

Sunshine in a Cloudy Age

Essay by Jay Senetchko, 2018

Clowns are one of the few things that can be simultaneously silly and sad. This odd contrast of characteristics makes them particularly potent symbols for the emotionally conflicted, both on a personal and societal level. Just as Watteau's *Pierrot* captured the sadness and silliness of an individual, as well as an entire society as it slipped into decadence and disaster, Sunshine Frère's yellow clown in the grouping *Send in the Clowns* might be similarly reflective of our present place in history. Her latest body of work *Cache Cache* features clowns prominently, along with other colourfully painted figurines doing double duty as music boxes. Golfers, cats, dogs, nuns, scenes from the arc, and more make appearances, but it's the clowns that stand out for me; I think it's the binary of silly and sad that pronounces their proclaims so conspicuously.



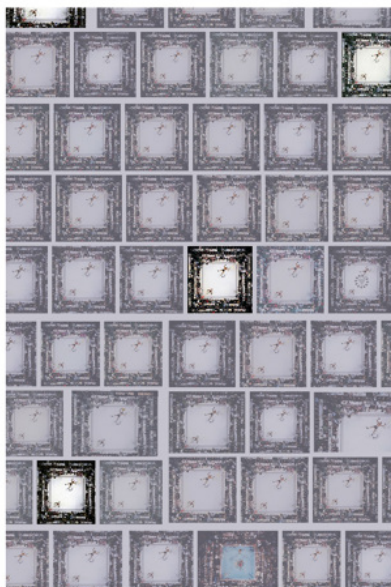
Pierrot, Jean-Antoine Watteau, 1718-19; *Yellow Clown* from *Bring in the Clowns* grouping, Sunshine Frère, 2017.

Binaries are no stranger to our current place in history, and less strange to those who make and reflect upon art. Binaries are the stuff our dreams and nightmares are made of; and through her work Frère presents both ends of that spectrum as a reflection of our contemporary world. *Cache Cache* is an installation of sculptures, music, screen and digital prints; and all of it looks commercially pop and appears to be infused with fun. But, it is also work that is meant to make you feel bad in the face of its entertaining appearance. There is a subterranean aspect of the exhibition that is deeply upsetting, and the pleasant first impression of its surface only focuses this feeling.

The exhibition at first appears to be a standard presentation of two-dimensional work on walls and three-dimensional work on plinths. This comfortable experience is furthered by the immediate recognizability of digitally printed photographs arranged in a banner format; what appear to be abstract paintings aligned in a row on an adjacent wall; all of which hangs in the same space as a terrace of small, brightly painted, and apparently porcelain sculptures set on a table. Depending on your biases, some would find the room welcoming in its initial embrace, others would find it predictable and boring. Thankfully for both viewer and Frère, it is a truism that first impressions rarely give much more than surface information. This is not only true of *Cache Cache*, but also the point of the exhibition. Closer inspection of all the presented works reward the viewer with details and unavoidable insights, and in so doing reveal their true intention.

The digitally printed banners of small pictures comprising *Image Search*, *Lost Algorithm* present search results that have achieved conspicuous cyber celebrity because of the

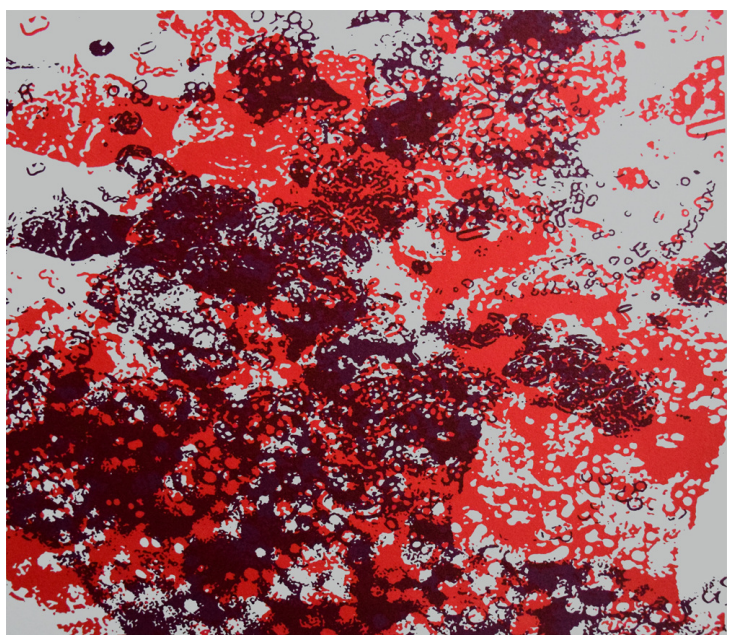
nature of their controlling algorithm. This algorithm allowed for unbroken streams of identical images to result from very specific search queries. In *Cache Cache*, the longer the stream of images, the longer the banner. The central and longest displays the search results of *Dawson Crying*, and it is flanked by searches that have led to banners comprised of an aerial shot of Muhammed Ali looming over a KO'd Cleveland Williams,



