I am just as enamored as I was the night before. The changes seem to take place in everyone else's perception.

Rather than just reveling in the art making environment as they had done the night before, people become highly skeptical and almost suspicious of my work. First, my co-workers, fellow artists and people with whom I share a passion for teaching are perplexed. "Is that for something?" they inquire. This question disturbs me for reasons I cannot yet identify. Do I have to have a purpose for making these mosaic kitties, I wonder. Regardless, I reply, "Yes, for my enjoyment." With a smile and a shoulder

shrug, they accept the answer. Next, my students, people who look to me for guidance in their education become very curious. “What are you doing?” they ask innocently enough. When I tell them that I am making mosaic cats for fun I receive a look that can only be described as confused pity for the crazy-cat-lady, and then they walk away. I feel almost compelled to chase after them and assure them that I am in all actuality a skilled artist, but I squelch the thought like a bug. There is no need for that, I think. My students know I am a fully capable artist. Finally, my family, the people who have always supported my interest in art. “What is that?” my mother almost demands. What an odd question, I think. Is it not obvious? After I explain that I am making art because I can, my mother and my biggest supporter, gives me an incredulous look and shakes her head before she returns to whatever she is doing in the kitchen. I am left a little stunned at this final rejection.

What is it about the mosaic cats that cause people to react so? This experience guides me to question how people judge art. We seem to have an innate knowledge about what is good and what is bad and apply it to art readily, even unprompted. Thus, my research through the lens of kitsch art begins.

Embracing Kitsch

“Kitsch is [a term to describe art that is] traditionally associated with bad taste...and is not of the wealthy, academically educated populace” (Congdon & Blandy, 2005, p. 198) often meaning that kitsch is mass-produced and is meant for public consumption. My experience at the high school art show making what I will forthwith call *Kitschy Cats* made me ponder the claims about kitsch art that Congdon’s article summarizes. The first of which is the claim that defines kitsch as bad taste. As will be

discussed further in Chapter II, kitsch art has been around since at least the 19th century when the term came to be used, and continues to be a thriving art form. If the reader picks up the 2017 spring catalog from IKEA, it becomes quite apparent that mass-produced consumer culture is alive and well. So, who gets the final say of what is good and bad taste in contemporary society? There are no more salons to dictate to the populace what good art is and what it is not. Naturally art museums and galleries abound, but this researcher would daresay some of the art that is exhibited there would make much of current bourgeois society cringe, so I do not think the museums and galleries are necessarily the ones educating the public on the ins and outs of good taste. Yet, the public at large almost immediately recognized *Kitschy Cats* as bad art. How is this possible? From where, exactly, does this seemingly innate ability to recognize kitsch versus high art come and why does kitsch still carry its negative connotations in a contemporary society?

The next claim to address is that kitsch is not for the wealthy or the academically educated. One of the reasons for this claim is due to the mass production of many kitsch items so that all levels of society, even the poor, have access to it. All of my interactions regarding the mosaic cats dealt with people who are academically educated or at least have some background in art, so perhaps there is some validity to this claim. However, there are inconsistencies in this claim as well. *Kitschy Cats* collages are not mass-produced. In fact, each *Kitschy Cat* takes many hours to complete, but each one is made out of mass-produced material. There is an incongruence here that needs to be explored.

Thus, I have two questions that lead me on a twofold path of research that converged at the end. First, could I make artwork that embraced my kitsch tendencies but

also my desire to produce high art? Second, what place does kitsch art have in contemporary society and how was it defined?

I contend that all people participate in kitsch culture in some way whether they recognize it or not. In order to investigate the first part of my path, I put together a survey geared at academically educated adults defined as 18 years of age or older who are currently in a Bachelor's degree program or already hold a degree from an institute of higher learning. The rationale for defining academically educated people in this way was to narrow the pool of participants to a manageable level by which there could be very little argument made about their educated status. In the survey, the participants answered questions about their knowledge of kitsch, and then they rated previously identified kitsch items in peer-reviewed articles on a scale of one to seven. A rating of one would indicate an item as not kitsch at all in their opinion while a rating of seven would designate an item as quintessentially kitsch. At the end of the survey, participants uploaded an item of beauty from their home or one that they would like to have in their home. They also were asked to answer the question if their item was kitsch or not and why they thought so. After analyzing the data, I found the threshold for kitsch tolerance was based in areas such as subject matter, sentimentality, mass production, and personal taste.

In order to investigate the second path of my research, I created a body of work that tried to blur the lines between kitsch art and high art using various media and subject matter that vacillates between cats and the human figure. After I created the body of work, I included some of the images in the survey for participants to rate. This data showed a trend related to material and imagery and its perception on the kitsch scale.

Additionally, I collected anecdotal conversations to see how people outside of the kitsch survey lens evaluated the work. Finally, I assessed my own artwork through my personal lens to see what kinds of qualities make art low or high to me.

I think it is important to illustrate to the reader my motivations when I make art at this point. When I create works of art, I do it for the sheer pleasure of it. The smell of the paint, the feel of the brush in my hand, the texture of the canvas as I work, and watching my handiwork come to life are all wondrous and deeply satisfying to me. When I am finished, I will often admire my handiwork evaluating its craft and beauty in hopes of achieving something even better the next time. Often, however, my artwork does not provoke deep contemplation or provide a platform for invigorating conversation.

Already, my motivations for making art are problematic for high art placing what I make more in the realm of kitsch. Kitsch seems to be the antithesis of high art.

High art and low art are two different social classes of art that are usually distinct in their class, concept, and style. According to modernist paradigm (Rawlingson, 2009), high culture includes art that is held in the highest esteem, usually by the cultural elite. (Hasio, 2015, p. 2)

High art is not supposed to solicit solely pleasure per se, but rather leave room for contemplative thought from the viewer. Kitsch art, on the other hand, supposedly feeds into our self-indulgent nature and requires no reflection. “[Kitsch] does not disturb or challenge the spectator and, rather than provoking vague and ambiguous affects, it communicates an explicit pre-programmed message” (Otty, 2006, p. 41). Perhaps, I am a hedonist when it comes to making art.

Although I have many inspirations, I am especially motivated by the artwork at the turn of the 20th century, particularly the Art Nouveau movement for its graphically designed elements based in nature and depictions of beautiful women. When I found out

that “Art Nouveau is sometimes described as kitsch, often in a degrading manner” (Congdon & Blandy, 2005, p. 197), I was dismayed because of my admiration for the work. Admittedly, the artwork created during this period is highly decorative in nature and meant for consumer culture, but the artists exhibited advanced skill in execution, innovation, and functioned as agents of beautification to the world. How can these qualities be in bad taste?

In my artwork, I typically enjoy making something beautiful. It is what I like about Art Nouveau, and if Art Nouveau is kitsch, then so must be my artwork. Auguste Renoir, a prominent artist during the Impressionist movement, once said, “To my mind, a picture should be something pleasant, cheerful, and pretty, yes pretty! There are too many unpleasant things in life as it is without creating still more of them” (Stokstad, 2008, p.1033). I agree wholeheartedly. In a world where shootings, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters are commonplace, I would like to provide people a visual escape into a place of beauty. Beauty, although very important for artwork in the past, has become something of a cliché and viewed as kitsch. Thus, all of the artwork I produced for this research will be formally aesthetically pleasing and hopefully beautiful, but by definition kitsch. As stated before, some of the images I produced were included anonymously in the survey to see where the participants judged it on the kitsch scale. I anticipated that some of my artwork would be rated low on the kitsch scale indicating a high tolerance for the piece due to media and subject matter despite being beautiful. Results varied, and are further discussed in Chapters IV and V.

My research has several implications. First, it may help to define contemporary people of the United States of America’s understanding of kitsch by testing their

tolerance levels of items that have been identified as kitsch by other scholars. Next, it may have a broader effect on changing how people think about art entirely making it accessible and viable to all levels of society. Finally, it may help to expand art educators' stances on what is and what is not acceptable in an art classroom thereby legitimizing student artwork that may otherwise be set aside.

Definition of Terms

Educated. For the purposes of this research, educated is defined as a person who is currently attaining or has already obtained a Bachelor's degree or higher from an institute of higher learning and is 18 years of age or older.

Kitsch. *Kitsch* is used synonymously with *bad taste* for this research. Bad taste is in turn defined as anything with previously identified kitsch qualities or associations from other scholars such as cheap, mass-produced, unsuitable for the cultivated, sentimental, morally degrading, etc. It is more fully defined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER II

The purpose of this research was to study the kitsch aesthetics of academically educated people in their everyday lives and their tolerance levels for kitsch art. Although the term kitsch has had several definitions since its inception in the early 19th century, it generally refers to art that is mass-produced and cheap. Traditionally speaking, kitsch is also an arbiter of bad taste and of moral degradation. Often, kitsch is associated with members of the lower, uneducated classes because of its cheap accessibility both economically and intellectually. Attempts to “instruct the uneducated classes in matters of good” design (Cieraad & Porte, 2006, p. 277) have been made in order to banish kitsch from existence, yet it persists in contemporary culture. “Beginning in the 1960’s, increasing numbers of academically educated people participated in popular and mass culture” (Congdon & Blandy 2005, p. 199). Additionally, according to researcher J. Jonunytė (2002) as presented by Marytė Ruzgytė (2007) “everyone is more or less, a user of kitsch” (p. 89). My hypothesis was twofold: first, I hypothesized academically educated people more than likely have some understanding of good and bad taste. They could likely identify objects commonly accepted as kitsch indicating the pervasive cultural ideals of good and bad taste. Second, I hypothesized that academically educated people have or want to have what they consider beautiful items of artistic value in their home but do not recognize those items as kitsch. If the second part of my hypothesis were true, then I contended that the traditional notions of kitsch no longer apply in a

contemporary sense and kitsch has instead become a mechanism of self-representation and cultural meaning.

To understand fully what constitutes kitsch art, how its perception has slowly changed, and how we all participate in kitsch on some level, this chapter will examine the origins of kitsch, the paradox of kitsch, kitsch as a meaningful presence in people's lives, and finally how kitsch art fills a human need for beauty.

A Brief History of Bad Taste

Kitsch art has taken on many forms, but its origin rests firmly in the realm of bad taste, and the kitsch label still evokes strong animosity from critics and viewers alike. Defining bad taste, however, has changed significantly and frequently over time and is discussed further in this chapter. Not unlike Impressionism, a term first used derogatorily to “attack the seemingly haphazard technique” of the paintings (Stokstad, 2008, p. 1026), kitsch is a label intended to debase artwork not only on a level of taste, but also morality especially when kitsch is related to people's emotions. “Indeed, the standard view treats emotions, especially intense emotions directed toward certain types of fictional objects or sentimentalized commodities, as perverse and perverting” (Knight, 1999, p. 414). Over time, however, the Impressionist movement became an important milestone in art history, and the Impressionist artists have become some of the most beloved and recognizable of all time. Kitsch art, on the other hand, has not been able to shake off its negative perception even though it has gone through many transformations as the criterion for good and bad taste varies across the globe. The irony, of course, exists in the fact that much of the art of the Impressionists today exists in the form of kitsch art. In fact, this researcher owns a snazzy pair of socks sporting Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*. The current

commercialization and consumerization of Impressionistic art shows that any kind of art can be perceived differently depending on the time, social climate, and the needs of the people who enjoy it. Impressionist artwork has undergone several manifestations from deplorable work that shuns the accepted societal and political norms, to a critical movement in art history, to kitsch art. Kitsch art, too, is not what it was in the past and has transformed into an important art form in contemporary society.

