

SCRAPPY THE BANDIT AND THE OUTLAW WOLF

An Exhibition Statement

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What Did I Come In Here For?

The gallery has always sparked an expectant feeling of forgetfulness in me, whether I am an unsuspecting viewer or conceiving of an installation for a particular space. More specifically, entering an art gallery evokes a feeling of being in between the safe, assured and comforting feeling of knowing, and the completely lost and vague feeling of having my mind turn blank. The moment of entry -- if I could slow it down and clearly perceive my heightened expectation -- is like going into a room to get something but forgetting what I'm looking for. I liken the experience to that of going into the basement for something -- not quite remembering what -- and opening a box. It might be the height of summer or above ground there might be three feet of snow. The basement is cool, like always; it is dark, a little damp, in a state of disarray or rigid organization. Within the stacks of boxes there are the possibilities of finding Christmas lights and water wings alike. Until a box is opened or its label read, the basement is neutral, quiet and waiting.

Scrappy the Bandit and the Outlaw Wolf has come to encompass this type of experience: the ambiguity of being both the moment before something happens, and the tucked-away-until-next-year Long Goodbye of an event's neatened and tissue-wrapped aftermath. And the heart of this exhibition offers a number of parallel narratives; these are illustrated by coils of pennants seemingly stored away, a perch in which to sit and wait, a shelter from which to make forays, and an oversize toy wolf that watches over the space.

Within these narratives lie an element of trickery and the possibility of fooling oneself. Either you remember what you came in for -- through consciously surveying the workings of your own mind at that moment -- or you believe that water wings really are the thing you want. This exhibition is an attempt to point the viewer towards this type of liminal experience.¹ Through constructing and presenting concentrated pockets of both types of divergent experiences as well as the spaces between, the possibility exists for the two to collide and influence one another. Toys, tree houses, fairground pennants and hiding places all reference childhood memory and a part of popular culture that is almost invisible due to its pervasiveness. The strange construction and further configuration of these elements in the gallery lets childhood memory bleed back into present-time imaginative spaces through shifts in scale, material use, obsessive labour and episodes of sheer volume.

What's the Occasion?

I came across an image on the Internet last year around Christmas time. Although it's an innocuous picture of a little racetrack made of felt, the blurred pennants in the background immediately captured my attention. I wanted to add the same sort of festivity to my studio space, so I quickly strung together some old quilt patches that I had cut into triangles, and zigzag stitched them to coloured cord. I haphazardly tacked them up around my studio walls and ceilings. I knew immediately that I wanted more.

¹ I would like to qualify my use of the term "viewer" as a means to describe my exhibition from this point forward. At the time of writing this support paper I had not actually seen or experienced the installation *in situ*, due to the nature of installation work made for a specific site. It may be interesting to the reader to note that when I write about the viewer, I am speaking of an *ideal* viewer. This concept of an ideal viewer is a crucial part of my art practice, a device I use to conceive of ideas, make choices about materials, lighting, spatial considerations and with which I am best able to maintain a fresh, critical eye. It is a highly imaginative space and I ask the reader to indulge in a little imagination as well.



Figure 1 Mediatinker, *Racetrack Hat*

Soon I began searching thrift stores for bolt ends and wildly patterned fabric, cutting hundreds of triangles, and sewing together strand after strand. All the while I was struggling with the meaning of these objects. They were festive, but designed for what event? They were both ambiguous in purpose, and highly specific in their materials. They were making reference to pennants strung above car lots but instead, the slick polyvinyl was replaced with the warmth of threadbare calico, printed corduroy, plaids that looked like my grandfather's shirts, and over-bold floral prints from the sixties and seventies.

They were also like Tibetan prayer flags, colourful and celebratory but also prone to wear and tear due to multiple rounds of installation, storage and exposure. But my flags were too jumbled and without the strict order and symbolic colour, their printed prayers and sacred images replaced by giant daisies, little horse motifs, and wide stripes. They were also like the farm quilts that the first few strings came from. I imagined that this crazy collection of wild triangles of fabric were the fantasy of a woman who would have liked to festoon her house, yard and dugout fence with colour as quickly and effortlessly as possible: But rather she had to use her leftover fabric scraps and small amounts of "free" time piecing together practical things instead.