Above: *Image Search*, *Lost Algorithm*, House of Art, House of Sport, House of Celebrity, Sunshine Frère, 2017; Below: details from *House of Sport* (Muhammed Ali, Cleveland Williams, House of Celebrity (Dawson Crying), House of Art (Jeff Wall, Destroyed Room).

Muhammed Ali standing over a defeated Sonny Liston, and Jeff Wall's *Mimic* and *The Destroyed Room*. The banners create a heraldic reference to Christian worship, and make a straightforward comparison between that once-ultimate-authority and contemporary tokens of conspicuous consumption (a portion of each banner title is *House of...Sports, Art or Celebrity*, making this point explicit). True, it is visual consumption mediated by a computer screen and the web presented here, rather than the consumption of actual goods, but it is consumption (and empty, repetitive, celebrity-oriented consumption) nonetheless.

Screens and goods play another role in Frère's *STOCHASTIC FANTASTIC!* screen prints: overlaid impressions of tangible objects that have been reoriented in order to confuse the nature of their pattern. Just as Oldenburg's squishy toilet and giant lipstick called into question the 'essence' of objects once their utility had been sufficiently distorted to render them useless, so do these pictures raise questions for us as to the nature of our perceptual relationship with the most ordinary of objects and that which we take for granted. With Frère we get hidden hydrangeas instead of leviathan lipstick, but the point is essentially the same. This conversation isn't very interesting when you question the essence of 'blackberry pie' or 'toilet', and investigate the internal life they may have apart from their immediate usefulness; but as soon as you extend the concept to people and it embraces 'barista', or 'mechanic', or 'mother', the conversation surrounding presumptions and utility gets a lot more interesting and significantly more sticky.



Left: *Soft Toilet*, Claes Oldenburg, 1966; Right: *Pie Particles*, silkscreen print, Sunshine Frère, 2017.

The sculptural pieces become more complicated as soon as they are recognized as not being either made of porcelain, or sculptures in the classical sense, but music boxes that have been homogeneously painted and grouped with others painted in different colours. And the sculptures move. The entire sculptural grouping rotates on its table-cum-plinth, even as the individual music boxes rotate independently and chime away

with their mini-melodies to create a cacophony of sound competing for our attention. This is almost *too* immediate in its interpretation as a parallel to radically individualized selves competing with each other for social recognition in an ever increasing environment of density and homogeneity. *Almost* too clever by half, but also just enough to make the exhibition at this point something other than just comfortable and enjoyable.



Left: ...*You Make My Heart Go Giddyup*, Sunshine Frère, 2017; Right: ...*You Make My Heart Go Giddyup* figure grouping.

All of these post-cursory inspections undermine the first impression of fun; and they also suggest that something deeper, something darker, might be operative here. But, the most I experienced at this point was a mild curiosity as to what the punchline was going to be, and what form-of-things-I-had-already-experienced it was going to take. And then Frère delivered her gut punch, her *coup de grace*, the blow that drives the point home. Upon exiting the first room, and turning a corner to enter the second, you are confronted with a battalion of these brightly coloured figurines set at eye-level.

