ART SLANT PRIZE 2014

SELLING A FANTASY

Selling a Fantasy: Edra Soto

By Stephanie Cristello

Luxury is so often determined by a price tag. But commerce is rarely how we interact with the phenomena of high-end merchandise — its excessiveness, its indulgence; its extravagance is almost always (and exclusively) experienced visually. We feel the texture of opulent velvets and silks first with our eyes, the metallic gleam of a smooth reflection through its cool touch on our sight, in jewels that refract their prismatic color back onto our gaze. There is something intensely tactile in the image of luxury — it is as visual as the eye that perceives it. The aesthetics of lavishness are accessible to all; it is not limited to the ones who can afford it.

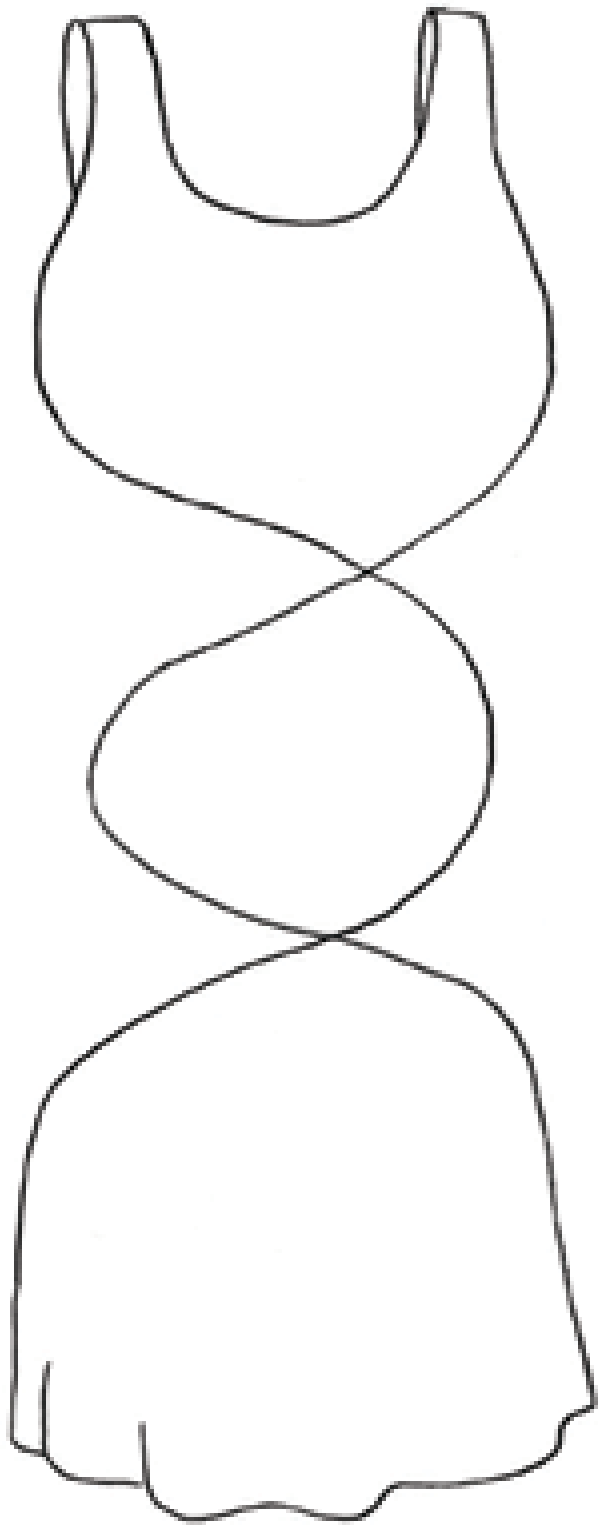
Luxury sells you a fantasy. So does the work of Chicago-based artist Edra Soto.

Soto's recent work elaborates on the false paradises promised to us by the imagery of the tropical vacation—an artificial aesthetic that carries with it the possibilities of warmth, leisure, and relaxation through the vehicle of the art object. These representations often take the shape of familiar domestic objects — plastic lawn chairs, side tables, patriotic flags, etc. — and indeed impersonate their function. We imagine experiencing this work surrounded by palm trees, while a cool breeze comes off the shore, the faintest echo of the sea as the tide washes closer and farther in the distance. But with every vacation comes discomfort. The sand in between your toes, mosquito bites, sunburnt skin, the unappealing resort food — the dream is broken. The work is exposed as a cover-up.

In Soto's work, the spectacular and its simulation are presented within a single experience. Fittingly matching its title, *Say Everything*, the imagery within this series of work hinges on excess. Two pieces stand out in particular — in one, a bright, striking orange tiger commercially printed on terrycloth envelops a series of chairs, stacked on top one another. In the other, the bright blue eye of a snow leopard pierces the viewer with its gaze, positioned just to the center of the seat back. In both works, the printed image is treated as upholstery. While the fabric perfectly conceals the surface of the chair, neatly sewn and carefully applied, it does not disguise its material. The shape is undoubtedly familiar; you can almost feel the white plastic seat beneath you. While the image exists on top of the entire object, almost flattening the chair through the optical busyness of its overall pattern, the furniture becomes anthropomorphic. That the chair has "legs" takes on a new meaning. There is something humorously futile about the artist's attempt to hide the cheapness of the material support by superimposing such a painstakingly labored image – a camouflage in plain sight.

