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Between Ourselves:

Shane de Lange

A central characteristic of the human condition is kitsch, continually recurring since the birth of market capitalism, with a procession of new trends falling in and out of fashion until the present day, evidenced by the extravagance of Rococo, the gaudiness of the Victorians, the macabre of the Industrial Revolution, the ornamentalism of Art Nouveau, the subjectivity of Surrealism, and the literality of Pop Art. Today, it is Street Art that fills the aesthetic quota for this ongoing socio-historical phenomenon, exposing the core of human experience where reminiscence and recollection, coupled with mass media and consumerism, sustains the world with kitsch. This is the only kind of environment that governments and corporations can comprehend. We live in a world of hyper-mediated imagery, a realm of über-stimulation, over-design, and soulless communication. Despite the scorn it receives from cultural elites and the perceived Avant-garde, it is difficult to deny the role that kitsch plays on a societal scale.

The relationship between kitsch and the Avant-garde has always been difficult, with the latter being a wellspring for the former, and the former being the culmination of the latter. This aesthetic seesaw of symbiosis between the mainstream and the fringe, the double helix of opposing romantic and classical trends, has been paramount in the development of

so-called modernity. This is further defined by the pendulum flow of alienation and enlightenment, oblivion and renewal stemming from the fading-out of the feudal system during the Renaissance leading up to the current antithesis of post-industrial hipsterdom; the dead-end of civilization¹. As Milan Kundera² expressed: “Before we are forgotten, we will be turned into kitsch. Kitsch is the stopover between being and oblivion. Modern thought has transferred the spectral character of Death to the notion of time itself. Time has become Death triumphant over all”. Within this context, The Global Village³, the Great Family of Man⁴, and the like, become infinitely malleable and docile with kitsch as the purveyor of cultural manipulation. Kitsch allows white-collar bureaucrats and politicians to dictate the status quo, ironically calling artists to the frontline and form street level rebellions. Although most of this is unconscious, kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all governments, corporations, and movements, the ultimate panoptic mechanism.

The dominance of kitsch can be attributed to the grotesquery of middle class moralism, and the ornamental normalcy of bourgeois sentimentality; all direct archaeological evidence of social engineering to any future historian. Cape Town based painter Jade Doreen Waller focuses on this historicification with her special hybrid of kitsch and Avant-garde tendencies. Waller’s brand of Pop-Surrealism encapsulates the hubris of post-apartheid retrospection, sourcing familiar second-hand material from the degrading kitsch of that era.

Waller utilizes the waning elements of Old South Africa nostalgia, imagining narratives from antique objects and commonplace ornaments, mostly derived from Anglo-American and Colonial histories. Waller's idiomatic medley of working class, suburbia-inspired, mass-produced merchandise includes ornamental animal skulls, porcelain dolls, cast-iron oval mirrors, bronze pocket watches, candelabra's, China Tea Sets, and classical drapery.

Waller's work can be described as 'Supakitsch', unconscious, mystified, and fantastical. Her staged and poised painted still lives have cultural roots in the alienation of post-war, atomic age, and apartheid era anxieties, conveying the illusory, iconoclastic, and utopian. Being both sentimental and rebellious, Waller's compositions are theatrical and performative, poetically communicating the history of these objects through wide-eyed and innocent narratives, communicating a languishing and aging ideological system of beliefs and norms.

Mannered and mechanical, cutesy and organic, a homage to practically every overtly romantic movement in history, recalling the traditions of Mannerism, Rococo, the Pre-Raphaelites, Art Nouveau, Surrealism, and Pop Art, Waller contextualizes bourgeois proficiencies towards kitsch; its constructed histories, its cosmetic futures. From Pop Art to Neo-Expressionism and the current Street Art phenomenon, Pop Surrealism, Supakitsch and Low Brow seem to have

become established sub-genres, influenced by the work of Banksy, Ron English, Mark Ryden, Shepard Fairey, Camille Rose Garcia, Ray Caesar, Takashi Murakami, Akiko Ijichi, and Yoshitomo Nara to name but a few.

Waller studied painting at the Ruth Prowse School of Art in Cape Town, completing her degree in Fine Art. She cites the emphasis that contemporary South African art has on conceptual practices, and how it is at odds with her figurative and illustrative style. Waller spent four years unlearning and reconstructing her painterly style, shedding much of her conceptual art indoctrination, attempting to find a middle ground between the Dada tradition and the Surrealist canon. From this foundation Waller has found a stylistic solace within the Low Brow art community of Cape Town, referencing the influence of Cape Town's Street Art exponents such as Faith47 and Motel7.