In this way the pennants act much in the manner that American art theorist Johanna Drucker characterizes the “Now Sublime”². Drucker describes the Now Sublime as possessing a very specific tension. It is that between desire and longing and the sacred references embedded within a work, and the employment of profane and ephemeral materials. This creates an utterance of the sublime that is within the immediate grasp of the viewer in terms of its materiality, and yet still maintains its monumentality. In fact, as far as Drucker is concerned, the monumentality is heightened as the mode of its expression is debased. As an example, Drucker cites the skywriting works of Gary Simmons, with their inherent associations with fairgrounds and low advertising, betraying a hokey and bad faith expression of an erupting and exuberant excess. Drucker writes, “The heroic struggle is recast as a specific and particular one in which current conditions can’t be transcended. In fact, Simmons’s is a non transcendent sublime, a call to reorder the universe as a social realm in which the metaphysical implications are related to particular human circumstances.”³ In *Scrappy the Bandit and the Outlaw Wolf*, my excessive, overabundant strings of pennants with their polyester floral prints and shoddy fabrication are a fast-as-possible utterance of a flash of insight or longing; a mad dream brought improbably and yet efficiently into reality. Like Simmon’s skywriting and Hassenfeld’s paper gems, a longing for beauty and excess has been brought low through its realization by the methods of its manufacture. Simmons may have been dreaming of divine messages written in cherubic pink clouds across the sky, but he has reconciled his ideal with and even revelled in the clunkiness of having to get an airplane to make it happen. Kristen Hassenfeld may have longed for a gem-encrusted grotto like the jewel mine in Disney’s *Snow White*, but when paper and card is all that is at hand, paper and card it shall have to be. These awkward realities of manufacture are some of the

² Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Complicity in Contemporary Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 116

³ *Ibid*, 119

“current conditions” Drucker speaks of. They are the limitations of time, resources, physical possibility and the difficulties of translating feeling into thought and thought into tangible objects. If we describe the Kantian (and earlier) idea of the sublime as being formless and boundless, then I think Drucker is trying to conceptualize what it is we do when we are trying to create an iteration of the sublime. The Now Sublime is what happens when we want to experience and show the sublime and we must end up reconciling with the limitations of our current conditions, make compromises, and find a small shudder of sublime within these compromises after all.

In describing the pennants in terms of “Now Sublime”, I realized that much of the work of contemporary artists that I am drawn to functions in much the same manner. Hassenfeld’s giant paper gems are an iteration of an immense desire for abundance and an overwhelming need for beauty that hurls itself into kitsch in the hands of the artist. It is this immediate and compelling need that begs to be fulfilled in the fastest and most economical means possible, resulting in works that become even more enticing and elusive because of their ephemerality, for they are made with tissue paper and card, lit from the inside and begging to be ignited or crushed.



Figure 2 Kristen Hassenfeld, *Trove*



Figure 3 Kristen Hassenfeld, *In Pawn*

Kimberly Hart's work utilizes extreme amounts of labour and skill to bring to fruition fantasies reminiscent of childhood fancy. They are indulgent expressions of desire, nearly maniacal in the way that Hart goes to such great lengths to make a joke that perhaps no one will get. *Pony Ache* and *Catbird Seat* both marry a silly passing fancy with an obsessive and labourious craftsmanship. Using materials such as pom poms, sequins and cheap polyester chenille yarns, she undermines the value that might be placed on her labour at the get-go. For despite the recent efforts of artists to induct alternative materials into the realm of labourious craft practices, pom poms and glitter are only beginning to move into the borders of gallery acceptability.



Figure 4 Kimberly Hart, *Pony Ache*



Figure 5 Kimberly Hart, *CatBirdSeat*

Both Hassenfeld and Hart are concerned with what Drucker calls the “New Monumentality”.⁴ Theirs are monuments on the road to decay, either through the ephemerality of their manufacture as in Hassenfeld’s paper gems, or through the immanent casting away of the ideas behind them as in Hart’s jokey divulgences taken to the limit through disproportionate labour and lowbrow materials. Hart’s obvious amusement with the thought of an ill or tired pony lying on an area rug is an inside joke with herself that no one is expected to get. No one likes an inside joke that they are not privy to, and the time and labour invested in it turns the joke against her as we ask ourselves why she wasted so much time on such a dumb idea.⁵

In terms of function, the strings of pennants in *Scrappy the Bandit and the Outlaw Wolf* act in similar ways as caution tape, theatre marquees and sandwich

⁴ Drucker, 114

⁵ This push and pull is the material and subject of Hart’s work, of course. She is by no means an indiscriminate reveler in dumb ideas just because they are part of her conceptual repertoire, just as she is no less than an accomplished craftsperson even though her materials are of a lower quality.

boards. They call attention, but unlike the marquees and sandwich boards, their meaning remains unclear. While their vagueness has been troubling, I have recently realized that this ambiguity is their strength; their lack of clarity is not incapable of constructing meaning. In fact, it is precisely this lack that allows these particular objects to construct meaning quietly and without exerting a great deal of force. They do this in spite of their garish colours, overly obvious and conflicting referents, and the intentional shoddiness of their construction.