Soto's silk flags operate in a similar way. Though the works are not quite abstractions — their shape and scale quite obviously betray the countries they propose to represent — the flags take full liberty with how they describe intensely familiar patterns. More reminiscent of foliage than governmentally appointed colors, which strips them of their "official" function, the flags are strangely more connected to their originally intended use. Which is, of course, to wave in the air. Here, the flags billow in the breeze more naturally, like leaves.

Just as the image of luxury sells us a fantasy, Soto's work allows us to experience that more often than not, the dream of paradise is better than the thing itself.



Dialogical Particulars: Adam Douglas Thompson

By Joel Kuennen

A word forms a concept of its own object in a dialogic way.

- Mikhail Bakhtin, Discourse in the Novel, 1941

Adam Douglas Thompson's drawings are words. His installed formations are sentences. His words, however, are not defined. His sentences are not linear. They are dialogic imaginations, each image acts as a concept through which their relational grouping gains meaning. The groupings can and should be read multidirectionally. This approach is how Thompson believes thought works, a concept trailed by consciousness that couples with nearby conceptual points, with each move gaining contextual meaning.

"I believe in particulars," says Thompson, "in a bottom-up emergence of meaning." Each image that Thompson draws in a characteristically minimal manner draws on the context a viewer brings to the work. However, it is when these particular objects are grouped that the dialogical wonder becomes apparent.

A cursory glance at his work would suggest that he is playing with juxtapositional readings. However, a closer look reveals that complex stories about the human condition emerge from very particular visual situations. Juxtaposition relies on contrast. Thompson's drawings rely on relation to gain their meaning. If you take a series of three of his images you can see

how his sentences take shape. Each image is related, image one progresses in form to image two, and so on. However, if you view image one and three, the shared form will not be present. Their only relationship will be one of juxtaposition. This analogy is imperfect since the serial nature of numbers implies a linear progression. Each drawing is made in relation.

The images rely on known forms — a whale, a boot, etc. — but these known forms are integrated through stark, black lines. There is certainty in the minimalism of the drawings. The visual economy of the drawings find a visual partner in lingual fonts. They are particular, if peculiar. These form mash-ups are often funny or bizarre like the products of an exquisite corpse game. Sometimes they rely on more stylized interpretations: a sharp, angular Whistler's Mother, for example, elicits the kind of relationship that would prod Whistler to paint his mother in the way he did. No matter the relational technique employed by the drawing, their stylistic character reinforces their use as component parts of a web of meaning.

The installations that Thompson produces are carefully planned to induce a particular tension. Within the nebulous, associative array, specific and tangible concrete objects call out and produce points of departure through which he addresses major themes in human subjectivity and experience in humorous and deft ways. "A friend once told me in regards to writing, 'all elements of life must be in appropriate proportions,' I always think about this as I'm making these webs." A little bit of humor, some regret — out of these associative formations come an existential poetics, unique to this artist but understandable to any viewer.

On Facebook Everyone is on Holiday: Anastasia Samoylova

By Caroline Picard

Anastasia Samoylova does not go out into summer fields when she begins a new work of landscape photography. She goes online, haunting public domain photosites for images of picturesque landscapes: sunsets, waterfalls, forests, oceans, and flowers. Despite the seductive vistas each calendar image portrays, they are so common they become redundant. "I'm almost monumentalizing them in my installations," Samoylova said during a recent (Skyped) studio visit, "otherwise they would just be these little orphans of images."

After printing out her source material at home, Samoylova brings the reproductions to her "studio," a single table and a desk with a cutting board on which she stages her collages; there the artist begins to cut and reconfigure her images, constructing elaborate three-dimensional arrangements that combine, reflect, and distort fragments of public domain printouts with gels, reflective surfaces, and semi-transparent corrugated sheets. The result is a slick, kaleidoscopic environment that revels in the process of its own staging — to such an extent that Samoylova even makes stop animation films of her process. Finally, she photographs the complete tableau, flattening her installation back into two-dimensions. Like the distorted space within each print, the production process is a constant expansion and contraction during which images slip in and out of three dimensions.

The colors in the final prints are saturated and bright; the patterns she incorporates similarly appear so regular that they read like Photoshop tools. The white backdrop feels too bright — everything feels artificial. And yet her interventions occur entirely in real time and space. Rather it's the source material that's digital: images of Nature that are as doctored as the celebrities in magazines. Samoylova, by contrast, insists on working with her hands, even going as far as refusing post-production edits. By printing out the images at home — translating the originally expansive outdoor space from its digital .jpg form into a domestically proportioned object — Samoylova brings the images into a material space with practical limitations. Consequently, the final print shows evidence of dust and small imperfections socialized habit would remove. "You start seeing blemishes," Samoylova said, "The studio shows through." In that respect, her photographs are particularly honest. Unlike early landscape photographs that presume to give you the "real" Yosemite experience, Samoylova exposes the contrivance implicit in photographic works, and in so doing emphasizes the curious ideologies embedded beneath our generic desire to frame and capture the environment.

