Sad Songs

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As beautification requires shadows, so clarification requires 'vagueness.'—...Art makes the sight of life bearable by laying over it the veil of unclear thinking.

Friedrich Nietzsche, Human, All too Human

The case could easily be made that art—contemporary or not—often expresses a considerable degree of sadness. If sadness is then for purposes of this argument taken to be the primary driving force behind most of the art in the exhibition **sad songs**, we could also conduct a brief bit of archeology of the closely related term melancholy (or, *melancholia*).

The ancient Greeks Aristotle and Hippocrates spoke of the body being composed of four humours, or fluids, with the excess of "black bile" (*melaina kole*) associated with signs of depression. The notion that a melancholic temperament could actually be linked to artistic inspiration and thereby beneficial resurfaced and became prominent in the Renaissance, as depicted in works such as Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melancholia* (1514), and continued and perhaps peaked in the form of Nineteenth-Century Romanticism.

The writer Robert Burton in 1621 wrote an extensive three-volume study entitled *The Anatomy of Melancholy* in which he stated that "Melancholy … is the character of mortality." Sigmund Freud's influential 1917 paper "Mourning and Melancholia" later served to distinguish between these two terms, the former being characterized as the therapeutic working through of grief and the latter as a more pathological and obsessive attachment to the lost object of desire.

The discernible presence of melancholia in **sad songs** is largely bittersweet and insistent rather than overwhelming and devastating in its character. Much recent art is marked by the loss of an anchoring connection to some prevailing ethos, be it Modernism or the unmoored and more indefinable associations with the notion of Postmodernism. In the wake of the Postmodern era, an ever-increasing onslaught of eclecticism and arbitrariness enters into the fray of the social, political, and aesthetic arenas of dispute.

Outward signs of political engagement are sparse to nonexistent in the works on view, displaced by those of weariness and longing. Artistic agency for most of the artists to be considered here instead involves eliciting oblique meanings from evidentiary scraps, broken fragments, and lingering traces.

It is worth noting that one of the writers most widely read (and least understood) by artists since the late Twentieth Century is Walter Benjamin. An extreme melancholic personality, Benjamin's work revolved in part around both a lonely, isolated nostalgia and the vain hope for a collective, revolutionary dream. And it is in dreams that Benjamin spent most of his time, in the company of Baudelaire, Kafka, and Proust. Somehow the essays of Benjamin, an obtuse thinker prone to Hashish-fueled reveries, and deceased (by his own hand) well before the emergence of Postmodernism, became required reading on countless art school syllabi during the formative years of the **sad songs** artists.

What does our sadness consist of when prompted by the remembrance of an old worn out Neil Diamond record? Or even an exceptionally memorable strain of Muzak piped into a supermarket you're running into on an especially difficult day? In Twenty-First Century American culture, Proust's madeleine is transformed into a Krispy Kreme donut.

opposite: Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia,* 1514

Ren Ricard, But You Love Me... Oil on canvas, 2003

Andy Warhol, *White Burning Car III* (detail)
Silkscreen ink on canvas, 1963
Don McLean, *American Pie: The Greatest Hits* album cover, 2002

Of spurned lovers and zombified paintings

Ah, painting my love is true
Painters are so horrible it's amazing they come up with you
and though the artists are all shits, I still love you.
René Ricard, The Pledge of Allegiance

From the text above, extracted from the earlier poetry of **René Ricard**, one might be surprised to learn that in the current exhibition Ricard, also a longtime writer of eloquent art criticism, takes on the guise of the painter himself. These recent paintings are inscribed with breathless anecdotes, as if Haikus hastily scrawled in lipstick onto a bathroom mirror. While artists today are frequently at odds with painting, Ricard offers paintings at odds with themselves, as if deciding whether to be texts, images, or from a distance appealingly bright, monochromatic ciphers.

Éminence grise of the 1980s East Village scene, Ricard is often remembered for his support of artists such as Julian Schnabel and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Here

Ricard's own paintings flicker back and forth between their childlike, almost rudimentary execution and the more deliberate wordplay of an experienced but highly improvisational poet. In *But You Love Me [You Said So]* the title phrase partially obscures an overturned still smoking automobile, the aftermath of a crash. The work summons Andy Warhol's canonical accident pictures, and one could also note that Ricard spent considerable time at the Factory. The poet has always been brutally confessional in his writings, but this approach is often leavened with an unlikely degree of tenderness. Ricard is often abrasive yet the confirmed aesthete.