The concept of kitsch was born somewhere in the 19th or 20th century. There does not seem to be an exact date or event in which the term was coined, but the general consensus amongst scholars including Eva Londos (2006), Irene Cieraad & Sjoerdije Porte (2006), and Kristen Congdon & Doug Blandy (2005) is that the word kitsch originated in Germany amongst art dealers who were making a distinction between art that was made for tourists and art that was made for people who know how to appreciate art. The former defines kitsch. If this story is the true beginning of the concept of kitsch art, then it points to the first indications of why kitsch is still perceived so poorly. First, kitsch divides people into two classes: people who know about art and people who do not. Second, the art of the masses, tourists in this case, is considered cheap, commercialized, tasteless, fake, and “aesthetic rubbish” (Congdon & Blandy, 2005, p. 198) while the art of the elite is unique and mentally and visually challenging. Clement Greenberg, a predominant and influential art critic in the mid-twentieth century perpetuated the socio-economic gap implied by appreciation of kitsch art by pronouncing that it is “not suitable for cultivated people” (Congdon & Blandy, 2005, p. 198). Greenberg also goes as far as to compare kitsch art with that of capitalism and totalitarianism. He argues that since kitsch imagery has no substance other than what is

depicted on the surface that the viewers are being essentially spoon-fed and do not have to think for themselves. Like cheap fattening food that has no nutritional value, the masses can easily get their hands on kitsch art because it is inexpensive. In essence, kitsch art keeps the masses subdued because it is readily and easily consumable, does not demand anything more than a cursory glance, and makes the general public feel good.

In addition to self-gratification, kitsch art is regarded with such disrepute on an ethical level as well. Sentimentality in reference to kitsch is when predetermined sweet emotions are purposefully evoked. Robert C. Solomon's *On Kitsch and Sentimentality* (1991) compares philosophical theories regarding sentimentality and kitsch art. He says by "the end of the [19th] century, 'sentimentalist' was clearly a term of ridicule and abuse, connoting superficiality, saccharine sweetness, and the manipulation of mawkish emotion. Kitsch was [literature's] artistic equivalent..." (p. 2). It is true that kitsch artists often access sentimentality through generally accepted depictions of beauty such as pristine children playing with puppies that result in the viewer feeling good. However, Solomon's argument is that even though kitsch art has the outwardly positive effect of making people feel good it is an exploitation of human emotions, and that is ethically bad. Ruth Lorand (1994) suggests that kitsch art is a "misuse of beauty" (p. 403) for just this reason. She readily admits that kitsch art can be beautiful by containing many beautiful elements, but it is like eating "chocolate cookies even though one knows that they are 'bad' for oneself" (p. 403). Based on Clement and Lorand's assessment of kitsch art, it seems to this researcher that kitsch should be avoided at all costs, but it is not.

The Paradox of Kitsch: Your Taste or Mine?

Naturally, one would think that cheap, dangerous, totalitarian, morally degrading art would have been eliminated from society long ago, yet kitsch art remains. Good taste versus bad taste is at its root a matter of opinion, and there are vastly different opinions of what constitutes kitsch art. The determining factors are dependent on whose opinion holds the most sway at the time. For many years and in many societies it was the wealthy who could afford to patronize and control the arts. For example, the courts and salons of France were the arbiters of good taste at one point in time. After their disappearance, “art specialists took the lead in matters of taste and judging developments within the arts” (Cieraad & Porte, 2006, p. 276). As the people who controlled the making of art changed, so too did the definitions of good and bad taste. Indeed, “one culture’s or one generation’s kitsch may be another’s Avant Garde, and what is obligatory as ‘compassion’ or ‘sympathy’ in one age may be dismissed as mere sentimentality in another” (Solomon, 1991, p. 4).

Solomon’s article offers an exquisite example of how tastes have changed and how people view and enjoy art. He visited the Denver Art Museum and went to the floor exhibiting works from nineteenth century France when the salons were the authorities of good taste. Two of the main artists still featured in this part of the museum are Adolph Bouguereau (1825-1905) and Edgar Degas (1834-1917). Adolph Bouguereau’s work is “staunchly traditional” due to his “adherence to established painting conventions” (Kleiner, 2009, p. 805). The work, *Childhood Idyll* (1900), at the Denver Art Museum features two idyllic adolescent girls playing against a picturesque background. It is so perfect it is an impossibility in real life. At the time of its creation, Bouguereau was a

“highly acclaimed French academic artist” and enjoyed immense popularity with the backing of “state patronage throughout his career” (Kleiner, 2009, p. 805), meaning that his work was sought after by the educated elite. Degas’s work, however, broke with traditional conventions with its unusual compositions, off-balance figures, and unidealistic scenes. Degas is now an important figure in Post-Impressionistic art history who earned a name for his depictions of ballet dancers while Bouguereau in comparison has faded away into relative obscurity. Therefore, it would make sense if contemporary viewers of this exhibit ignored the Bouguereau work completely due to its now perceived kitschy nature: cute girls in a pretty setting that demand nothing of the viewer but pleasure. After all, who would voluntarily have their taste, nay, their very morality called into question by admiring such work? The reality, however, is contradictory to expectation. According to Solomon’s article, the catalog for the exhibit said:

Most of our visitors readily admit they don’t know a whole lot about art. So it’s only natural for them to look for works that are pretty and easy to understand...novice viewers rarely speak of the Bouguereau’s features and aesthetic qualities. Instead, they use it as a springboard to dreams of the future or nostalgic memories of the past. More advanced viewers are soon bored. (p. 4)

Indeed, the average person today, just as the elite in the past, admire Bouguereau more than Degas despite Bouguereau’s kitsch qualities. Thus, the good taste of the past shifted from the elite to the lower class thereby making it bad taste. However, from this researcher’s viewpoint, this seems an unfair assessment of good versus bad taste. Unfortunately, if the catalogue truly quotes the curators, then they continue to perpetuate the arbitrary standards of high and low art indicating that the uneducated art goers, meaning the general masses, cannot possibly understand the Degas paintings in the same way as an academically educated art goer can so they prefer the Bourguereau. The

paradox is this: A hundred or so years ago, the educated elite appreciated Bourguereau and not Degas. What truly is the difference between then and now? Regardless of the answer, this story illustrates nicely that the change in opinion about Bourguereau happened with the people who control the art, but not the art itself. Bourguereau was once wildly popular with elite French society, but now is popular amongst the everyday person.

A Change in the Paradigm

Despite numerous efforts to eradicate bad taste from the world, kitsch has in recent years enjoyed a growing interest amongst collectors, universities, and museums. This was made possible by the changing dynamic of consumer society. Andy Warhol's work in the 1960s, and in part the work of the Dadaists in the early twentieth century, played a major role in helping to pave the way for the rising interest in kitsch art. Warhol, originally a commercial artist, was openly interested in financial gain and used available technology to lessen his workload to increase profit. Take for example Warhol's *Marilyn Diptych* made in 1962 using silk-screening. "The method was quicker than painting by hand and thus more profitable, and Warhol could also produce many versions of the subject – all of which he considered good business" (Stokstad, 2008, p. 1152). Furthermore, he glorified everyday ordinary objects such as his famous Brillo Boxes, soup cans, and cookie jars. Perhaps more importantly, Warhol played on people's emotions by tapping into mass media subjects like the death of Marilyn Monroe. While not regarded as kitsch, Warhol's artwork shares many qualities that define kitsch art such as easy accessibility, mundanity, and purposefully emotional. Without a doubt, Warhol's work is some of the most influential contemporary art of the twentieth century. Warhol is

often credited with ending art, as we know it, meaning the art of the elites from the historical past, and beginning a new paradigm whereby the art of the everyday is just as valid as the elitist artwork from the past. As Arthur Danto states, in an interview referring to his book *After the End of Art* (1997), “You can’t say something is art or not anymore. That is all finished. Warhol made it no longer possible to distinguish something that is art from something that is not” (Menand, 1998, p. 40).

The world’s transition to viewing art differently did not happen overnight; it took time to take hold. By the 1980s, Greenberg’s influence over the art world waned and was viewed as elitist and “irrelevant to contemporary culture” (Otty, 2006, p. 42) enabling scholars to take a serious look at the role kitsch plays in people’s lives.

Different Needs, Different Kitsch

First, it should be understood that kitsch exists in a variety of forms depending on who is looking. The catalog from the Denver Art Museum, for example, is not taking into account the viewers’ personal lenses. Each viewer is going to bring something to whatever he or she is looking at and will have different reactions no matter what the artist may have originally intended:

We can fail to have a kitsch response to something that many might take to be an exemplary piece of kitsch...Some of us are just unaffected by, for instance, depiction of wide-eyed and innocent children cuddling puppies. And we might experience a kitsch response to an atypical object. (Knight, 1999, p. 412)

It is essential to understand that within the kitsch world there also exists a spectrum of low to high. Of course, having a low to high spectrum is problematic in the world of kitsch because it would indicate that there is an inherent hierarchy. Rather than label kitsch with the terms of low and high, this paper will use the terminology *Classical* for the former and *Professional* for the latter as used by Ruzgyte’s article from 2007.

Classical kitsch is kitsch art that meets the generally accepted definitions of kitsch art: cheap, plastic, mass-produced, etc. Professional kitsch is art that is “typically very professional, well-made, and expensive” (Solomon, 1991, p. 3) meaning that it is not easily identifiable as kitsch and may be often mistaken for high art. Regardless of where kitsch art falls on the kitsch spectrum, it is dependent on the viewer to give it meaning. In terms of Classical kitsch, sometimes it is “those different, silly, but nice objects [that] get other (not necessarily aesthetic) value[s] and right[s] – emotional, historical, cognitive” (Ruzgyte, 2007, p. 87). These qualities take the viewer beyond just the surface of kitsch artwork and requires one to think on a deeper level and start to appreciate what kitsch has to offer contemporary art. The following reports on kitsch done previously by other researchers will help to support this point.

Reports on Previous Studies of Kitch:

Daniel Miller is a researcher who studied kitsch art not from a standpoint of taste, but rather from the viewpoint of the people who own it in his paper entitled, “Things that Bright up the Place” (2006). In his research, he writes about a woman named Marcia, originally from the Caribbean, but at the time of research lived in South London. Her home at Christmas time becomes “like a museum of high kitsch” (p. 237). Based on the descriptions in the research, every available space in Marcia’s home was occupied with some figurine or knick-knack. It was so jam packed with stuff that Miller found it difficult to move about the house without fear of knocking something over. Miller reflected:

Looking around at the ornaments it is only too easy for people from another background and a different system of reputation to dismiss these things as kitsch... Yet to think in terms of kitsch is simply to condescend, to fail engage with the materiality of this population, what precisely she has and why, and to fail

to engage with her. Because as one comes to understand both her and this scene within which she has center stage, then it reforms itself once again into a very different kind of aesthetic, one that holds considerable meaning, that populates the landscape with clues as to who she is and the contradictions that life has created for her. (p. 237)

Indeed, as one reads about Marcia's life, it becomes apparent that the items in her home speak to her experiences. For example, the sheer number of items in her home may be a direct result of the poverty she experienced as a child. As a retired adult in South London, Marcia can now travel and purchase commemorative mementoes and display them as a reminder of how far she has come in life. They provide her with a source of pride. Additionally, Miller found that Marcia would buy several of the same object to bring back with her to sell to her friends and neighbors. The reason behind this behavior also spans from her background of continuous labor and seeking opportunities to make a little extra money. Even in Marcia's relatively comfortable retirement, these habits remain. Miller's research continues to elaborate on how the kitsch items in Marcia's house relate to her rich and tragic background. Thus, the "Black musicians...Santas, religious icons, and toys" (p. 236) items considered Classical kitsch become a "diorama of the meaning of her life" (p. 244). Marcia's items deserve so much more than just a cursory glance. They should not be dismissed automatically just because they are traditionally accepted as kitsch.