The room itself is painted black, and so are the thin rod-like plinths that the figures balance precariously atop. Whereas their predecessors in the previous room have some degree of autonomy in their movement and their sound, these have none. They are immobile, fixed in place, and their voices have been homogenized into a single track of barely audible bass. This contrasts wildly with the tinny staccato of next door. Combined with the resulting accentuation of the figurines' colour in their new environment, and the contrast with the white, previous room, the exhibition achieves a metaphorical knockout. The mood, if not the final point, of the show has been set. These figures are static, and they are confrontational in their stasis; they are sad and disturbing; and they are legion.

All of it, the colour in all its forms, the prints, the sound, the banners and the music boxes now become reinterpreted as serving the purpose of drawing parallels with the life we currently enjoy; and it is precisely the *enjoyment* of this life at which the exhibition takes aim. It is through the polarities of a silly first impression and a slowly



The Dreams in Which I'm Dying are the Best I've Ever Had installation at Seymour Art Gallery for *Cache Cache*, Sunshine Frère, 2017.

I'm lucky enough to know Sunshine, and lucky enough to have spoken with her about her work, her thoughts on others', and her feelings about where we reside historically, both in art and outside of it as a species. And through our conversations it has become apparent that we share concerns and motivations in the making of our work, even though the work we make could not look more physically different; we seem to agree that there is a pattern lurking amongst those whom we know that make art, and a similar societal pattern lurking in the collective background from which we draw. And lurk it does, darkly.

Zeitgeist. Sunshine and I use the word a lot (sometimes mockingly, sometimes seriously), as it best sums up that which we struggle to identify. *Zeitgeist* is a German word usually used synonymously for "world-spirit" (Germans are expert in creating single words that capture complex and multifaceted ideas). It generally refers to the dominating belief system of a particular age in the many ways in which it might manifest. Frère and I both share the belief that repetition and repeating cycles seems to be the *zeitgeist* of our moment in history, and the poles of that cycle terrorize our collective psyche.

I suppose the word that best describes this repetitive *zeitgeistian* pattern is *lost*. We seem to be lost between the poles of ultimate purpose and ultimate pleasure. This is why I think Frère's clowns serve as such a potent symbol: there is a silliness that is

easily associated with pleasure; and it is likewise easy to associate sadness with a pursuit of purpose that goes unrequited. After any pursuit of purpose yields a conspicuous absence, an inevitable flight away from this recognition and its associated despair leads to the alternate pole of pleasure. This generally manifests through acts of conspicuous consumption, compulsive pursuit of, or interest in, celebrity, or good old-fashioned abuse of substances. Once enough has been achieved or ingested at the pole of pleasure, the pursuit of the pole of purpose begins again, a similar result ensues, and the cycle continues.

Others we have spoken with seem to share this sense of things, and it also seems to be born out by themes present in the media environment we inhabit. From *Madmen*'s Don Draper and his personal struggle with the poles of self; to attempts at breaking the societal wheel of misery in *Game of Thrones*, we see the same preoccupation with polarities and the peculiar conflicts they present in the better examples of popular culture. Both present individuals and the societies they inhabit as making the same mistakes, again, and again, and again. Nothing seems to be learned, and the air always smells the same. Frère's work is perfumed with the conflict of this repetitively circular nature; and like perfume it seduces.

Bright, shiny things are always seductive, and Frère gives us rooms full of them. But, many things that are initially seen as seductive, are also revealed to be repulsive once their pleasant surface has become transparent. Embracing the repulsive by ignoring the seductive leads to a cycle of despair that becomes all but inescapable, because it is all but unidentifiable to those locked within. In the absence of a cohesive societal story, capital 'M' meaning is provided by frivolity as an alternative to despair. The first room of *Cache Cache* gives us a representation of the centrality of pleasure, and when we peak around the corner we encounter the despair that stares back from a void of our own creation.

That void may just be our species' preoccupation with drama and ornamentation regardless of how vile the thing being decorated. Frère's work exposes this in a beautifully nauseating way. Automated golems spinning and singing for our amusement are beautiful both technologically and aesthetically; but, the very same devices are industrially replicated and disposable kitsch that nauseatingly belch synthesized depreciations of what was once great music.



Left: Don Draper from AMC's *Madmen*; Right: Daenerys Targaryen from HBO's *Game of Thrones*

Frère critiques both art and life in work that pulls us to the poles of pleasure and purpose simultaneously to expose their insidious center. Pop Art knew the seductions of the beautiful and how effectively they could hide a terrifying truth; and any Pop artist worth their 15 minutes would be proud of Sunshine's insightfulness.