Waller places some emphasis on the fact that her work is influenced by the feminine qualities of Faith47's work, running counter to the traditionally male dominated Street Art scene in Cape Town. A mash-up of everything Pop, placed within an all-encompassing fantasy world that imports from Dali, Tretchikoff, Warhol and Koons, Waller's paintings can be positioned as ulterior to the masculinized orthodoxies common to Street Art.

Ever present are Waller's dolls, family heirlooms handed-



down from her mother. Dolls, adolescent figures, and deformed cartoon-like characters are a preoccupation within certain sub-genres of the Street Art movement, notably recalling the internationally renowned graffiti of Miss Van, communicating the loss of innocence, critiquing the fabricated lifestyles that have come to fill the in-between space in the procession of life and death. Waller takes this cue, dolls being her version of Campbell's Soup cans; alter ego's suggestive of Max Ernst's Loplop churned into a collection of Bragolin's 'Crying Boys'. The products of this chimera are contemporary Pop-Surrealist narratives, palimpsests to the ebb and flow of mass media trends, cultural historication and ideological degradation. Waller's appropriation of Dali-esque melting clocks, Tretchikoff-like velvet textures and moody colors, Antoine Watteau-inspired Pierrot's, and Hitchcockian birds and forests are simultaneously humorous and sad, gleeful and morbid, sometimes impish, fusing the qualities of B-Grade Horror films with a Baroque-like counterpoise.

The greater social involvement of Waller's work interrogates the middle class penchant for consuming objects and later discarding them; the psychology of turning mediated objects into fantasy stories and soap operas. Waller is obsessed with the fact that these pre-owned objects, once valued

now kitsch, somehow contain relevant histories behind their surface values. Waller's sentimentality here hints towards aspects of Naïve art, not quite conscious but rather intuitive, a fusion of Art Nouveau and Japanese Manga, merging the sub-conscious automatism of Surrealism with the social intent of Pop Art's ironic superficial contradictions. Waller's existential, semi-gruesome, quasi-mystical figurative work encompasses fantasy and fetish. Her airbrushed, blue-collar memories follow Pop Art's lament towards consumerist ethics and Surrealism's interrogation of the humanist metanarrative. Allen Ginsberg⁵ observed similar traits in Warhol's work when he said: "Ultimately Warhol's private moral reference was to the supreme kitsch of the Catholic Church".

Ultimately, Waller's mission is to recollect episodes from her past, hailing back to her childhood just before the demise of Apartheid and the cultural mentality of the proletariat at that time. Waller's intimate connection to her past, coupled with her awkward relationship to the formal qualities of painting vis-à-vis Henri Rousseau, are peppered with elements of 'faux naïve' painting. Falling within the Low Brow profile of an artist working towards more imitative or self-conscious modes of production, countering the accepted High Brow establishments of painting, emphasized by her fusion of disciplines that are not usually considered art, such as illustration, tattooing, fantasy and comic books, into the field of Fine Art.