For Safety and Good Looks

In installing this exhibition, it was necessary for me to heighten the inherent ambiguity of these pennants. Over the past winter I had installed them in numerous locations, each time stringing them up from the walls and ceilings in the manner that they would most naturally be hung. This left me increasingly dissatisfied. Finally, I wound them up in hanks and hung them stored away in my studio, barely expecting to go back to them again.

From the age of eight or nine, as a child growing up near Georgian Bay and spending the summers on our family's boat, I had a job above deck. Whenever we would leave port, the mooring lines would get thrown back up on board. They had to be neatly coiled forming a large, flat nautilus of rope. I loved this job and took great pride in the tight coils and symmetrical arrangement of the various lines as well as the trust placed in me to do this job correctly. I took special pleasure in the beautiful marriage of form and purpose that resulted. To coil a line flat on a deck is to prevent anyone from tripping on it, and to do it with care is to make this caring manifest in an aesthetic arrangement. It was a frugal beauty that I had discovered at that time, created through concentrated action and practical purpose. Until I noticed the way that these hanks of pennants hung in bunches in my studio,

I had forgotten all about this type of beauty reached through organized and functional simplicity in regards to my own practice. My pennants were made up of the same sized triangles throughout. They were sewn to the cord with the same small space between them. When I coiled them up I would always bring them together at the small space between the triangles, creating a very organized set of triangular sheaves, each bunch strung to the next. From the previous haphazard gaiety of chaotic strings there emerged a slightly pedantic and very practical hank, easily hung for storage and guarded from tangles. In fact, if I completed all the steps correctly these little elements would organize themselves, highlighting their inherent logic as a product of geometry and serendipity. When hung in the gallery this way the pennants become much like a box of Christmas ornaments in the basement, either recently stored or awaiting immanent unpacking or both, simultaneously. The pennants are in an intermediate state, ready and waiting. In



Figure 6 Allison Track, work in progress

this way, fraught with potential action and meaning, they create a narrative filled with many specific yet conflicting cues and are without the comfort and finality of a resolution. I have tried to show the opulence and simultaneous frugality of the pennants through the use of cheap and unwanted materials, brilliant colours and garish patterns, shoddy fabrication methods, a compact and practical arrangement, and sheer abundance.

In a calculated move, I have hung these hanks of pennants from all

faces of one of the large pillars in the centre of the gallery space to not only hide the pillar but simultaneously point it out as well. The Gordon Snelgrove Gallery is an awkward space in terms of its architecture, and the pillars consistently disrupt the sightlines of the gallery. By attempting to hide one of the pillars, I have tried also to make them painfully obvious. The pennants distract attention, but at the same time point out the very thing that they are supposed to conceal. The gallery is therefore made to seem an inadequate host, and the work is an inadequate foil for the architecture. In this way the work in the gallery, and myself as the artist, are engaged in a both parasitic and mutually beneficial relationship, both needing and using the space but also being shaped and influenced by it.

Camouflage/Decoy



Figure 7 Allison Track, work in progress

In the white of the gallery -- alongside the ridiculous riot of colour of the pennants -- there is the equally ridiculous green camouflage of the tree house. As the pennants are successful in their capacity to act as a lure and decoy, the tree house is exposed and its camouflage useless. Even more useless is the labour involved in the production of this homemade camouflage. In a green setting the structure might blend in, but the white gallery only serves to make it stand starkly out. Covered with green burlap and embellished with knit tube, not only does the tree house fail to blend in

visually, but the low aesthetics of its manufacture are also in contrast to the types of materials and processes often found in art galleries. In effect, the tree house tries to hide itself inappropriately, with painstakingly knit and rug-hooked camouflage. The failure of this disguise seems then to lie not with the camouflage but with the white gallery around it. In this way the gallery is exposed as the institution that it is: a site for the staging of a spectacle. The tree house provides a little visual oasis of green but not the luminous greens of natural organisms full of chlorophyll and water-filled cell walls. The tree house is very green, but still fails miserably at being *green*. The tree house and the gallery both oppose and affirm something within each other, one in place to support and simultaneously tear down the other.

Who's Afraid?

The wolf in *Scrappy the Bandit and the Outlaw Wolf* is slightly larger than life-sized and covered in a coat of fun fur. It stands alone at one end of the gallery and faces the tree house from across the space. In this way a situation is created where a potential viewer is placed in between the two upon entering the gallery, and is caught in the middle of a static standoff. It is a standoff between two iterations of a faked natural world. The tree house is only hiding; camouflaged in an attempt to screen it from view, it is a seemingly invasive structure. However, the wolf is masquerading, a much more deceptive and devious act, attempting to stand in for the real thing.