Frère's use of only found popular culture objects further reinforces the thematic force of her bleak tale. 'Found objects' imply that at some point they were discarded, which means that at some point they were consumed. That also implies they were purchased for a purpose and then felt no longer to fulfill that purpose. Whatever temporary meaning they provided was, at some point, found to be vacuous. To quote *Madmen*, they were "a bandaid on a permanent wound;" and when one bandaid doesn't work anymore, it's replaced with another.

Cycles and their poles presume centers around which they circulate, and I think this 'wound' is the central part of Frère's work. It is that around which we circulate, and that which lay at the center between the poles of pleasure and purpose. Theorists at the beginning of the 20th century worried what would take the place of the central binding force of religion if it were gone. Art and philosophy tried to fill the hole and were found wanting; science and technology can't do it by definition. So not only does our center does not hold, it's empty. This is the source of our collective wound, it may also be our *zeitgeist*, and it is the point that Frère makes in every aspect of her exhibition.

It's not so much the presentation of the absence of value that these figurines, banners, and prints represent that is so unnerving, but rather it's the complete banalization of value at the foundational level of spirit that spawns such sadness. "People would rather believe a lie than nothing at all" Friedrich Nietzsche said at the close of the 19th century; at the beginning of the 21st, it is all too easy to identify intellectual trends that are content to provide temporary lies in avoidance of nothingness. Humans abhor a void. We have invented the possibility of doing nearly anything technologically, but have done comparatively little with it morally, philosophically, or aesthetically. Instead, by stupendous feats of scientific progress, we run faster in the same tired circles around a center that threatens to swallow us whole.

I do not believe that people want to believe this, I certainly don't, and I'm sure Sunshine Frère doesn't either. But, I also think this '*spirit of the times*' is very real, and is very hard to ignore...at least as a possibility. Not only do I think people *want* to believe in having a purpose, I think they *need* to believe; and they need to believe in a purpose attached to something other than that which can be consumed. We are all, in this way, romantics. And there is something inherently romantic about art, and its production.

I expose my bias: at heart I am a Romantic. I'm a Romantic with a strong inclination toward the pragmatic, but a Romantic nonetheless. I believe in the possibility of achieving something better, both individually and collectively. I like the idea of climbing mountains in your Sunday best, although not the practicality of it. The idea is a good one, but the method needs some more thought.

I think that *Cache Cache* may very well be an attempt to elevate Romanticism to a new form. There is no parody in this body of work, or pastiche, or pale postmodern irony. This is new Romantic work impossibly blended with Pop; it is Romantic in the classical sense, and Pop of the most contemporary form. These are figures robed in the raiment of Pop, but struggling in true Romantic fashion against the overwhelming forces of their environment. These forces may be invisible, rather than the tangible crashing waves or avalanches with which cranky Germans of centuries past might be more familiar, but they are no less real, powerful, or awe-inspiring. And no less rewarding when overcome.

Frère's figurines stand, resilient and coated in their industrially coloured and commercially available armour, battered and banalized, but standing still. They are both sad in their inadequacy to the task at hand, and silly in the futility of their effort. They



The Dreams in Which I'm Dying are the Best I've Ever Had, installation detail of figure grouping.

serve not only as pronouncement of our current predicament, but also as testament to our unending pursuit of purpose. They are, as is the entire exhibition, its own self-contained binary. It is a recognition of the way the world is, and the way in which we may want it to be otherwise. It is a reconciliation of opposing forces. Frère makes the superficial world of practical Pop join forces with an idealistic Romantic spirit, and

exposes someone who continues to fight, and someone who loves all the various weapons that makes the fight possible.

We still struggle, we still hope, and we still dream; this exhibition is ultimately a reminder of that fact. It is hearteningly appropriate that the musical accompaniment of her yellow clown is *My Heart Will Go On*. In any fight, we have no choice but to adopt the defenses we have at our disposal, and the commercially available world of popular culture is not only the most readily available, it also has the most ammunition. It may not be the best humans have ever thought or made, but it is uniquely our own, and only need be directed down alternate paths of progress to fill the hole around which it circles.