While several of the artists in **sad songs** offer up servings of subdued gloom or otherwise sober meditations, **Danielle Gustafson-Sundell**'s mixed-media conglomerations are charming eruptions of incandescent, neo-psychedelic abandon. Her artistic practice is decidedly clever and resourceful, featuring such favored materials as felt, yarn, tacks and safety pins. Out of this cacophonous whirlwind of thrift shop and hardware store ephemera, the artist conjures some genuinely cohesive and rarefied moments.

In *Soft, Yellow Inside(s)*, adamantly plain cinderblock cubes act as bookends, framing a plethora of primary yellow rolls of felt, each hand rolled and pinned. The piece becomes both elegant and funky, a pleasantly wayward Minimalism. *Dear Pirate, My Heart is a Bloody Tattoo* presents an actual knife blade piercing a cartoon valentine heart sewn to a round piece of stretched black felt, leaving only two exaggerated drops of 'blood'. Such gratuitously overwrought titles belie these deceptively clean and articulate materializations.

Gustafson-Sundell's major themes are love gone right, wrong, and desperately awry, their visual analogues operating simultaneously as emblems of teenage angst and Postmodern art school strategies. In her works, the abrupt intensity of her sentiments is matched tit for tat(ter) by the hand-crafted, near-obsessive labor of her formal process, which in turn recalls both the Feminist

art of the early 1970s and moreover the neo-Surrealist and psychologically propelled works of Annette Messager and Mike Kelley.

In the late **Robert Blanchon**'s video *I Can't Live in a World Without Love,* a dark and smoky cabaret atmosphere evoked by the vintage recording of the jazz singer Lena Horne soon gives way onscreen to a milky grey-out interrupted by a thin dark line bisecting the frame. The line—actually a hair, to be exact—twirls and wavers unsteadily. The hair remains languorously dancing before the lens, sometimes appearing a line drawn across this open field, or perhaps a crack in a wall, followed by a sleepy set of eyes. Horne dedicates her song "to one of my friends that's slipped away," and despite the virtually abstract quality of this work, one is snapped back to the realization that this is a work by an artist now gone, who was at the time of making this work witnessing many friends and acquaintances *slipping away* due to the devastation of AIDS.

It is telling that Blanchon, a gay male artist who worked prolifically on notions related to marginalization and "otherness," chose the singer Lena Horne to "complete" the work aurally, as Horne was one of the very first African American entertainers to cross color lines, singing for both predominantly white and black bands, acting in Hollywood, and then in the McCarthy era she along with friends such as Paul Robeson was blacklisted for her political sympathies and civil rights activities.

Postmodern fragmentation and Romantic pastoralism

Can you take me back where I came from/ Can you take me back/
Can you take me back where I came from/
Brother can you take me back...
Unfinished snippet from The Beatles 'white album', 1968

A significant theme serving as a centerpiece to **sad songs** is that of the constructed landscape. More specifically, I refer to artworks that may be superimposed template-like upon those visions we already carry around in our heads, whether drawn from Claude Lorrain and Caspar

David Friedrich, or perhaps Hollywood and View-Master, Walt Disney and David Lynch.

In **Jin Lee**'s *Untitled* photographs (2004-05), torn plastic bags arrive high up in a tree to create a new visual rhyme—almost as if the artist had woven the shreds and strips of detritus into the branches herself. Her works are among the quietest in the exhibition, and the most unendurably sad. Jin Lee lovingly renders a moribund, despondent landscape, the great American prairie reduced to trash caught on wintry branches. I am reminded of another photographer, Robert Frank and his sardonic statement that fame amounted to "old newspapers blowing down Bleecker Street."

In the manner so characteristic of photography, Lee's works record easily overlooked transitory movements and incidents for our stationary contemplation. Her hushed natural settings are continually punctuated by signs of the surrounding commercial world, such as a dangling Wal-Mart bag with a smiley face emblem, implying that of course good consumers all is very well in the world (especially at corporate headquarters).

Benjamin Butler's bold, subtly insinuating paintings schematize the pastoral. Stark in their drawing, effusive in their coloration, Butler's works give us abstracted traces and glimpses of the landscape rather than convincing renderings. Any attempt at verisimilitude is sabotaged by the evident width of the brushstroke in addition to the straight-from-the-tube character of the applied pigment.