Powered by a motor the wolf's head wags, attached to the neck with the same type of hook and eye mechanism used to make cheap, bobble-head toys found in dollar stores. The movement is designed to surprise and disarm, continuing to swing eerily after a supposed initial impulse. Like fortune-telling

automatons found at small town fairs, the wolf's movement is made using a very primitive set of mechanics, asking us to suspend disbelief. In the same way that the automaton relies on tiny dim and dusty electric bulbs and flickering shadows, the wolf relies on the indistinct qualities of peripheral vision and the nearly animal instinct involved in peripheral scanning, to induce a feeling of alarm.

The wolf is the only pretence toward an animate presence in the gallery. The tree house, the chair and the strings of pennants call to mind ideas of waiting and anticipation as well as feelings of vacancy and emptiness. The wolf, however, is made to work toward the very same set of evocations through very different cues. A sense of anticipation and waiting is evoked through the movements of the wolf's head, the wobbling that neither slows nor increases as expected. A sense that something is lacking is conceived through the obvious lifelessness of the wolf. The uncanny resemblance to something alive is coupled with an attempt toward the animate.

Marc Swanson is an artist whose concerns bear a resemblance to my own. Using culturally loaded objects such as taxidermy models and bad faith materials such as rhinestones and fun fur, Swanson is also suggesting a type of masquerading. Man-made objects are passed off as the real thing, and fantastical experiences are created for the viewer that forays into the natural world cannot rival. Wild and natural things are held suspended, stopped in time so that they neither move nor are subjected to natural cycles of decay. Artifice frames these objects in such a way that they create experiences with all the simulated airs of a Disney World set. This is the natural world, designed, crafted and packaged with *our* desires in mind. The ground is soft, the weather perfect, the animals hold still and everything is laid out in order that we may consume it with ease. This is the mediated version of the natural world that my generation has been exposed to the most, and while we know it is not real, it's much more enjoyable to contemplate.



Figure 8 Marc Swanson,
Killing Moon



Figure 9 Marc Swanson, *Untitled*

In contrast to my work and Swanson's, Joseph Beuys famously used a coyote to explore the idea of "wild" in a much different way. In *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), Beuys lived with a live coyote for three days in a New York gallery, setting up a clearly dualistic relationship. Beuys was making a political statement, and like most of the concerns of the avante garde of his era it was a statement that was oppositional in nature. It is interesting to note that Beuys never let his feet touch American soil for the entire time he was in the country, except within the gallery, being transported to and from the airport in an ambulance. His distance from the object of his opposition, American soil and American ideology, could not have been more absolute.

The obvious artifice involved in ideas of the wild in Swanson's work as well as my own intimate an erosion of the usefulness of an oppositional stance in art. Both Swanson and I have a profligate and pleased hand in the creation of a

faked nature, and it is a nature so badly faked that each utterance becomes more about the hand of the artist and the muddled *ideal* than anything else. In fact it is this collusion with popular culture and the pleasures involved in material production that set these works apart from the radical oppositional statements of Beuys and others.

The wolf acts as a sentinel in the space. It is the one thing that is supposed to oppose -- or be opposed to -- in relation to all the other objects in the room. As useful and as useless as a scarecrow or an artificial owl, the wolf acts as guardian and watchdog. Pointed toward the tree house ladder, the wolf is a quiet presence poised across the space from the tree house, strangely capable of movement. Meanwhile, a viewer might be stuck on the ladder, incapable of movement for a moment, perched with head up a hole and with lower body exposed. While all of this may seem rather dark and brooding, it is important to recall that the wolf is cuddly and cartoon-like, fashioned after a gag toy, a cheap bad faith novelty preposterous in its design. It is a grown-up artist version of the giant guardian and wild and ferocious pal that I always wanted as a child, made as best as I am capable and out of the most appallingly poor and bad-faith materials that I deemed fit. It is another instance of a Now Sublime, the idea of unshakeable safety and complete wildness brought down to earth by its suit of fun fur and its toy body.

Who's There?

A structure implies occupation. At the very least, its constructedness points to the idea that someone constructed it. A tree house in particular implies a very casual type of occupation. It is a type of structure already charged with liminal

attributes, being neither a permanent building, nor a portable tent. It involves a blurring of the conventions of indoors and out-of-doors. It is not quite a shelter civilized enough to keep nature completely at bay.