Lucia Ruggerone and Neil Jenkins (2015) did another very interesting case study in Milan, Italy. These two researchers looked into the beauty aesthetics of Milan's low-income citizens. Their selection of low-income people was very purposeful because they wanted the opinion of people who were virtually untouched by conceptualizations of beauty defined by art history or previous aesthetic philosophies. This relates to kitsch

artwork directly because kitsch is associated with low-income people who are not educated in the art world nor trained in good taste. Each of the research subjects had to produce from their home an object of beauty. Beauty for beauty's sake is arguably another qualifier of kitsch art because it taps into the viewer's basic pleasure instincts and does not require any deeper thinking. However, despite meeting the two qualifiers for participants in study of collectors of kitsch, poor and uneducated, the people who were involved as research participants definitely had their own ideas about what constitutes beauty, and it was far more than skin deep. Notably, no one participant requested "clarification on what [the researchers] meant by 'beautiful,' the concept was unproblematic for them" (p. 400), and they selected objects without hesitation.

The first participant, Maria, selected a religious statue of Padre Pio, an Italian priest canonized in 2002. The statue itself qualifies as a Classical kitsch item. It is mass-produced and means to produce predictable feelings of devotion within the viewer. Ruggerone and Jenkins (2015) point out, however, that for Maria the statue is beautiful for her not because of the way it looks and not for the way it is supposed to make her feel, but because it evokes for her feelings of personal protection for her and her family. Maria strongly felt that the statue was responsible for miracles associated with her children and herself. Thus, its beauty rested not in the statue's external kitsch nature, but in what it symbolized to Maria. Maria's love for the item seems to transform it into something deeply meaningful. It was taken from ordinary to extraordinary for this reason.

The second and third participants produced beautiful items, though not as directly associated with Classical kitsch art as Maria's religious icon, that again were significant in their lives even though the objects were not high art. It goes to suggest that people of

low economic status can recognize beauty and substance in their worlds just as well as the educated elite, and for similar reasons. Ruggerone and Jenkins say, “When thrown into the flux of ordinary life, aesthetic takes on an anthropological meaning and that the aesthetic value of objects is for ordinary people a signifier of a set of relations they entertain with those things” (p. 409).

Kitsch art is art for the masses, but evidently, it can hold deep meaning for the people who own it as illustrated by the above reports. “The author [J. Jonutyte, 2002] advises to understand kitsch not as a type of an object but a man’s frequent relationship, communication with these objects as cultural objects” (Ruzgytė, 2007, p. 81).

Beauty and Kitsch

Defining beauty is just as difficult as defining good and bad taste. Yet, the two share some distinct similarities making them intimately related. The premiere figure in defining aesthetic beauty is Immanuel Kant from the 18th century. *Critique in Judgment* (1914) establishes the differences between pleasure, beauty, and goodness. Much of what academia knows about aesthetics today is based on his work. He says, “That which GRATIFIES a man is called *pleasant*; that which merely PLEASES him is *beautiful*; that which ESTEEMED [or approved] by him, *i.e.* that to which he accords an objective worth, is *good*” (1914, p. 54). Pleasantness, Kant continues, only concerns irrational animals. Beauty, on the other hand concerns men, who are animals, but capable of rational thought. Goodness is an idea that concerns all rational beings perhaps including the spiritual world. Pleasantness, as Kant defines it, is something that placates to the senses. For example, if this researcher derives pleasure from eating black licorice, the sensation is pleasant to the researcher because it provides physical pleasure. Black

licorice is not a flavor everyone enjoys, however. Thus, this researcher cannot then turn around and say eating black licorice is beautiful because it is not a universal feeling. For Kant, beauty must be universal, devoid of pleasantness, and viewed from a disinterested point of view. Beauty and goodness differ in that goodness derives from concept alone. Goodness is not the result of a physical interaction, but rather a mental one, and again as with beauty, it must be universal to be truly good.

A major crux of Kant's argument is that people tend to mix up pleasure with beauty. Beauty cannot be connected to the senses of any particular person. Kant's influence may be one of the reasons why kitsch art is viewed so morally deplorable; the claim is of course that kitsch art preys upon the senses and it purposefully makes the viewer feel good, which is neither beautiful nor good. Paradoxically, in the course of art history, figural and representational art gave way to much more abstract, conceptual, and subconscious work. There are many contextual reasons for this shift, but perhaps this is due in part because representational art relates too directly to the senses and could never be considered truly beautiful by Kantian standards. Thus, representational beauty in art became kitschy.

Yet, despite Kant's influence and despite the bad reputation of kitsch, representational beauty and kitsch persist and people still indulge in them. The proceeding part of this chapter is an exploration of beauty as a learned and biological need in all people's lives despite their cultural background.

Learned Beauty versus Universal Beauty

"Beauty is mysterious. We know it when we see it, but it eludes explanation" (Sanders, David, & Love, 2012, p. 566). It is true. In this researcher's experience, it

seems people know immediately when something is beautiful just like they seem to know when something is kitsch, but they have difficulty explaining how or why they recognize it. Obviously, much of what we perceive as beautiful is dependent on and influenced by factors such as upbringing, culture, and historical period. The purpose of this section of writing is not necessarily to analyze the ever-changing beauty aesthetics of the past or contemporary societies across the world, but rather the underlying currents that people may be unaware of in their day-to-day lives that inform their ideas of what is beautiful.

People's knowledge of category structure within their culture plays a critical part in defining what they think is beautiful. A study done by Megan Sanders, Tyler Davis, and Bradley C. Love (2012) sought to see how category knowledge of art in museums versus art in a student art show would be rated by 93 undergraduate students from the University of Texas in regard to beauty and category typicality. According to Sanders, Davis, and Love, the cultural expectation is that works of art in an art museum have already undergone a rigorous selection process by experts and by association are more valuable, beautiful, intellectual, etc. than artworks outside of the museum. Student artwork is just the opposite: artwork done by people who are still learning. Student artwork is thus, perceived as inferior in every way when compared to artwork in a museum. The results of the study are quite interesting and informative. Indeed, the graduate students did rate the art museum works as more beautiful and typical of their categories than the student artwork. However, "because student art shows are not as strongly associated with beautiful art, beauty did not contribute to this category's typicality structure" (p. 572). This means that since student artwork is not typically considered beautiful that its beauty ratings did not alter its typicality ratings. The point

here is that this type of knowledge about beauty is embedded in the culture resulting in a rather unconscious byproduct of the society in which the 93 graduate students live:

Museum artwork is inherently beautiful because experts say so while student artwork does not have the same kind of credibility. These kinds of judgements come from individuals and, by Kantian standards, cannot be universal examples of beauty. However, there are types of beauty that may actually be universal much as Kant proposed.

Undoubtedly, culture and the brain influence each other in complicated ways. Given these multidirectional influences, it makes sense to stop trying to explain art as one or the other; rather, it makes sense to try to understand the way art can be understood both biologically and culturally. (Chatterjee, 2014, p. 124)

When a person looks at something he or she considers beautiful certain parts of the brain associated with reward/pleasure activate. This is true whether or not the person is looking at the actual object or looking at a visual representation of that object such as a piece of artwork. Interestingly, “when evaluating the aesthetics of art, the same networks are activated as for attractive faces” (De Ridder & Vanneste, 2013, p. 334). This statement is critical in understanding how the human brain works when deciding if something is beautiful or not. If the same parts of the brain activate when looking at beautiful artwork or a beautiful face, then it indicates there is “no special art circuitry in the brain” (De Ridder & Vanneste, 2013, p. 334). If there is no part of the brain set aside for art, specifically, then that means every person on the planet has the ability to judge what is beautiful and what is not. As Ruggerone and Jenkins suggest:

...aesthetic appreciations do not only occur in relation to artworks, design pieces, or fashion items and they are not only formulated by experts and/or highly educated/cultured individuals. On the contrary, experiences of beauty and aesthetic assessments permeate ordinary people’s everyday lives: as they go about their ordinary affairs, individuals continuously make aesthetic choices, evaluations, remarks, that give sense to their experience and shape their way of existing in the ‘life-world.’ (p. 394)

Thus, there is nothing special about the people who distinguish between low art and high art other than their privileged status in society. From a Kantian point of view, this ability to judge beauty does not automatically constitute universal beauty since everyone has differing tastes and find different aesthetic experiences pleasurable. However, if our sense of beauty is linked to our biology, then perhaps universal beauty does exist.

Take for instance the beautiful face example mentioned previously. In Anjan Chatterjee's book, *The Aesthetic Brain* (2014), he references several studies that investigated the correlations between people's opinions on beautiful faces in both the same ethnic groups as well as across ethnic groups. He says, "Taken together, the consistency of ratings of facial attractiveness across ethnicities and cultures suggests that there are common elements in faces to which adults are responding that are not just a cultural creation" (p. 7). The three attributes that seem to make faces beautiful regardless one's cultural background or ethnic heritage are averageness, symmetry, and sexual dimorphism. In regards to the human face, the aforementioned qualities may be where universal beauty lies since culture does not seem to affect these areas. Beyond these three characteristics, however, perceptions of beauty become very complex. Beauty "exists in relationship to other things, which is what gives it its meaning in the world" and art is no exception: "The context determines how beautiful a certain piece of art is considered to be" (De Ridder & Vanneste, 2013, p. 334). Thus, the human race's knowledge of beauty has underpinnings in our shared biology, but is also greatly influenced by our culture. Regardless, beauty is a need both culturally and biologically, and kitsch art might just be the answer to that need.

Debunking the Kitsch Myth

Taste and who defines taste has certainly changed and “it is doubtful whether kitsch is something that really exists” (Londos, 2006, p. 295) in contemporary society. There have been many attempts to eradicate kitsch art altogether. Take for instance several attempts by well-meaning people at taste reforms. Books such as *Have You Good Taste?* by Margaret Bulley from 1933 tried to educate people on how to tell objects of good taste from others using an arbitrary set of criterion such as, but not limited to: color, line and shape, rhythm and balance, ornaments and decoration, etc. Naturally, the book’s standards of taste were based primarily on what Bulley considered to be in good and bad taste at the time. Again, this boils down to a matter of opinion and is subject to change as culture and time progress.

Another example of people, in this case a “group of self-appointed of the interior artists” (Cieraad & Porte, 2006, p. 277), taking it upon themselves to educate the masses in good versus bad taste happened around 1900 in the Netherlands. These same interior artists held an exhibit in 1908 that concentrated on the designs of chairs to communicate the ideals of good taste to the public at large. What constituted a good chair was the shape of its legs. Chairs with straight and square legs were good while chairs with curved and round legs were bad. In the context of the time and place, these criteria may have made sense, but to this researcher now seem completely random and meaningless.

Humans may have evolved past our basest animal instincts through the cultivation of society, but perhaps our need for beauty and personal meaning has manifested itself in other ways with kitsch. Far from becoming an artistic blight of the past, kitsch seems to be rising in popularity amongst both academically educated and uneducated people.