Before getting her MFA, the Russian born artist originally studied environmental design with Bauhaus and Dadaist roots — roots that no doubt contribute to her appetite not only for the strangeness of social media (she was one of the first Flickr users in 2004), but also the game of creative constraints. Add to that the two years she spent working as a designer for Armani, and the origins of her aesthetic begin to emerge.

The nature Samoylova portrays is not natural — it never was natural. *Beaches* presents a series of boxes and flat planes, hanging together in defiance of gravitational forces. Oceanic tides draw in and pull back from one another, refracting as though in a hall of mirrors. It's impossible to

discern the scale of the composition; skylines appear at cross-purposes. It's no wonder the experience of space seems so strange when the images themselves are facsimiles of facsimiles of facsimiles.

A pervasive desire haunts Samoylova's tableaux. "Pictures are a manifestation of our search for the sublime," she told me through the screen of my laptop. And like its historical precedents, this "sublime" is skewed. *Beaches* plays with the idea of the beach, how desirous it is because of what it signifies: the luxury of vacation, the implication of success, the appeal of relaxation as an untroubled psychological state. When one gets to the beach it must be photographed and shared, not only to prove that such places exist, but perhaps most of all to prove that one has arrived there.

A Play on Material: Oren Pinhassi

By Joel Kuennen

Material can be transcendent. Postmodernism is failing. History is a spiral.

These three assumptions underlie Oren Pinhassi's work. Beginning with the familiar — towels, a backpack, a dwelling — objects are transformed through the addition of another common material: plaster. Through this addition, he transubstantiates the everyday into thematic sculptural and architectural forms, an act that Pinhassi describes as transcendent. There is a key definition being explored through Pinhassi's work: transformation vs. transcendence. Both connote change, however, Pinhassi's goal is not a change in form, but rather an elevation of form into the realm of critique.

Postmodernism promised a revaluation of culture following the deconstruction of Modernism. Pomo was supposed to be a putting back together. Pinhassi rightly accuses postmodernism, however, of focusing on deconstruction and calling it reconstruction. While these two activities are dialectically bound, the object of postmodern art and indeed postmodern society remains an act of deconstruction. Think of the popular memes of our society and the cultural attitudes they address. As a culture, we are still working to deconstruct the infrastructures of racism, sexism and power that predispose an individual. Postmodernism ultimately promised a freedom of creation, a freedom of potential that is seemingly impossible without the dissolution of existing paradigms of power and privilege. The problem with this is that dissolution itself is an impossible

activity; there is no null state of society that can act as a point of departure in reconstructing society. This is why the act of deconstruction and reconstruction are dialectically bound and subvert a linear understanding of history (hence, the spiral). While something is deconstructed, it transforms, it finds new context within the existing paradigm. Through the simultaneous act of reconstruction the object is always transformed, but, Pinhassi asserts, it may transcend as well.

In Pinhassi's 2014 installation, *Untitled*, he created a domestic space, a safe space, a shelter. The material form calls upon the historical and material histories of its components while at the same time subverting those histories through its presence in a gallery. Add to this the material alterations of Pinhassi, and the object transcends what it is and becomes thematic. Behind this shelter is a brick bathtub, really a brick cube that is built around an emergency water reservoir, a 100 gallon plastic bag that consumers can buy to fill with water in emergencies instead of filling their apparently dirty bathtubs. The plastic bag in the shape of a bathtub calls up the theme of safety, security, necessity, while at the same time disrupting the cassual understanding of the object.

Plaster has a long history of being an art material but it is also used to build and parget walls, to set broken bones and was used in the mummification process. Modroc, the form of plaster used for setting bones is actually noted as one of the first invented composite materials. A very basic compound of alkaline lime and sand, plaster itself is transubstantial.

Sometimes these histories are obvious like the material itself, other times, not so much. The sweeping parabolas that constitute the shelter in *Untitled* are formed by gravity, an idea Pinhassi gleaned from a technique of the Spanish architect Antoni Gaudí. Pinhassi saw this use as bringing an

otherwise hidden force to the fore. Gravity is always implicated in a structure as the structure must defy gravity to stand but one doesn't necessarily think of this every time you step into a building. By submerging burlap in plaster then draping the sheets from two stable points and letting gravity and time shape the plaster arches, Pinhassi uses gravity as a material, the effect of which becomes apparent when the burlap arches are set sideways to form billowing columns that support a much greater, arched canopy over the dwelling. The rigidity of the plaster together with the perceived flaccidity of the burlap situates the forms in a contested state where they transcend their form and become contemplative art objects.

Images:

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ART SLANT PRIZE 2014

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