Sewing Skulls

oil on canvas
100 x 100cm

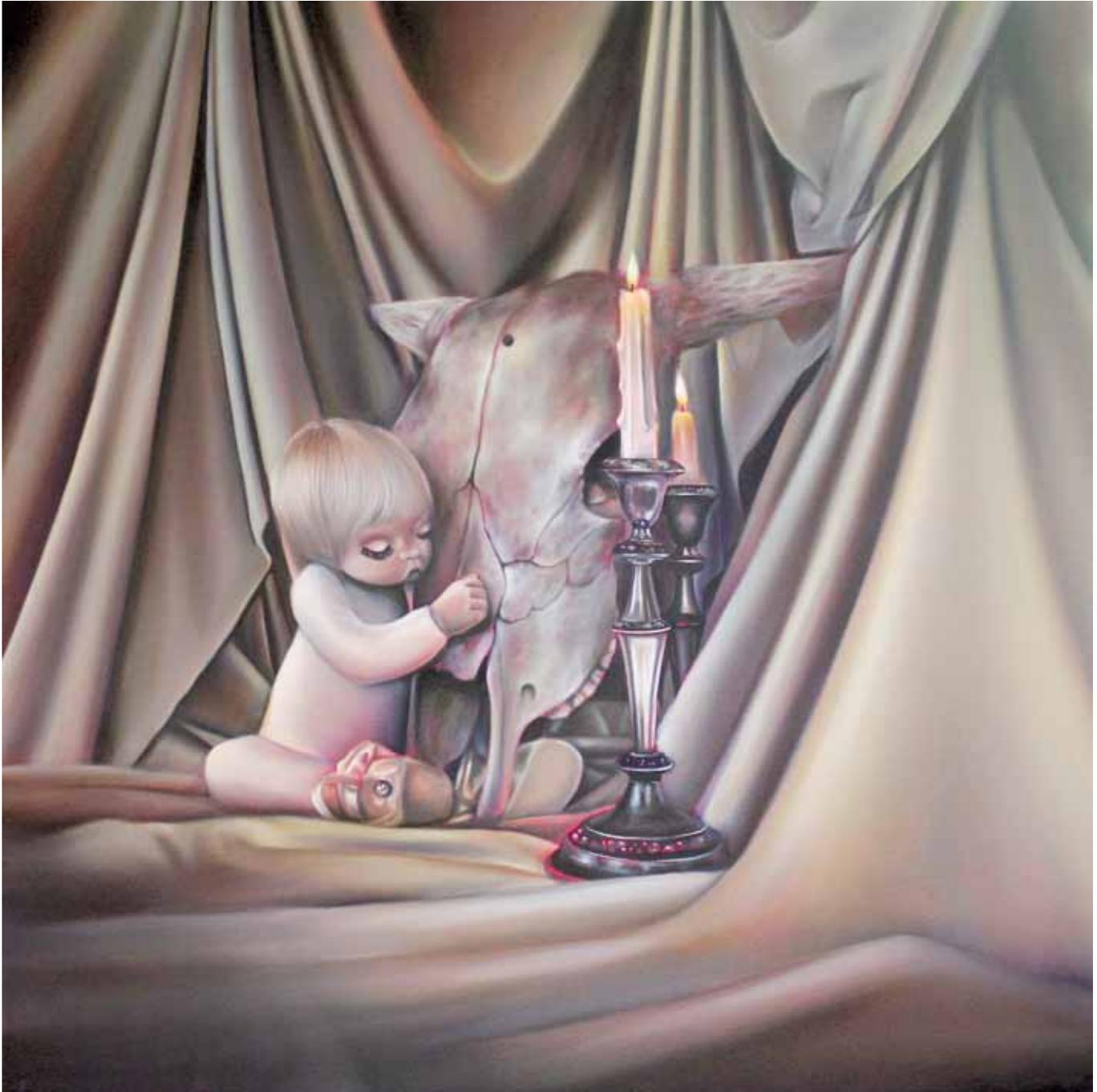
From this basis, Waller poeticizes the dregs of industrialization and post-war aspirations salvaged from working class debris, creating whimsical and ironic odes to consumption. She depicts a world populated by discharged yet culturally significant relics, once desired by the gluttony of a society that continually discards resources in search of the New; worshipping progress, and rapidly losing the cultural acumen to appreciate truly Avant-garde art. Drawing from kitsch, Waller's sensibility transforms and recycles the debased raw material of Western cultural simulacra, cultivating it for reintroduction into the current and fleeting cultural temporality. Waller's idiomatic approach welcomes kitsch for its mechanical formulas, inauthentic experiences, and vicarious sensations – orphans waiting to be adopted.

Endnotes

1. An article detailing this subject was written by Douglas Haddow for AdBusters Magazine. The article is available at the following url: <http://www.adbusters.org/magazine/79/hipster.html>
2. Milan Kundera - "Unbearable Lightness of Being" (1984).
3. Marshall McLuhan – "The Medium is the Message" (1964).
4. Roland Barthes – "Mythologies"(1972).
5. Allen Ginsberg - "A Collective Portrait of Andy Warhol," Andy Warhol: A Retrospective (1986).