“Beginning in the 1960s increasing numbers of academically educated people participated in popular and mass culture” (Congdon & Blandy, 2005, p. 199). Nowadays, kitsch seems to have permeated every niche of society. “The author [J. Jonutyte, 2002] claims that kitsch purposefully functions on modern culture and everyone is more or less, a user of kitsch” (Ruzgytė, 2007, p. 89). Cieraad & Porte (2006) conducted a study that is illuminating to the growing participation of kitsch culture. The study targeted people in the Netherlands, one of the places that went through dramatic taste reforms. The purpose of their study was to examine how different members in society from lower-educated males and females to university students to highbrow members of Netherlandish society view and participate in kitsch. As it turns out, the researchers found that almost all members of their study participated in kitsch culture in some way both positively and negatively. Some items of kitsch were seen as trendy and fun while others were branded “too kitschy” (p. 287). As mentioned earlier, there does seem to be a hierarchy even within kitsch. However, if everyone is a user of kitsch, then those kinds of distinctions really cannot exist. Furthermore, the distinctions between low and high really cannot exist.

This chapter has ruminated on several points. First, kitsch art has a long and sordid history. Opinions about what constitutes kitsch art have changed depending on who is in power, cultural expectations, and changes in the art world. Second, kitsch art is far from meaningless, mass-produced, garbage. Indeed, it can reflect a person’s entire history if the viewer is willing to take it seriously. Third, kitsch art and perceptions of beauty share several characteristics. They are both culturally dependent and their perceptions change over time. Beauty, and the need for beauty, may have biological

underpinnings that make human beings universally require it in their lives. This quality of beauty may contribute to the persistence of kitsch art. Finally, with the absence of clear distinctions between low and high art everyone has become a participant in kitsch culture in one way or another. It is this researcher's opinion that kitsch art now has a respectable place in the art world and should be treated as such.

CHAPTER III

Methodology & Methods

This researched was conducted using Rita Irwin's A/R/Tography model whereby this artist is also the researcher creating art in order to understand the perceptions of kitsch in contemporary society more profoundly, and then be able to take this new knowledge and spread it in the educational realm. This model allowed for rhizomatic relationships to rise and form throughout the conduct of the research revealing new and surprising understandings. To aide in this model, I used historical analysis, informal interviews, as well as survey to gather and analyze data.

Data Collection

There was a threefold approach for data collection. First, I examined my own relationship with kitsch and my art making process. Second, it was imperative that an historical narrative presented through the literature review in Chapter II was established in order to understand the rich and complicated story of kitsch art. Additionally, the historical background for this research project set the precedent for defending kitsch art's role and pervasiveness in contemporary society. Third, I surveyed other members of the academically educated demographic and their relationship with kitsch.

I administered the survey over the social media website Facebook using a survey generator called Qualtrics. I was able to gather data from academically educated people who are 18 years or older. For the purposes of this research, educated people were defined as those who are currently in a bachelor's degree program or have obtained this level of education or higher. It is the researcher's assumption that academically educated

people had some preexisting knowledge of good and bad taste due to their level of intellectual merit, and that they would be able to judge differing levels of kitsch art. Additionally, this researcher contended that the vast majority of academically educated people participate in kitsch culture in their beauty aesthetics. The focus of the survey was to determine how kitsch items were rated by academically educated people, as defined by the terms in this study in Chapter I. The file upload of a beautiful object at the end of the survey provided additional insight to academically educated people's aesthetic choices. The ultimate goal of the survey was to try to determine the tolerance level of kitsch items by educated people and to try to pinpoint some of the contemporary standards of what constituted each kitsch rating.

The artwork created explored what this researcher considered beautiful, and also contained traditionally kitsch elements such as mass produced media and subject matter. Four artworks of the nine made by the researcher were included in the survey to see how academically educated people rated them on the kitsch scale and potentially why. Further investigation was conducted regarding the role of subject matter for the artworks in relation to kitsch. Additionally, anecdotal conversations between the researcher and the viewers were included to give an even broader perspective of how the researcher's artwork was interpreted both in and out of the realm of kitsch.

Procedure

The timeframe for this study was four academic school semesters on a traditional calendar. The body of artwork for this study began in the spring of 2017 and completed at the end of the spring 2018. The historical research took two academic semesters to

complete and polish. The survey was open to volunteers starting in January 2018 and was open for two months.

Participants

I collected all of the data and produced all of the artwork independently for analysis. Additionally, I informally took note of firsthand conversations amongst friends, family, educators, and colleagues regarding the artwork and kitsch aesthetics and the critical thinking that arose from those conversations. Finally, fifty-one completed, viable surveys were submitted after two months of availability through Qualtrics via the social media website, Facebook.

Data Analysis

Part one of the data analysis starts with discussing the process of making the artwork. This part of the analysis helped to illuminate the decisions made during the art-making process. It was important to consider things like material and imagery choice in terms of kitsch aesthetics in order to illustrate the very deliberate choices made to blur the lines of high and low art. Next, I discussed the informal conversations I had during the art making process and surprising insights, emotions, and concerns that arose as a result for both the viewers and the artist. Finally, the survey results were analyzed systematically looking for patterns and trends amongst the responses that would point to new definitions of kitsch and its place in contemporary society.

Limitations

There were several constraints regarding the outcome of the study. First, survey data was limited to those who voluntarily completed it. This means that data received was ultimately out of the researcher's control. For example, data was skewed by a particular

demographic. The majority of the survey takers were Caucasian/white women. While this gave interesting results regarding kitsch tolerance amongst educated women, it was not necessarily representative of the population as a whole. Additionally, since the survey was distributed on Facebook, a website created in the United States of America, it was likely that most survey participants were American giving a somewhat narrow and Western view of contemporary kitsch aesthetics as opposed to a global view.

Another constraint was trying to define the characteristics of kitsch art in my own artwork. Kitsch art has such a variety of definitions and parameters that no one body of work could possibly encompass all of them. Thus, I had to narrow down definers of kitsch to two variables: media and subject matter. Finally, concerning the subject matter in the artwork, this researcher was bound to correspondences from the photographers whose work provided the inspiration for several paintings in the body of work who did not respond. Thus, finding out more about the individual models proved to be problematic.

CHAPTER IV

Yonts Raising the Height of Kitsch to High Art

The beginning of the art making process for this research was rather serendipitous in that I had no intention or even inkling that the first mosaic cat would turn into something much bigger. As stated in Chapter I, my impetus for making art is a bit self-indulgent as I do it because I enjoy the process. Due to the reactions I received when I made my first mosaic cat (see Figure 1), however, I found purpose and passion in delving



Figure 1. Tiffany Yonts, Kitschy Cat #1, Paint Sample Tiles, 2017.

into the perceptions of high art and low art, specifically kitsch. What proceeds in this chapter is my process and evolution of making the art, conversations about the art before, during, and after its creation, my impressions based on the literature review, and the data analysis of the research survey.

Initial Art-making Processes

I made the first mosaic cat purely from imagination. I did not make use of any reference images, and the resulting cat is a bit cartoonish, but not without its charm.

Before I decided to research kitsch in depth, I made three more mosaic cats (see Figures 2, 3, & 4). For each of the proceeding mosaic cats, I did use image references I found on the internet to inspire each one in a very rough manner. As I made each mosaic, I was



Figure 2. Tiffany Yonts, *Kitschy Cat #2*, Paint Sample Tiles, 2017

able to refine my techniques by placing tiles more closely and tightly together as well as using varying colors to imitate lighting. Each subsequent cat retained the same mosaic quality as the first and a bit of the cuteness, but with a better execution of skill.

Additionally, each cat became more difficult to make as the cats became more detailed and slightly more, and I am using this term very loosely, accurate to life.



Figure 3. Tiffany Yonts, *Kitschy Cat #3*, Paint Sample Tiles, 2017



Figure 4. Tiffany Yonts, *Kitschy Cat #4*, Paint Sample Tiles, 2017

By the time I finished the final mosaic cat, I had decided to defend kitsch as a valid artistic style. I only had to decide how I was going to go about it in a manner that would be satisfying to me artistically. Ultimately, I wanted to combine my developing new mosaic style with subject matter that I considered high due to its difficulty to see if the resulting artwork would be judged by others more favorably. Additionally, I thought that materials may have something to do with the relatively low opinion of the mosaic cats, so I thought a mixed media approach to my next works to include painting, a

traditionally accepted high art, would help to elevate my mosaics into the realm of high art.

In my opinion, the most difficult subject matter to master is people. In order to avoid painting a person in a cartoonish manner I decided to once again do image research on the internet. This time, however, I was much more selective about my image choice since I much more accurately tried to depict the figure in each image that I chose.

I started my image research by looking through copyright free/royalty free image web pages such as iStock and Getty to ensure that I could have legal access to any image I used. Additionally, I chose to look for images of beautiful women. There are two reasons for this choice in subject matter. First, I chose beautiful women to satisfy my own impeti for making art. I like painting beautiful things as well as people, so the two seemed a good match. Second, and more importantly for the purposes of this research, since I had already decided to defend kitsch I chose beautiful women because beauty and the figure have become somewhat outdated in the contemporary art world and are considered somewhat kitsch.

Initially, I was not sure what I was looking for in a beautiful figure. Much of my image selection was intuitive. I knew a beautiful face when I saw one, and there were many. Ultimately, I looked for images of beautiful women where I could potentially see a way to use the mosaic tiles from *Kitschy Cats* in both the background of the image as well as the figure itself. As with the mosaic cats, I made each image in successive order trying to improve upon each one as I went. Unlike the mosaic cats, however, I spent a lot more time in the planning process of each image.

After finding the images I wanted to use for my artwork, I began the art making process by doing a pencil drawing (see Figures 5, 6, 7, & 8). Doing the initial pencil drawings served a couple of purposes. First, it allowed me to dissect the figure on an intimate level. Through the graphite drawings, I learned about each figure's features, lights and shadows, curves, and imperfections as represented in the reference image. It was like getting to know the people without ever having met them. The drawing process made me wonder what kind of lives each person led and who they were. Second, on a



Figure 5. Tiffany Yonts, *Pencil Sketch Magnolia*, Graphite, 2017.



Figure 6. Tiffany Yonts, *Pencil Sketch Hollyhock*, Graphite, 2017.



Figure 7. Tiffany Yonts, *Pencil Sketch Calla Lily*, Graphite, 2017.



Figure 8. Tiffany Yonts, *Pencil Sketch Sunflower*, Graphite, 2017.

much more technical level, the pencil drawings allowed me to consider the planning for the artwork such as which parts would be painted, which parts would be mosaic, and which parts might potentially be another material. In Figures 5, 6, 7, & 8, I spent a great deal of energy shading the areas I wanted to paint, and in the areas that became mosaic I just did a simple line drawing. Even though I must cut each individual tile piece, it is

quite difficult to make the tiles fit a prescribed format, so through my experience with *Kitschy Cats* I learned that it is just best to keep the planning for the mosaic sections simple. Then, I was left to decide what to do with each background.

I knew I wanted to do something beautiful, and the background for each reference image was blank like a photograph taken in a studio, so I had free reign to do what I wanted. Since one of my favorite art movements is Art Nouveau, which often features beautiful women and flowers, I began by choosing to do flowers inspired by stained glass windows from that period, namely those of Louis Comfort Tiffany. As with choosing reference images for the figures, I chose which flowers I wanted to use based on my personal preferences as well as what I thought would be a good solution to my technical artistic problems. In essence, the flowers became a decorative element in the artwork, which is another characteristic of traditionally accepted kitsch art.

By the end of this phase of artistic research, I accomplished making multi-media art using both high and low materials centered around the human figure (see Figures 9,



Figure 9. Tiffany Yonts, *Magnolia*, Mixed Media, 2017.

10, 11, & 12) that was meant to be perceived as higher art than the mosaic cats due to the change in subject matter from cats to people and the addition of paint.