At times Butler evokes Dove, Avery, O'Keeffe, the grand successes of US Modernism, but by reconstituting the ghost of their gestures as small, frail, and inert "failures." Modernist painting is thus read as a code which can be seen through, unraveled, deciphered, and ultimately dismantled. Coloration comes in sour, faded greens and lemon yellows. Lakes constructed via intertwined lines are reminiscent of circuit board patterns, cluttered and claustrophobic.While "flatness" was at

Arthur Dove, ***Gale.*** **Oil on canvas, 1932**
Milton Avery, *Yellow Sky*. Oil on canvas, 1958

Benjamin Butler, Untitled Mountain Range (Lake), 2005

one time a signifier of Modernist purity, for this artist it is part of a more predatory Postmodern patterning.

The wispy, diminutive look of **Anya Gallaccio**'s *Heart of Gold* is markedly different from the more bombastic sculptural approaches of such yBA ("young British Artist") colleagues as Damien Hirst or the Chapman Brothers. Here it is the viewer who might lean over the nearly five-foot high tree, cast in bronze, with its silver buds held perpetually on the verge of opening forth. The title also points toward Neil Young's now-standard 1972 song in which he seeks a "heart of gold" but repeatedly states in downcast fashion "and I'm getting old."

Gallaccio's sculpture feels pathetic and stunted, yet charmingly reminiscent of the Xmas tree only desired by the child-failure Charlie Brown. Furthermore, lending another contrast to the current piece, Gallaccio's own 1996 *Intensities and Surfaces* was a 34-ton monolith composed of blocks of ice upon which a half-ton boulder of rock salt rested, slowly melting its way through the twelve-foot high sculpture, an inexorable

dematerialization by degrees.

Untitled (Tropicalia), a painting by **Whitney Bedford** is a scattershot mess of a picture—luridly drawn, painted, and otherwise scratched. Bedford's work is like a Ouija board séance conjuring a roundtable of Nineteenth-Century spectres: Turner, Whistler, and Homer. Bedford channels such Romantic atmospherics with abandon: profuse globules of paint meet vibrant streaks, smears, and intentional cracks. Wispy penciled palm trees lurk near the thick grey spill of a storm cloud.

As the story goes, J.M.W. Turner asked to be lashed, Ulysses style, to the mast of a ship during a stormy crossing of the English channel. Much as Jackson Pollock would a century later speak of being "in his painting," Turner (according to legend) nearly became part of the sea itself when seeking inspiration for his *Snow Storm—Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* (1842). Now Bedford offers up her own future of painting: an abstracted shipwreck conveyed by way of anxious stutters and shimmers onto a tiny wooden panel.

Whitney Bedford, Untitled (Tropicalia), 2004

Winslow Homer, *The Coming Storm*. Watercolor, 1901

J.M.W. Turner, *Snowstorm—Steamboat Off A Harbor's Mouth*. Oil on canvas, 1842

Elements of the pathetic, grandiose, and absurd

Gloom, despair and agony on me.
Deep dark depression, excessive misery.
If it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all.
Gloom, despair and agony on me.
Song featured on the Hee Haw television program, c.1970s

Jack Pierson's *Passing Time #2* is a mesmerizing large-scale ink-jet print on canvas enlarged from a photographic depiction of that most clichéd and generic of scenes: frothy waves lapping across a sandy beach. The printing process is undisguised, even foregrounded, clearly evident as its primary dots, now reading as textural elements, help the grains of sand reverberate further in this example of digitized pointillism. This is Pierson at his best, as a near-stock photo becomes deceptively luminous, seductive, and beautiful—kitsch transcendent.

Pierson's microcosmos is generally created from small glimpses, largely centered upon contemporary urban life and its related gay subcultures. He has commented that "these pictures from my real life are meant to make me believe that my real life is somehow bigger, brighter, and contains more beautiful moments than it actually does." Pierson has presented his found poetry across photography, sculptural installation, and drawings. His *Christ on the Cross* is a pencilled text, a casual scrawl with an additional smear—or halo–isolating the lone title phrase. This simple drawing ends up as a weird associative conflation of Sunday School, conceptualist poetry, and graffiti.

Sharing Pierson's irreverence is the photographer **Justine Kurland**, whose *Jesus with Girls* depicts a thin, bearded hippie speaking to two young girls dressed in white. One one level, the image is almost innocuous, but on second glance it conveys an ambiguous threat, as perhaps these teenagers are about to be preyed upon by this Charles Manson-like fellow. The image also references the mass-produced portraits—often presented in 3-D—of a distinctly Anglo-American saviour hanging in millions of households throughout the country.

