



Installation view of *Of the Standard of Taste*, Photo: SITE Photography.

# OF THE STANDARD OF TASTE

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Front Cover: Installation view of *Of the Standard of Taste*, Photo: Francesca Moore



# OF THE STANDARD OF TASTE

ANDREA HOOGE, KATHLEEN MCGIVERON  
 CURATED BY ANDREA PEPPER

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“No matter how much we scorn it, kitsch is an integral part of the human condition”

– Milan Kundera

In his influential essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939), Clement Greenberg described kitsch as a phenomenon that arose in the newly-industrialized West, alongside the avant-garde. While the avant-garde, according to Greenberg, emerged in order to defend aesthetic standards from the decline of taste caused by consumerism and mass reproduction, kitsch was explicitly associated with populism, the proletariat, and urbanization. For Greenberg, kitsch was the opposite of high art.

Derived from the German word for trash, kitsch refers to art, objects, or designs that are considered to be in poor taste because of their excessive embellishment, sentimentality, or mass reproduction; modern examples include Hummel figurines, Bob Ross paintings, and *Pop! Vinyl* figurines. Although derided by Greenberg, kitsch has proven to be enduringly popular and continues to be widely integrated into daily life. Encouraged by a sentimentality for the past that each generation experiences as it ages, kitsch has in many ways fulfilled Greenberg’s prediction that kitsch would become “a universal culture, the first universal culture ever beheld.”

Lowbrow art is a genre that evolved out of kitsch, through an underground popularity in the 1970s. With cultural roots in underground comic strips, lowbrow art often has a sense of humor that ranges from gleeful to sarcastic. The critical status of both kitsch and lowbrow art is uncertain, and they have both been largely excluded from the category of “fine art.” Like all art movements they continue to evolve, and what gets classified as kitsch or lowbrow art will no doubt change in the future. Despite their different origins and unique histories, for the purposes of this exhibition and essay it has been useful to consider kitsch and lowbrow art as often-overlapping categories of work that is not necessarily mass produced but that nevertheless possess the aesthetic qualities associated with each of those art movements: excessive ornamentation, sentimentality, commercialism, and humour. *Of the Standard of Taste* is an exhibition featuring a collection of

scratchboards and ceramics by artists Andrea Hooge and Kathleen McGiveron, respectively. Maintaining their practices in the Lower Mainland, both Hooge and McGiveron have each had success in the kitsch and lowbrow art scene in Vancouver, exhibiting at The Fall Gallery, Hot Art Wet City Gallery, and Ayden Gallery. Working out of Vancouver, Hooge focuses on figurative oil paintings and scratchboards that are heavily influenced by nostalgic magazines and children’s books. Her scratchboard works in particular immediately recall the forms of classic children’s literature. Taking inspiration from the stylized characters of the *Little Golden Books*, Hooge adds an unnerving aesthetic to the characters she creates, placing them in scenes that are equal parts alluring and disturbing. In *A New Perspective*,



Andrea Hooge, *A New Perspective*, 2017, scratchboard, 5 x 5 in, Photo: SITE photography.

for example, she presents a domestic environment that includes a writing desk and Queen Anne-style accent chair. Above the desk, two portraits of innocent-looking young children hang on a small wall. Two children sit in the foreground; one, on the chair, wears a bull mask and stares at a lit candle in his hand. The other child sits on the ground, wearing an owl mask and staring blankly at a pile of books burning on the

floor. The burning books are disconcerting and in contrast with the projected innocence of the images on the wall. The animal masks on the children suggest that concealing their identity offers the opportunity to act out.

Kathleen McGiveron is based in Langley and primarily works with clay to produce rebellious and bizarre ceramic figurines that reflect on popular culture, politics, and contemporary social and political movements with an exceptionally tongue-in-cheek attitude. Her ceramic sculptures often

emulate the style of vintage Hummel animal figurines that first became popular in 1930s Germany. However, where these vintage figurines are generally small and sincere, McGiveron’s are outsized and humourous, even sarcastic. One of McGiveron’s newest works, *Just Keeping it Together*, depicts three bunnies standing with their backs to each other, grouped so closely that their bodies appear to meld together. Fleshy seams where their bodies meet are imprinted with what appear to be stitches that have healed over, giving the uncomfortable impression of a science experiment gone wrong. As with Hooge’s scratchboards, McGiveron’s sculptures provoke discomfort, suggesting something gone awry. Both artists have a way of depicting cute characters that are uncomfortably weird.



Kathleen McGiveron, *Just Keeping It Together*, 2018, ceramic and acrylic, 17 x 9 x 9 in, Photo courtesy of the artist.

Both Hooge and McGiveron have experienced how the Lower Mainland is becoming increasingly inhospitable for local kitsch and lowbrow artists. Astronomical rents have led to many gallery closures, particularly those with experimental or commercial mandates. As exhibition space disappears many artists are transitioning to using social media platforms as an alternative to bricks and mortar galleries; both Hooge and McGiveron embrace and use social media not only for commercial promotion but to develop as artists. Along with her artistic practice, Hooge markets a series

of collectibles such as magnets and t-shirts through Instagram, which leads followers to in-person markets and her website. McGiveron markets her wonderfully weird work through Etsy and Instagram, allowing her to share exhibition information and work-in-progress with her followers.

Social media offers new, ungoverned platforms that artists like Hooge and McGiveron can tailor to their individual needs. For many artists the online format creates better opportunities for meaningful discourse with their audiences than traditional gallery contexts. But at the same time, there is undoubtedly a stigma in the art world around artists using social media to gain commercial success; by embracing such practices, artists may find other career paths closed off for them. *Of the Standard of Taste* challenges this status quo and invites audiences to consider the interrelationship between the aesthetics of kitsch and the role that commercial platforms play in the critical reception of contemporary art.

The challenge of trying to bridge the gap between commercial success and art world approval is at the heart of this exhibition, but this phenomenon is in no way limited to the current historical moment. The title of the exhibition is taken from an essay written by the eighteenth century philosopher David Hume. In his *Of the Standard of Taste*, Hume describes the various qualities a person must fulfil in order to be a proper critic and judge of artistic quality, including “delicacy of taste” and simply having a lot of practice (obtained by seeing a lot of good art). Hume acknowledges that everyone may have an opinion about art, and that there is therefore a level of subjectivity involved, but he concludes that sophistication is required to correctly critique it. Hume’s assumptions about who could possess such sophistication was obviously laden with class, race, and gender connotations; such assumptions may have shifted in some ways, but are still the lived reality for many in the contemporary art world.

- Andrea Pepper