Figure 10. Tiffany Yonts, *Hollyhock*, Mixed Media, 2017.



Figure 11. Tiffany Yonts, *Calla Lily*, Mixed Media, 2017.

I knew the only way to tell whether or not the artworks featuring people would be judged more favorably by the general populace than *Kitschy Cats* was to actually use some of my images in the survey I made for people to rate. Thus, I chose one mosaic cat



Figure 12. Tiffany Yonts, *Sunflower*, Mixed Media, 2017.

(Figure 3) and two portraits (Figures 10 & 12) to include among other images that had been previously identified as kitsch items by other researchers.

As an artist and as a researcher, I felt that the gap between the two sets of paintings, *Kitschy Cats* and the mosaic portraits, was too large. I needed some sort of bridge between the two. Thus, I made one more artwork in an attempt to make the two sets of mosaics a more cohesive whole when looked at as a continuum of kitsch art from low to high (see Figure 13). In this last painting, I returned to the subject matter of a cat,



Figure 13. Tiffany Yonts, *Kitschy Cat #5*, Mixed Media, 2017.

but this time the cat is painted and in the same manner as the human figures. The background was inspired not from stained glass, but from wallpaper. Figure 13 was still done in the same mosaic technique as all the other artworks. Finally, I used embroidery cord woven directly into the wooden canvas in an attempt to artificially lower the impression of the overall work from an artwork that might be considered relatively high to something in the middle between kitsch art and high art. Figure 13 was also included in the survey.

Critiques and the Can-of-Worms

My artwork and research concerning kitsch and its place in contemporary society sparked rigorous conversations and discussions. In some cases, the artwork and research seems to have made people truly ponder what kitsch art is and their personal notions about good and bad taste. In other instances, concerns were brought up about the association of subject matter and kitsch that I had not considered and led me to think further on my choices. What follows are excerpts and summaries of the aforementioned conversations with particular emphasis on the conversations regarding the mosaic portraits.

The first time I had a formal critique about the mosaic cats was at the end of the spring semester in 2017. At the time I was more incredulous about the reaction to my artmaking experience than I was concerned about the validity of the art itself. To me, the mosaic cats were something fun to make, and that should be reason enough for making them and calling them art. At that point, I had not put much thought into *Kitschy Cats* being viewed as something other than legitimate, albeit cute, art. However, as I was regaling my art show story to my peers and professor it came to my attention that

questioning the validity of art and the concepts of low versus high could indeed become my topic of research. One of my cat-loving peers remarked, “That’s high art, I don’t care what anybody else says.” While I did not necessarily disagree with my cohort member’s sentiments, I could not help but acknowledge my biases when it came to my own artwork. “Yes,” I thought, “*Kitschy Cats* is art, but is it ‘high art?’” Thus, I came to realize that in my mind the cartoonish cats were somehow lacking in substance in comparison to my typical work, which strives for realism. My previous notions of high art, which include realism, was one reason why I thought the addition of a realistically (to the best of my ability anyway) painted figure would improve the perceived level of the artwork. I was soon to find out that I was not entirely wrong in my assumptions, but I definitely stumbled on to something that I did not expect.

The following summer semester I began work on the portraits. It was a slow and tedious process with significantly more time spent in the planning process than the mosaic cats. However, I found great joy in making the portraits and found each one to be quite beautiful. With the added elements of the figure and *realistic* painting, I felt that the portraits had somehow gained prestige, but they definitely retained some of the low nature of the *Kitschy Cats* with their bright colors and decorative qualities.

During the formal critique, one of my peers advised me to, “Ditch the idea of kitsch. Your work is valuable and worth it.” My fellow student meant this comment to be a compliment, of course, but it just fueled me to further investigate what makes art low or high, kitsch or not, valued or disvalued. There was just such a disparity between the reactions to *Kitschy Cats* and the portraits that I was left wondering how people decide. I did not want to value one set of artwork over the other because both sets represent a piece

of who I am as an artist: playful and serious, whimsical and technical, etc. Contradictions live side-by-side in life, so why cannot kitsch and high art live so as well and be equally valued?

The fall semester that followed allowed me to further explore kitsch elements combined with portraiture and mosaic. I took a fibers class that challenged me to include other materials into my body of work like glass seed beads and embroidery cord. For this class, I started with another portrait using much the same process as before except I was looking to add more than just sample paint tiles. During this time, I finished Figure 13, the bridge image, and Figure 12 the African woman with the tattoo.

For Figure 12, I found what I interpreted to be an exquisite picture of a woman who exuded confidence and wisdom beyond her years for my final portrait. She had that certain something that I looked for in a subject. Thus, I excitedly embarked on the venture of creating this last portrait. The finished product is, in my opinion, the most successful of all the portraits. This woman dominates the canvas and stares directly out at us maintaining a fierce beauty. For me, she embodied high art despite the inclusion of techniques and materials that may be viewed as kitschy. It seemed to me that I had successfully transcended the low/high barriers, or had at least blurred them significantly.

Then, the can of worms opened. My tattooed beauty sparked controversy particularly pertaining to my chosen area of study, kitsch, and its relationship to race. These conversations turned out to be one of those unexpected, but important, rhizomes typical of A/R/Tography based research. The people asking me the questions truly had my best interest in mind, and they made me think more deeply about my choices. I had three academically educated people, all of whom work at the university level in the fine

arts, spend a couple of hours each discussing my work with me. I noticed during these conversations that similar questions kept arising: Why/How did you choose your subject matter? Should you or do you have the right to appropriate cultural imagery outside of your own? What relation does your work have to kitsch? The discussions about these questions can be found in Chapter V.

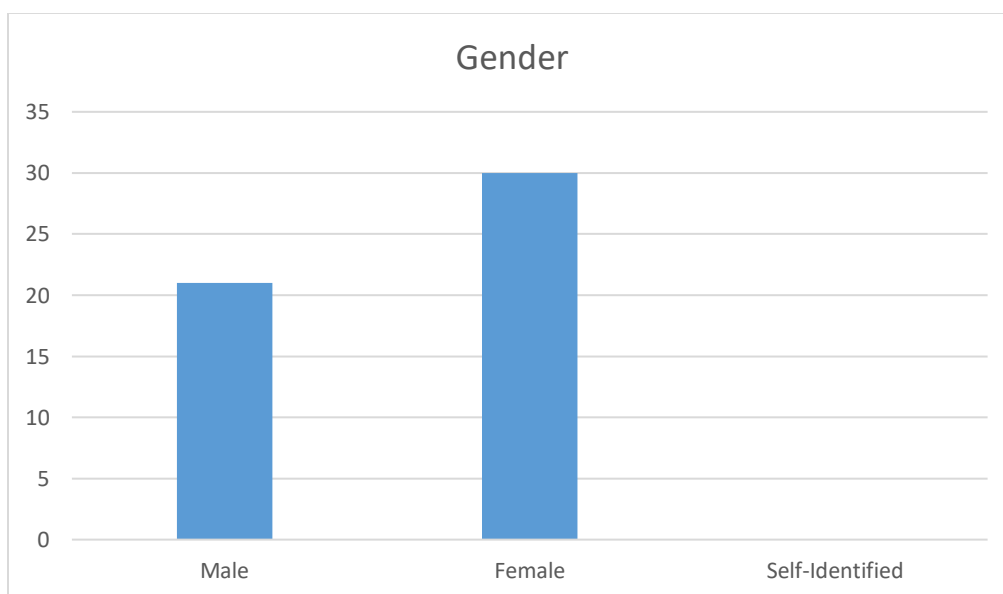
Survey Says...

The survey was comprised of three main sections: demographic information, kitsch ratings, and a file upload. What follows is the report and analysis of each section of the 51 completed surveys.

Demographics

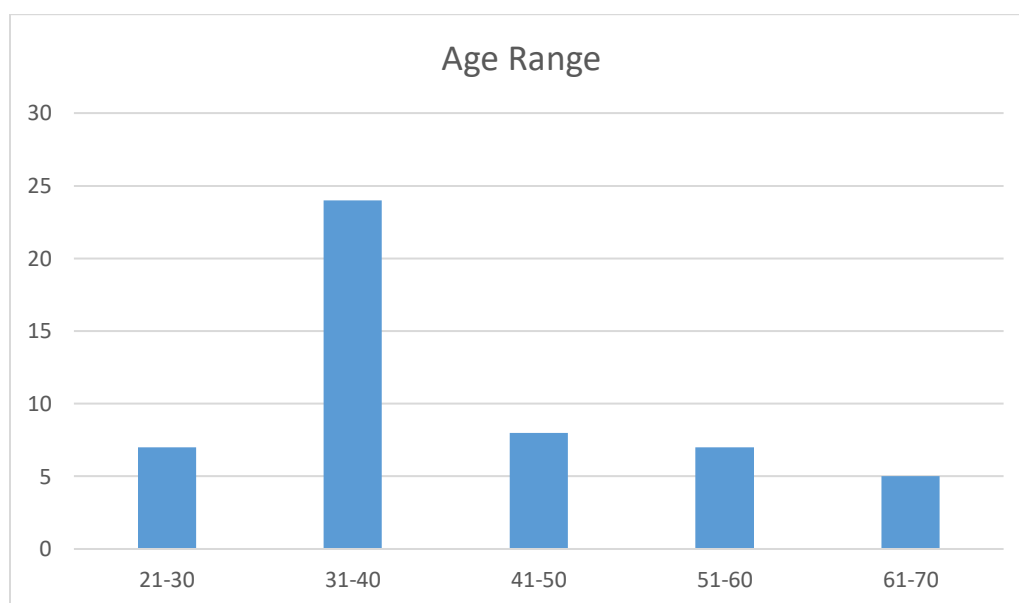
Of the 51 respondents, 21 (41.18%) were male, and 30 (58.82%) were female and 0 claimed self-identified (See Table 1). This is not an ideal distribution as female respondents outnumber the male respondents by roughly 20%, but it informs me that most responses are coming from a female's perspective on kitsch for this survey.

Table 1: Gender



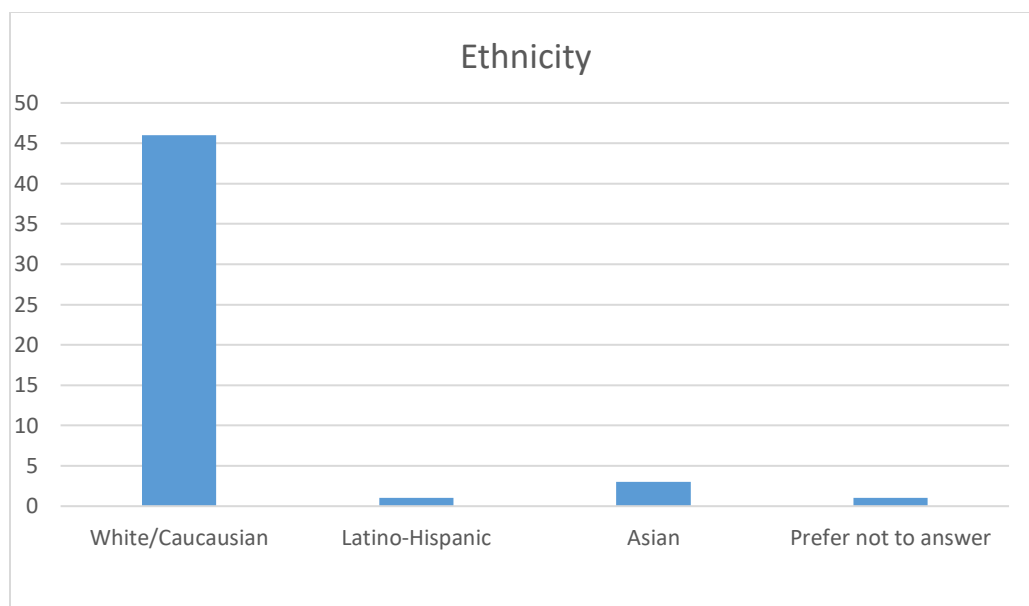
The age range surveyed anyone from 18 years of age to 91 and above. The responses spanned from 21-30 year-olds to 61-70 year-olds. The vast majority, 47.06%, of participants were between the ages of 31-40 (see Table 2). This is not particularly surprising as the survey was initially distributed to my friends on Facebook of whom I also share the same age range. Thus, most of the responses came from people who share the same temporal history as me.

