

Thomas Rapai

Artist Statement

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The process of conveying cuteness to the viewer disempowers its objects, forcing them into ridiculous situations and making them to appear more ignorant and vulnerable than they really are.

– Daniel Harris  
*Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic,  
The Aesthetics of Consumerism*

In my painting practice I begin by choosing a subject with which I identify through the quality of nostalgia and its numerous complications.

In one series, based on kitsch ceramic figurines (imagine salt and peppershakers shaped as pigs, a flower planter of a donkey pulling a cart, a bird on a tree branch... I could go on) I choose the object based on its understood cultural “cuteness.” These strange, benign and freighted objects have no agency but through my paintings, I reframe them by redefining the cuteness and vulnerability.

Scale shift, abstraction of figures, and unsettling color contrasts within the paintings create challenging aesthetics, which are directionally oppositional to their source. Bold lines and assertive mark making delineate the surface of the canvas. Paintings are painted over and over. Visible under paintings create a dialog between previous iterations of paintings, moments; and histories. Memory.

These paintings are sourced from inane decorative objects through which people self identify. They fascinate and bewilder me as I attempt to decipher their particular location within collectible culture and kitsch. My intention is to de-kitsch kitsch, to return agency through the act of painting.

Architecture is another exploration in my painting practice, specifically midcentury buildings whose structures resonate from my past. Family road trips across the country included sleeping in highway motels which were exciting transient spaces for me as a child. The vernacular architecture of these structures inform my aesthetic sensibilities as an artist. I was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan and the urban landscape of my city had and still holds a profound influence on me. In Detroit, “the party store” is the colloquial name for a corner liquor store (I was a regular customer at Liquor Land Party Store, on Schoolcraft Road, Detroit). Another series of architectural paintings are these very party stores: distinctly Detroit, specifically representing class and taste in my complex iconic hometown. My architecture paintings deploy nostalgia through dream-like paint, partially blurred lines, motel and store signs lacking text. I paint these structures to communicate aspects of memory, both remembering and forgetting.