A Silent Echo
oil on canvas
100 x 100cm





Candle-lit Clinch

oil on canvas

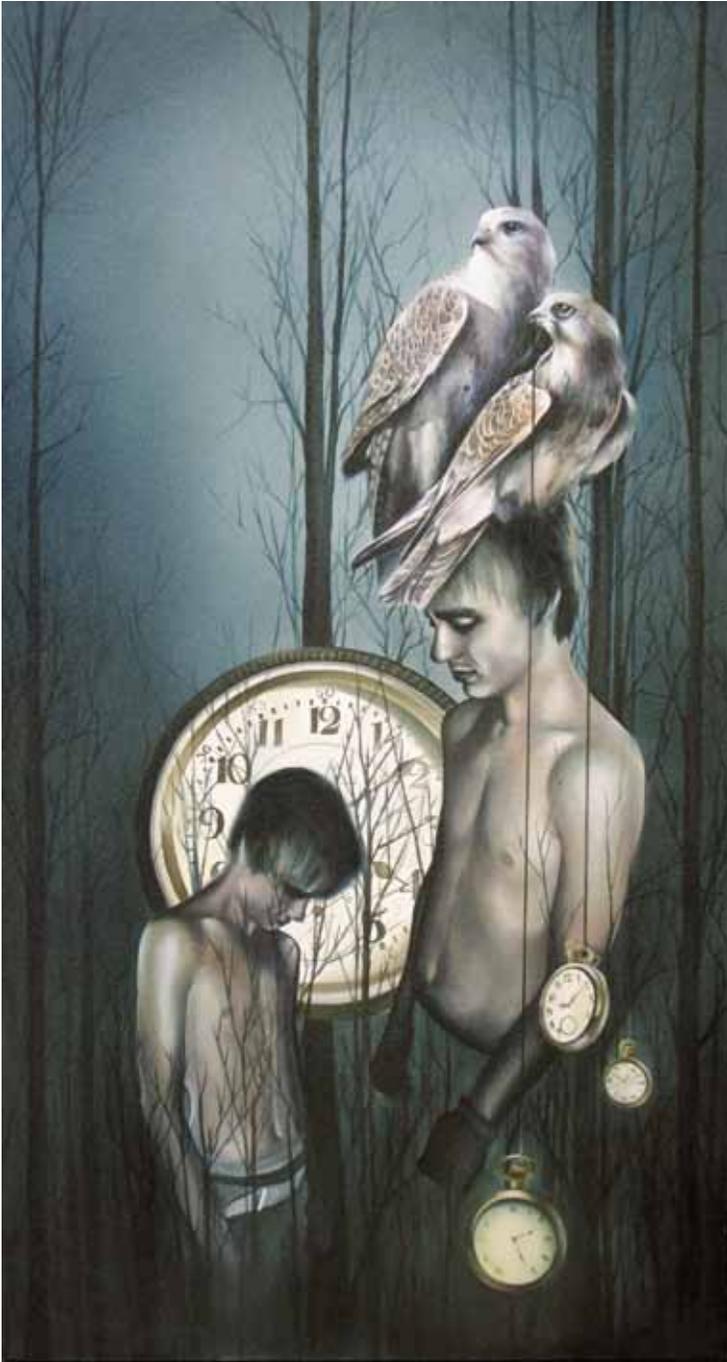
100 x 100cm



Ramsha
oil on canvas
101.5 x 50.5cm

Barakah
oil on canvas
101.5 x 50.5cm





Suspended Perch
oil on canvas
130 x 70cm

Self Portrait
oil on canvas
130 x 70cm





Static Poise
oil on canvas
130 x 70cm

Dappled Slumber
oil on canvas
120 x 67cm





A Recollection Entangled
oil on canvas
120 x 67cm



Disengage
(triptych)
oil on canvas
each 91 x 25cm





Transcendence
oil on canvas
120 x 165cm



My Midnight
mixed media sculpture
35cm

An Occasion of Solitude
mixed media sculpture
18cm





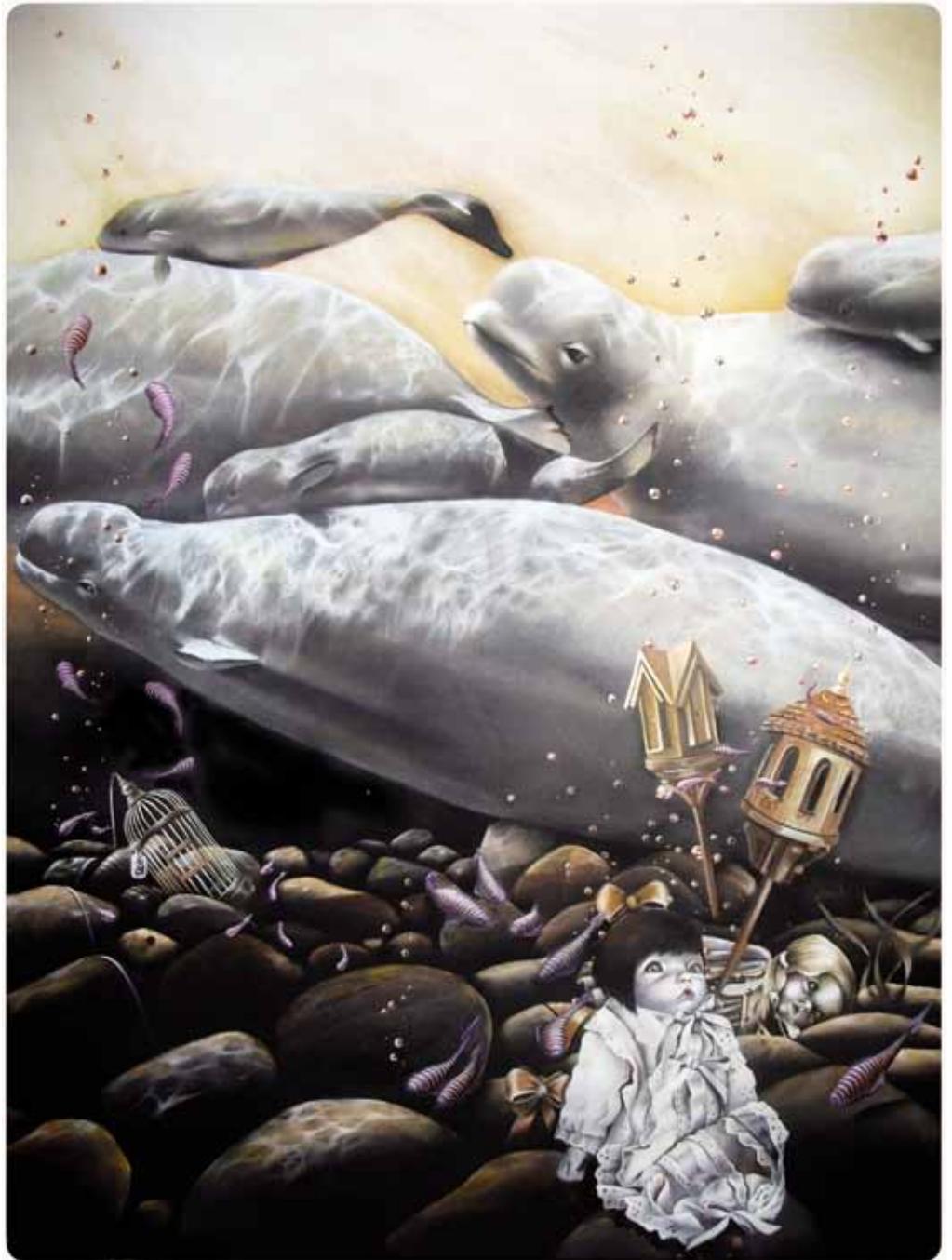
Crystallise I, Crystallise II
oil on skate decks
82cm



Rapt
oil on paper
24 x24cm



Mislaïd
oil on paper
42 x 31.5cm



A chance meeting of Beluga
mixed media on paper
103 x 84cm

Fasten to Delusion
oil on wood
40 x 37cm



JADE DOREEN WALLER RÉSUMÉ

Born - 1987

Qualifications

2007-09 National Diploma Cum Laude in Fine Art at the Ruth Prowse School of Art
Majors: Painting, Mixed Media Installation and Sculpture

Experience

2007 Prosthetic Artist and concept Sculptor, Scorpion King 2, Z NEWS

2007-09 Puppet Designer, Out the Box Festival

2009 Own Fashion Label and product range, J.D.WALL Designs

2011 Art curriculum developer, INTEC College

2010-11 Self employed Illustrator, Platinum Group - VERTIGO, Truworths - Identity, Inwear

2010-12 Lecturer in Drawing and Painting, Ruth Prowse School of Art, Cape Town

Group Exhibitions

2009 *Graduate Exhibition*, Ruth Prowse School of Art, Cape Town

2011 *2 Years later - A skateboard Exhibition*, YoursTruly, Long Street, Cape Town

2011 *Winter Wonderland*, Salon91, Kloof Street, Cape Town

2011 *Ensemble*, 34FineArt, Woodstock, Cape Town

2011 *If You Let Yourself Love a Wild Thing*, Salon91, Kloof Street, Cape Town

2011 *Outside*, 34FineArt, Woodstock, Cape Town

2012 *Between Ourselves*, 34FineArt, Woodstock, Cape Town

Awards

Academic Award for Practical Body of Work, RPSA, Cape Town