Table 2: Age Range



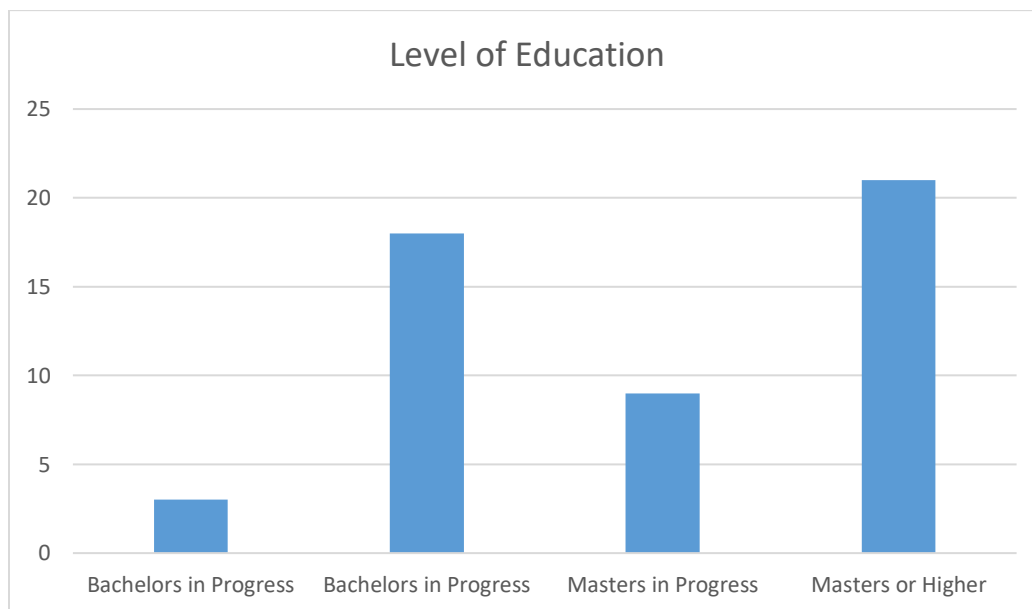
The responses for ethnic background were overwhelmingly skewed toward one demographic, white/Caucasian, with only a smattering of people answering otherwise (see Table 3). Again, this was not terribly surprising due to the distribution method and my personal circle of friends who are comprised predominantly of white/Caucasian Americans.

Table 3: Ethnicity



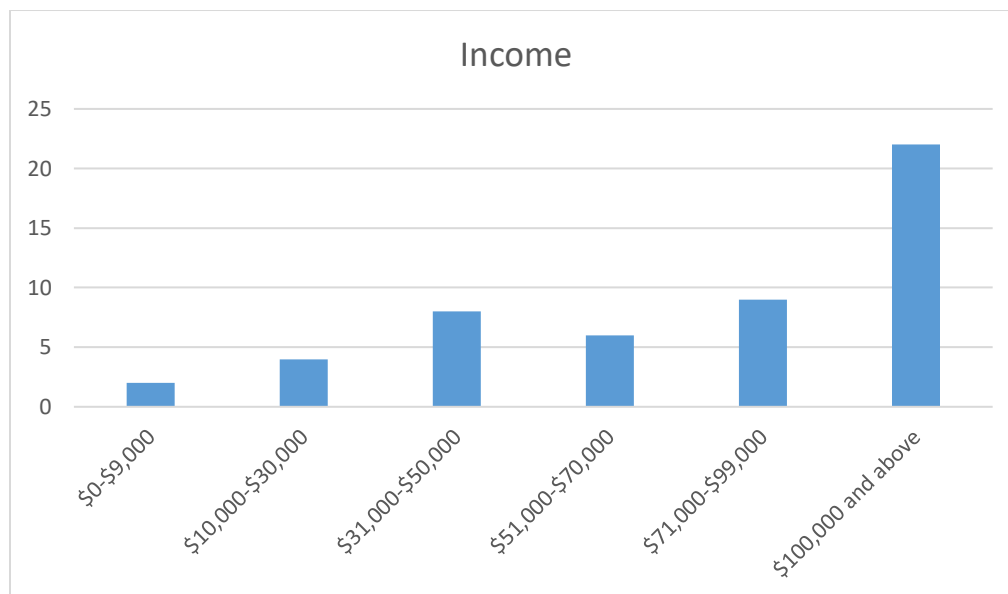
Next, all participants who completed the survey were eligible as *academically educated* in that they all were at the bare minimum currently in a Bachelor's program of better (see Table 4).

Table 4: Level of Education



The final survey question had to do with level of income. This question had the most diverse range of answers with participants answering in every category presented, but respondents were still dominated by one demographic - \$100,000 and above (see Table 5).

Table 5: Income



When taken all together, the general profile for a participant of this survey was a 31-40 year-old white/Caucasian female with a master's degree earning over \$100,000. This was exactly kind of demographic I was aiming for because traditionally speaking the wealthy academically educated are not people who would participate in kitsch culture. However, the next portion of the survey lead me to believe that this demographic does indeed participate in kitsch culture. It was just that their tolerance for kitsch items varies.

Kitsch Ratings

Once demographics were established, it was important to get a feel of whether or not the survey participants knowingly participate in kitsch. So, the first question asked was whether or not they recognized the term. Twenty-nine of the 51 said they did while

22 said they did not. There was a difference of only 13.72% between the two responses. More interestingly were the responses to the next question asking whether or not the participants felt they knew the difference between good and bad taste. Forty-six of the participants said yes while only five said no. That is a difference of 80.4%. These answers help to support my theory that while academically educated people are not formally taught about things like kitsch, they certainly seem to think they know it when they see it.

Next, participants were asked to rate imagery on a scale of 1-7 with 1 being not kitsch and 7 being exemplary kitsch. What the participants were not aware of, however, was that all of the selected images had been previously identified as kitsch by other scholars as presented in Chapter II. These images were the controls in the survey. The inclusion of this researcher's images were the variables to see how participants would rate them in comparison to other kitsch imagery. Figures 14-23 and Tables 6-15 illustrate the ratings each image received. Figures 15, 17, 19, & 23 are the variables while Figures 14, 16, 18, 20, 21, & 22 are part of the control group.