My tree house has many particular things wrong with it. These very small, but important decisions elaborate upon, reemphasize, and expand the experiences induced in the rest of the gallery. A ladder extends to the round hole in the floor underneath the structure, but the steps go only part of the way up. This arrangement allows a viewer to let only the head and shoulders enter the tree house space and he or she must remain perched partway in and out, the lower body exposed to the gallery, hands and arms occupied with retaining stability, and head and shoulders remarkably alone and cut off from the space the body still occupies. The point of this configuration is to call attention to both of the locations that the body fills, and to both experiences that are elicited. This feeling of physical and psychic disconnect is reiterated elsewhere in the gallery by the wolf, its head only loosely attached to its body. But here, a viewer may be allowed to experience the physical sensation of being cut off from the body. The wolf, with its severed head, is at once both funny and comfortably cuddly. Yet, when the viewer places himself in the same type of position, the experience might produce a slight flutter of anxiety and a constricting in the chest. To further emphasize and compound an anxious atmosphere, I have filled the bottom eight inches of the tree house floor with earth. The bottom of the floor is dark, the walls are dark, and a dim and very green light enters from the green fibreglass ceiling. It is humid and muffled inside with a strong earthy smell. Pounds of earth surround the opening in an attempt to add to the feeling of pressure and alienation from the physical body. As there is no means for the viewer to completely enter the space the only way to change the physical situation is to back down the ladder, leaving the environment above unresolved.

Predator/Prey

The pennants warn and celebrate, call attention and distract. They occupy the visual faculties and engage the mind with their myriad potentials. In many ways, the pennants are a trap, a lure and an elaborate decoy. They are the bait that enjoins a viewer to become lost in their visual noise and latent potential and to anticipate something more. The tree house stands exposed in an effort to allow the viewer to be exposed as well, enjoining the viewer to become a conspicuous presence in the gallery, aware of the space that is occupied and shared. The tree house implies occupation, and can be partially occupied, however awkwardly.

Similarly, a lawn chair-turned-hunting perch is strapped to the top of one pillar, inferring use by someone. I have included the lawn chair in order to reiterate the idea of temporary shelter that was explored with the tree house. A tree house is mostly playful in nature, but this lawn chair is used to point toward a more sinister kind of function. A chair high up in a tree is commonly used as a blind from which to hunt. It is a place to lurk and watch undetected and from which to take a sure shot. Strapped to a pillar in the gallery, however, and draped with coiled pennants the perch is utterly exposed. It is not high enough or hidden enough to safely or practicably use. In fact, the lawn chair becomes ridiculous as it is bedecked with bright pennants and high above the room. It is very nearly like the crow's nest under a big top, an absurd and fantastical perch. Again, elements of farce and failure, ideas of exposure and a need to be hidden and sheltered, are blended and allowed to construct meaning. Both elements -- the tree house and the chair -- embody a type of lacking. What is missing is the physical presence of someone who may or may not return and a lack of pointedness and clear purpose.

Moving Through

Each object in the exhibition adds to and influences its neighbour, but throughout the installation all of the objects are analogous to one another, each with their parallel narratives. The wolf, the pennants, the perch and the tree house all point toward the liminal spaces of watching, waiting, hiding and seeking. Each object in the installation plays its part, from the watching wolf, to the perch for waiting in, to the hiding spot and the way that the pennants stretch through the space, seeking out corners.

The decision to use the materials of outsider art, folk art and kid's crafts was a conscious one made in order to emphasize that these ideas are the illustrations of a passing fancy or a recurring dream. Like Hassenfeld's paper gems, the immediacy of materials such as fun fur, lawn chairs and dirt emphasise an immediate and pressing need to make concrete the quality of feeling brought on by a daydream. Bad-faith materials and low aesthetics embed within them an economy of value, but they are also contrasted by copious amounts of labour invested in the production of some of the objects themselves. Miles of pennants and masses of green camouflage are evidence of a sort of dwelling in fantasy and feeling. This type of labour takes the objects from the realm of childhood fancy and extends them to a serious indulgence on the part of myself, the artist.

Scrappy the Bandit and the Outlaw Wolf combines a present-time imaginative space with a set of childhood memories, allowing the two to play against each other in the mind of the viewer. It brings together the temporal events of preparation, the moments before something happens, the idea of a neatened and stored aftermath and a feeling of having just missed something. *Scrappy the Bandit and the Outlaw Wolf* explores the liminal attitudes of watching,

waiting, hiding and seeking. The exhibition indulges the viewer with the opportunity to dwell in these liminal spaces for a time, exposed to glimpses of pleasure, anxiety, vulnerability and the thrills of catching and being caught.

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