Jesus seems to have just communicated something of importance to his two young foils, but this information remains mysterious. As viewers, we are left in awkwardly theatrical anticipation, watching as the water of a grey stream rushes past their ivory toes. In her nostalgically-styled yet stark neo-Romanticism, Kurland echoes the staged portraits of Sally Mann, Emmett Gowin, and the Nineteenth-Century tableaus of Julia Margaret Cameron.

The "seventies" of **Keith Edmier** is a constellation of pop culture icons vaguely reanimated into some half-life for current artworld consumption. The most significant aspects of life become mere teenage obsessions: *sex* represented by the pin-up Farrah Fawcett; *mortality* by the 1980 assassination of John Lennon seen only through its chillingly mundane aftermath. In Edmier's *Morning*, sculptural replicas of the shoes worn by the doctor who officially announced Lennon's death are displayed in a translucent bag labeled PATIENT'S BELONGINGS, atop a large, pristine plexiglass pedestal.

Justine Kurland, *Jesus and Girls*, 2003
From the series *Songs of Experience*

Julia Margaret Cameron, *Light and Love*, 1865
Sally Mann, *Shiva at Whistle Creek* (detail). Silver gelatin print, 1992

The formal appearance of the work also quotes a sculpture by Yoko Ono in which an apple sits atop a similarly transparent plinth; thus Edmier cleverly interweaves the grotesque popular fascination with the musician's demise with the clarity of presentation of Ono's rarefied

Keith Edmier, Morning, 2004

Yoko Ono, *Season of Glass* album cover, 1981
Yoko Ono, *Apple*, 1966

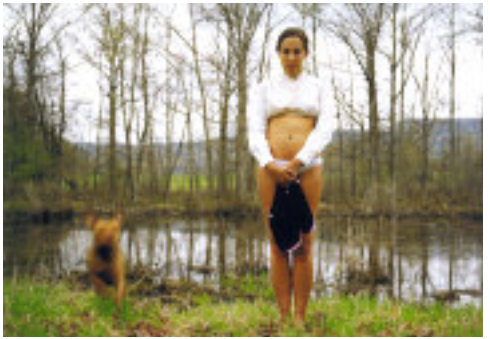
Fluxus aesthetic. Although Edmier's work is a synthetic blend of high art sophistication applied to pop cultural references, to my mind, Edmier remains the young boy perpetually under his blankets with a transistor radio pressed tightly to his ear.

In considering the photographs of **Katy Grannan**, it's important to note that her subjects are respondents to advertisements soliciting participation. A social exchange, or perhaps more properly, a contract is thus created. Grannan in her images of Americans of working class backgrounds in suburbs and small towns plays with a convention of so much portraiture, as it is often commissioned by the wealthy to further their public image, the ruling class lionized and triumphant.

Grannan's works on the other hand hark back to William Eggleston's deceptively offhand and offkilter 'documentation' shot around Memphis and northern Mississippi, or Richard Avedon's grandiose "American West" series. Her subjects are clad in ill-fitting clothes and pose less as archetypes but awkward individuals before the camera. They are indeed monumentalized as the color prints reach four by six feet, yet we almost hear a faint bit of country music drifting in the background, a white blues of slicked-back sadness and broken-down ballads.

The artists in **sad songs** with their varying approaches to addressing the fragility of human emotions equally draw our attention toward how ineffectual the visual

work of art is in terms of directly accomplishing this task. But here both underlying notions and strong passions inform curious conceptual wanderings: a hair traversing a screen, a few monumental portraits, a peculiar anecdote or two. Nevertheless the artworks float in an air-conditioned chill, ultimately an artificial surrounding for an enormous amount of actual uncertainty and anxiety. Perhaps what much of the sadness of Sad Songs really amounts to is a lament for the shortcomings of the contemporary world, consistently failing to measure up to the wishes of artists, often themselves yearning for that which is unattainable, unreasonable, or inexplicable. If artists are alienated, they are to a degree delivered from their alienation by their hopes for the future, as the Kinks—in a soothingly banal pop song—once urged: "Accept your life and what it brings/I hope tomorrow you'll find better things."



William Eggleston, *Untitled Near Minter City and Glandora, Mississippi*. Dye transfer print, 1969-70
Richard Avedon, *Bob Dylan.* Gelatin silver print, 1962

Katy Grannan, Carla and Pit Bull, Gate House Road, New Paltz, NY, 2003