Table 6: Rating for Figure 14



Figure 14. Image 1

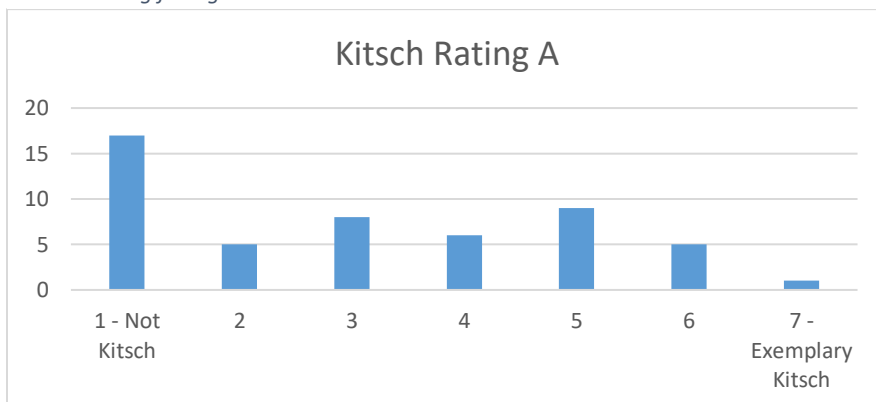




Figure 15. Image 2

Table 7: Rating for Figure 15

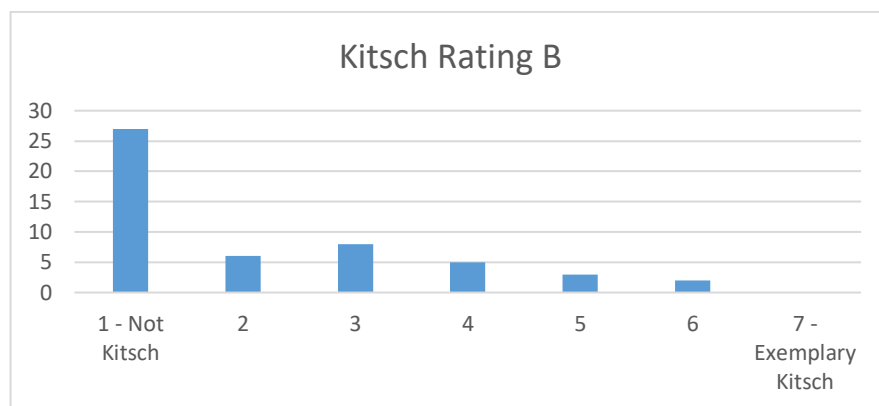


Table 8: Rating for Figure 16



Figure 16. Image 3

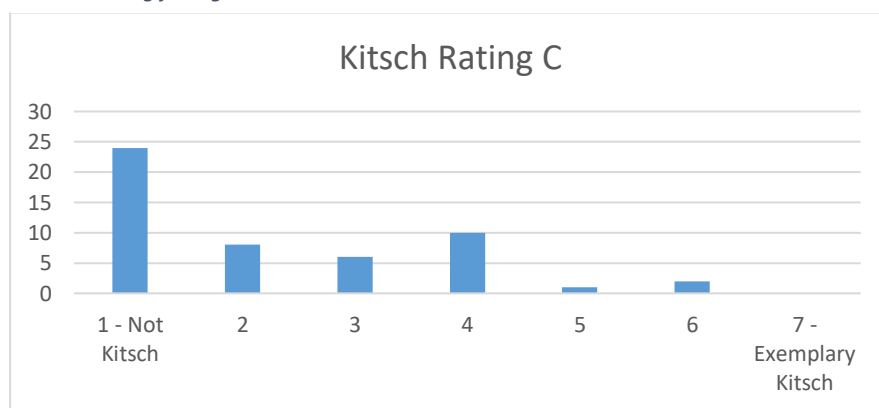


Table 9: Rating for Figure 17



Figure 17. Image 4

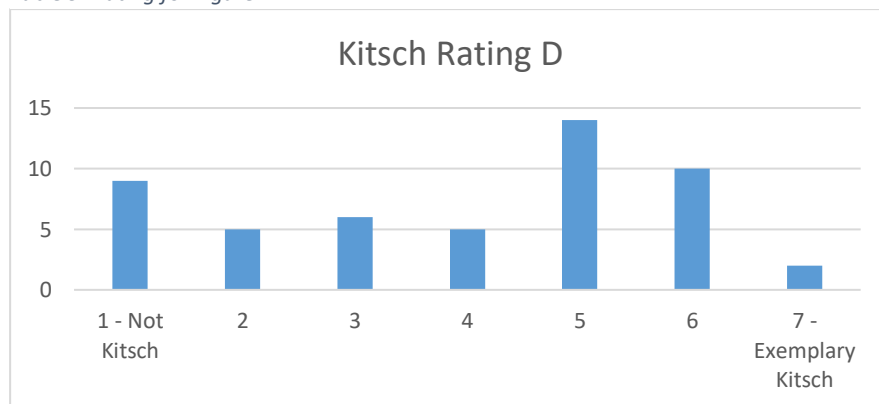


Table 10: Rating for Figure 18



Figure 18. Image 5

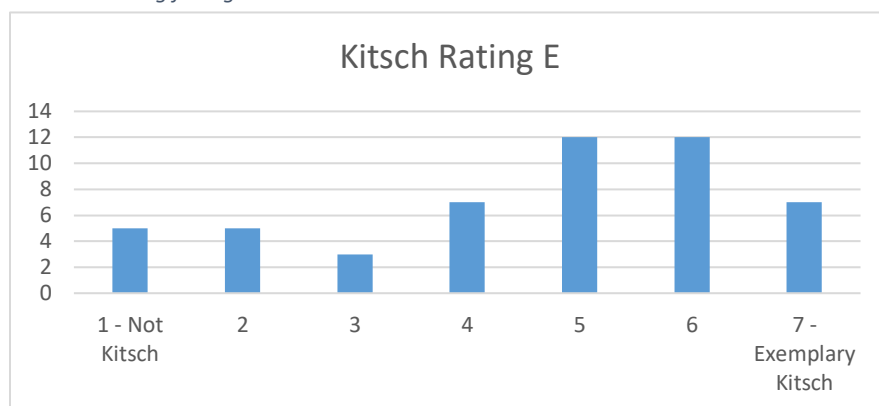


Table 11: Rating for Figure 19



Figure 19. Image 6

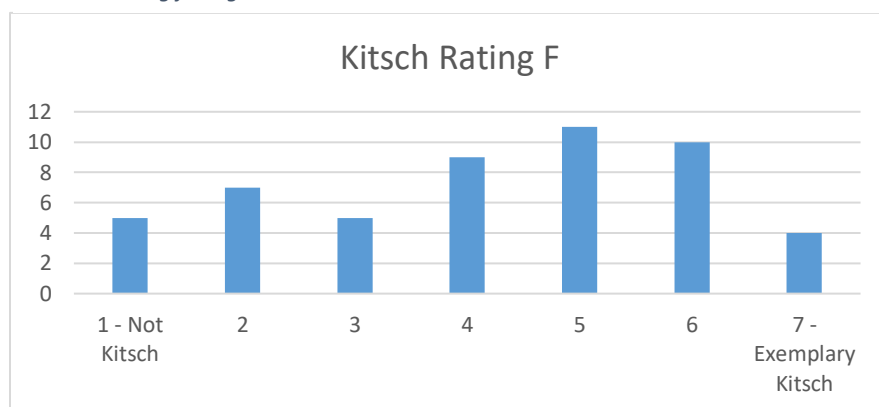


Table 12: Rating for Figure 20



Figure 20. Image 7

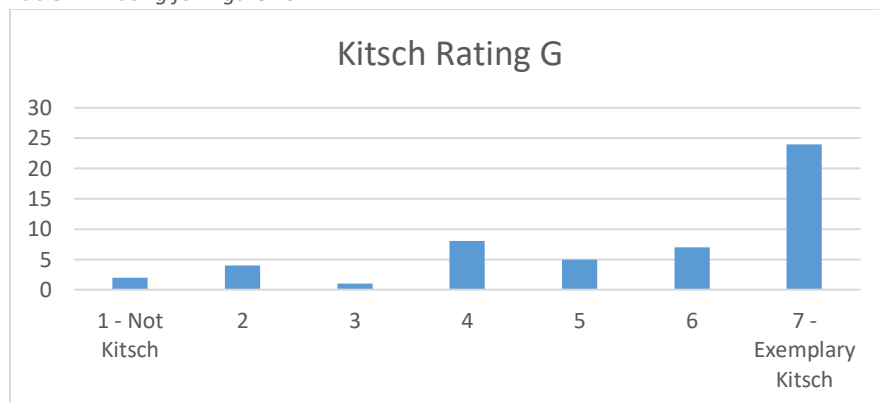


Table 13: Rating for Figure 21



Figure 21. Image 8

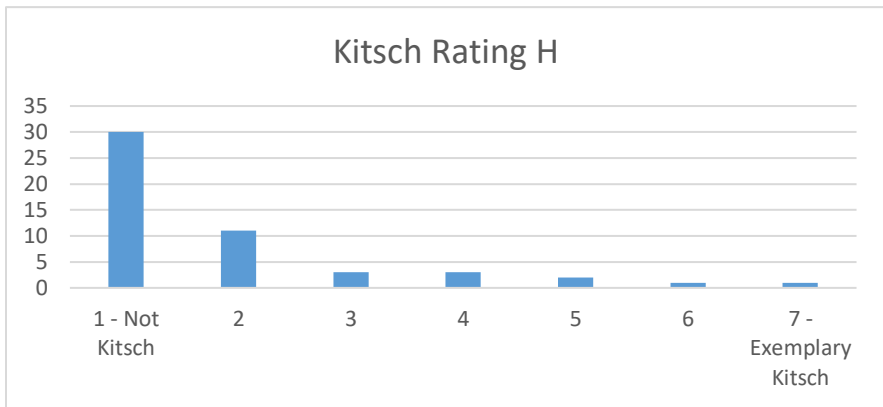


Table 14: Rating for Figure 22



Figure 22. Image 9

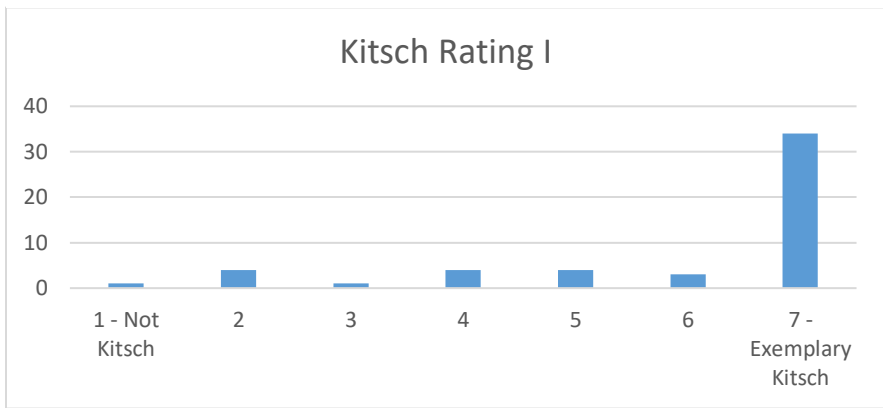
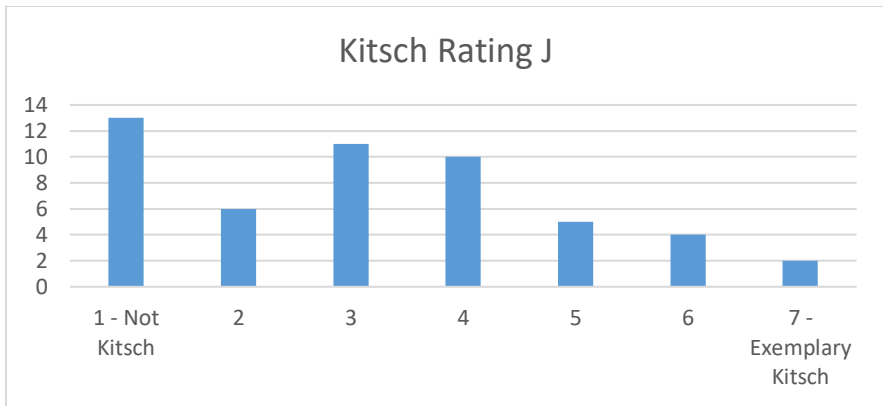


Table 15: Rating for Figure 23



Figure 23. Image 10



It came as no surprise that each image was rated differently on the kitsch scale by participants. Some things, like the pink flamingo and the garden gnome, were strongly identified as kitsch items with the most number of people rating those items as exemplary kitsch. Of the items rated, it is this researcher's opinion that those two items were indeed

the most Classically kitsch items as they are plastic, mass-produced, cheap, and have the purpose of levity. Other images like Figures 16 & 21 were strongly rated as not kitsch at all by most participants. Again, this outcome is not all that surprising as Figure 16 is a functional chair, and Figure 21 is a museum quality painting done by an Academic French painter. These objects seem atypical of kitsch as they are not overtly mass-produced, cheap, or call attention to themselves in such way.

As for my artwork, I was delighted to see that Figure 15, the tattooed African woman, was rated very strongly as not kitsch by most people. Figure 23, the portrait of the white/Caucasian woman, while also rated mostly as not kitsch scored much higher overall in the kitsch ratings despite having fewer kitschy materials than Figure 15. Perhaps this is a result of the brighter color palette for Figure 23, or what I perceive to be a less realistically painted figure. The cats in Figures 17 & 19 scored within the kitsch scale, but I was surprised to see that the realistically painted cat portrait was more definitively rated higher in the kitsch scale than the solely mosaic cat which had a somewhat more even spread of ratings. I am not sure what could account for these ratings as I expected the painted cat to rate lower on the kitsch scale than the mosaic cat. However, I recall a conversation I had with an academically educated friend of mine who told me that the inclusion of embroidery cord on the painted cat made it more kitschy to her than the mosaic one. Perhaps materials played an important role in how the two artworks were rated.

Finally, what was rather surprising is that no one item, not even the pink flamingos, was rated as completely kitsch or not. This indicates that the academically educated do have some tolerance for kitsch items or at least recognize that some things,

even a garden gnome, does not live in the land of black and white, but rather somewhere in the gray area. Since there was a range of responses for each item, it begged the question of how people decided to rate each item.

The final part of this section of the survey asked what factors influenced the participants' ratings. While the answers varied greatly from person to person, and some people gave multiple reasons, some definite patterns emerged for what kinds of qualities for which participants were looking when assigning their ratings for each image. The answers with the highest frequency of usage involved the following: Tackiness, subject matter, personal taste, display-ability, mass-production, and color. By far, personal taste and display-ability, which means whether or not people could picture it in their own home, were the two greatest factors in determining individual ratings with close to half the respondents replying with something from these two categories. If I included subject matter as a matter of personal taste, that number only goes up to nearly two thirds of the participants. These findings indicate that although things like color and materials do have a bearing on how people judge artwork as kitsch or not, there was no greater influence than their own mind. It would seem that kitsch was indeed in the eye of my academically educated contemporaries.

File Upload

For the last part of this survey, participants uploaded a picture of something in their home or something they wished to have in their home that they found beautiful. Then, they briefly described why the item was beautiful to them and explained whether or not their item was kitsch and why. It was this researcher's hope to find a connection between beauty and kitsch aesthetics in contemporary culture. Do participants desire

beautiful items in their homes that also have kitsch qualities, and do the participants recognize their items as kitsch or not?

Respondents uploaded a wide variety of beautiful items. I, as the researcher, separated the uploads into five categories: Painting/drawing, photography, sculpture, furniture/household décor, and other. The category with the most uploads was the Painting/drawing category with 21 file uploads. Next was Furniture/household décor at 15 file uploads followed by Other with seven file uploads. Finally Sculpture had five file uploads and photography had three file uploads. As with influencing factors for the kitsch ratings, the reasons why people found their items to be beautiful were numerous and often people listed more than one. In the end, two predominant categories emerged.

First, an overwhelming 32 of the 51 responses listed emotional impact or personal connection as the definer of beauty for their item. Next, 21 people replied that the elements of art (line, shape, value, form, color, texture, and/or space) heightened their sense of beauty in their chosen item. Color was the most influential of the elements, which helped me to understand why the white/Caucasian woman in the study may have been rated higher on the kitsch scale than the tattooed woman from Africa.

The high number of participants responding that their item is beautiful because of their own personal/emotional connection with it was very intriguing when compared to how many people responded that their item was not kitsch. Thirty-three of the respondents gave a firm no, while an additional four people said no, but maybe other people might think their item was kitsch. Thirteen of the participants recognized that their item would be regarded as kitsch (some of whom even ventured to rate it on the kitsch scale), and one person did not say one way or the other. The reason why this was so

interesting is that sentimentality is definitely one of the definers of kitsch as presented in Chapter II. It was why Figure 21, the painting done by a French Academic, was deemed kitsch. Yet, it seems as though contemporary participants do not automatically view sentimentality as kitschy. I decided to go back to the data to investigate this connection further.

The first indicator that sentimentality and kitsch no longer have a strong connection was that 30 people rated Figure 21 as not kitsch at all, and the second indicator was that even though most of the respondents recognized sentimentality as beautiful, most participants did not find their item kitschy. Additionally, only one respondent answered that sentimentality played a role in their kitsch ratings from the second part of the survey.

When tasked with judging the *kitschiness* of the file uploads based on sentimentality, this researcher faced a chicken before the egg question. Does art have to be made with the intention of evoking a sentimental reaction for it to be considered kitsch, or does a benign item that evokes any sentimental reaction at all make it kitsch? It would appear based on the surveys that the contemporary academically educated person might argue the fact that since the item has sentimental value that it is not kitsch at all.

When given the chance to defend their beautiful items as not kitsch, however, very few of the participants listed sentimentality as a reason for why their item was not kitsch. Actually, only four people said their item was not kitsch because of the meaning for them. Most people argued their item was not kitsch because of its subject matter, perceived quality/timelessness, and whether or not it was made for mass consumption. There definitely seems to be a disconnection between people's ideas of beauty and kitsch.

I guess I should not be surprised. No one wants to think their personal taste would be anything other than good, and indeed few participants ventured to say their chosen beautiful item was kitsch.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

I investigated two main questions throughout the course of this research. First, could I make artwork that embraced my kitsch tendencies but also my desire to produce high art? Second, what place does kitsch art have in contemporary society and how is it defined? I investigated these questions using the methodology of A/R/Tography whereby I learned through the lenses of an artist, a researcher, and a teacher.

To the first question, I say yes. Through the manipulation of both subject matter and material I found as an artist that I could create art that was rated by my academically educated peers as both high and low, kitsch and not kitsch, and pretty much everything in between. The ratings from the survey satisfied my artist's lens as well wetted my researcher's appetite to learn more.

The second question further required my researcher's lens, and I say that indeed kitsch does have a place in contemporary society at least amongst the demographic I surveyed. Their ratings would indicate that they have a tolerance for kitsch items. Due to the fact that all of the survey items were technically kitsch, a rating of 1 on any image indicated a very high tolerance for that item while a rating of 7 indicated a very low tolerance for that item.

A contemporary definition of kitsch, however, is still quite elusive. According to the survey participants, kitsch was heavily dependent on how tacky an item is and the subject matter. It is a matter of personal taste and display-ability within one's own home.

Kitsch is mass-produced, and color usage plays a role albeit a somewhat minor one. Most importantly, kitsch is individual to the viewer. Thus, I think kitsch objects retain some of their Classical definitions from the past, but the people to determine good taste from bad now are the everyday viewers on an internal level. Ideally, further study should be done with the survey participants to find out from where their preconceived notions of good and bad taste come. The study could continue in the form of survey, but may be better accomplished in a series of interviews. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the initial survey, which was anonymous, I cannot reach out to participants of the survey conducted for this initial research. I would have to rerelease the survey with an option for interview later. The outcomes viewed through my teacher lens will be addressed after the next section.

Unexpected Outcomes

This next section addresses the reoccurring questions regarding my in-process artwork. The following is an account of how I went about answering the questions posed to me by the three people who work in post-secondary education in the arts.

Question 1: Why/How did you choose your subject matter?

When I was choosing the subjects of my portraits I did not have a certain kind of woman in mind, just ones I found to be beautiful. I looked through hundreds of photographs searching for women who spoke to me. Initially, I did look at photographs of predominantly white/Caucasian women. In fairness, when one does a Google search for *royalty free beautiful women* the first images shown are mainly Western looking white/Caucasian women. As I was scrolling through the pages of images, I thought to myself that beautiful women exist all over the planet, and that I should not limit beauty to

the confines of my own culture, that of a white American. What would it say about me if my ideals of beauty encompassed solely white/Caucasian women?

One response to my question about ideals of beauty concerned my cultural lens. It was suggested that I imposed my white American lens of beauty on someone from a different culture. Naturally, I cannot deny the unseen forces of culture on my psyche. However, I was able to present a different view, one that proposes the existence of universal beauty. In my studies of beauty and the human brain I came to realize that the *certain something* I was looking for in the women most likely had to do with my biology. Human beings innately recognize and are attracted to symmetry, averageness, and sexual dimorphism. I think these biological motives were more the powers at play when I selected the images I painted than what white America tells me is beautiful. To help support this theory, I did my best to change nothing about the women in my mosaics. I did not add nor subtract anything significant from the portraits. I wanted to respect and represent each woman to the best of my abilities, and I painted them as such.

Question 2: Do you have the right to appropriate cultural imagery?

Figures 11 & 12, the portraits of the non-white/Caucasian women, as it turns out, do not come without cultural baggage when painted by someone who is outside of their culture, especially when my culture has a history of dominance, subjugation, and abuse in respect to theirs. During each of my three conversations my whiteness was brought up and whether or not I had any right to paint the people in Figures 11 & 12. My work was compared with the scandal at the 2017 Whitney Biennial and Dana Shutz's painting of Emmett Till, an innocent who was brutally beaten to death in a hate crime, and to a lesser extent, Edward Curtis's name was also mentioned as a well-meaning white photographer

who misappropriated imagery of the Indigenous American Indian. These were some powerful comparisons!

I had a very difficult time as an artist rectifying the issue of my race and wanting to paint women who I find beautiful. However, I found that it was equally difficult for my conversation partners to refute my right to do so entirely. One of the major points brought up is that I knew nothing about the two women in my reference pictures for Figures 11 & 12. This was true. My counterpoint was that I knew nothing about the other women, who appear white like me. Does their cultural background not count simply because they seemed to share my same skin color? The answer, of course, was no.

At my educators' behest, I strove to find out more about the women in my portraits with minor success. This was something like going down a rabbit hole. I went back to the royalty free website where I initially found the images and was able to track down the name of two of the photographers for Figures 10 & 12, and the name of another website company that took the image of Figure 11, *People Images*. Unfortunately, I could not find any information for Figure 9.

For Figure 12, I found out that the photographer, who's online monicre is Ran Plett (aka ColdClearWater - <https://www.instagram.com/coldclearwater/>), is a photographer from Vancouver, Canada and he does photography all over the world (<https://www.dpreview.com/members/3270321598/overview>). According to his Instagram page, the woman is indeed from Africa and is part of the Datoga tribe in Tanzania. For Figure 10, I found out the photographer may be a European female, who goes by *anneleven* online (https://www.redbubble.com/people/anneleven/portfolio?ref=carousel_portfolio). I

reached out to both photographers asking more questions about each model, but I never received a response from either one of them. I also tried reaching out to the company that took the reference picture for Figure 11 to find out who the individual photographer was, but with no success there either.

My efforts were not for naught, though. I managed to find out that the three models' reference pictures were placed on a royalty free site that required them to sign a model release consent form. Thus, their image was not being used without their knowledge and permission. For at least one of my conversation partners, this was a satisfying conclusion to my right to use the imagery. For the other two, they still had concerns about my race. I was told it would be safer to stick with white women. I do not necessarily disagree with them especially considering the current cultural climate of the United States. However, if artists only did what was safe for them, then no progress in any direction would ever be made. I seriously doubt if my artwork will ever have any significant cultural influence, but it certainly will not if I never dare to push any boundaries. We had to agree to disagree at this juncture.

Question 3: What relation does your work have to kitsch?

Much of the effort I spent making my body of work was to try and obscure the border between low and high art by manipulating materials, techniques, and subject matter. To my surprise, each one of my three conversation partners had difficulty understanding how my portraits were in any way kitsch, although there was no difficulty with the mosaic cats. At this point in the conversations I got the opportunity to show my learning and understanding of kitsch and ask questions in return, the first of which was what was kitsch to them. I found out for these three people kitsch was fairly narrowly

defined: campy, ironic, and plastic were all words they associated with kitsch. Beautiful, figural, hand-made, decorative, feminine, and the like were not a part of their definition. I explained there were many more definers to kitsch, so many in fact that it became extremely difficult even for me to pinpoint what kitsch is now. My work is kitsch and not kitsch. It is both high and low. It does not fit neatly into a single category. My work is supposed to make the viewer question their opinions and the nature of art through the lens of kitsch. Indeed, this last question was the crux of my research and the goal of my survey to find out what academically educated people think about kitsch.

What Kitsch Taught the Teacher

Throughout the process of making the artwork for this body of work as well as researching how it fits into the world of kitsch has given me several insights to take back to the classroom as an art teacher. When considering my practice as both an artist and a teacher, I thought about my process, which almost always starts with image research. For many of the projects I teach to beginning drawing/painting students they also start with an image or an object. Initially, I choose a bank of images from which the students may draw. Eventually, students get to make their own visual reference choices which I then talk to them about. Often the conversations are more about mechanics than meaning due to the nature of the skills-based projects I have designed, but if I truly want students to make meaning out of their artwork, they are going to need to choose imagery which they can defend much as I did. I would talk to students about why they are choosing certain images over others, what it mean to them, and also what it could mean to others who look at their work. These revelations may seem very fundamental to some art educators, but until I created the body of work for this research, I never had to defend my visual choices

to the extent I had to for this. Additionally, I would encourage my students to stand by their choices, but be able to argue for them in an articulate fashion, which may require some further research and reflection on their part.

One other thing that was affirmed for me during the course of this research is that not everyone fully appreciates or understands the ever changing world of kitsch and taste, and much of what our students experience and enjoy is a part of that world. I would advise my fellow teachers not to automatically dismiss subject matter in which students show interest and the teacher finds none. As my research pointed out, much of what people consider Classical kitsch can have deep meaning for its owner or admirer. Instead of steering students another direction, perhaps educators could take a moment to try and understand why a student chose what they chose. Teachers might be surprised by what their students have to say.

Rhizomes in the Road

There are a myriad of ways to continue this line of research, not all of which have to do directly with kitsch but stem from the idea of taste. First, attempting to understand how people, who are not necessarily trained in the fine arts, come to understand art and through what lens is one path I would consider taking. How do we acquire our biases toward one art form or another? How does the art we are attracted to define who we are as people? How can understanding our biases and preferences in art help us to understand humanity better? How can we share and use cultural imagery without abuse or trespass? Truly, how can we cultivate empathy through visual choice?

Kitsch, for this researcher, is no longer a matter of good or bad taste. It can be a reminder of a loved one, a skillfully crafted piece of furniture, or a plastic pink flamingo.

It is a choice of the participant to value or devalue it. In turn, I wonder if when we make these decisions if we value or devalue the person who owns it and/or creates the artwork with which they choose to surround themselves.

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