

Messenger Boys

Kyle Dancewicz

Do Lisa Lapinski's sculptures know each other? Is that a very dumb question to ask? Since the late 1990s Lapinski has made sculptures and installations that bring handmade, altered, and reproduced objects together in apparent conversation. Critics who have written on her exhibitions have often imagined that their disparate elements are arranged with some kind of syntax in mind, speaking to each other and the viewer in "an extremely protracted and complicated form of address."¹ But given their stillness, their muteness, their blank stares and expressionless or absent faces, the idea of conversational content in Lapinski's sculptures seems less important than envisioning the structure that determines who can talk to whom, on what terms, and with what vocabulary.

Writing on Haim Steinbach for a catalog in 2008, Lapinski borrows from Hegel to describe the way that Steinbach's shelves and rows of objects work: "Appearance is not a realm where difference is constant, but one where equals become unequal and unequals become equal (necessarily); and this structure of appearance is the structure of the object that appears."² Avoiding a more conventional reading of Steinbach's work as "commodity sculpture," or as concerned with the ability of display to activate dimensions of an object's social history, Lapinski instead tries to understand what is happening when one object is put next to another, and the two are thought together and thought apart at the same time.

Lapinski's work philosophically expands Steinbach's prepositional project of "next to" across space and time, outlining a realm of appearance populated by objects who stand in for themselves, but also for the particular ways in which their sovereign characteristics are chopped up, distributed, and received. A small red chair hanging by its face in *Little My Chair #3* (2017), for one, depicts Little My (1950–), a supporting character from Tove Jansson's (1914–2001) Finnish-Swedish Moomin fairytales, first published as novels in the 1940s. In another work simply called *Little My Chair 2* (2011), she appears similarly compromised, with her stern, ageless face removed and her upper body swapped for tightly stretched chair caning.

In Lapinski's exhibitions, Little My and other characters meet each other on neutral ground at different phases in their respective processes of replication, dissemination, and brand extension. Like Little My, they may enter as reupholstered, almost-found objects, imported into the exhibition from foreign contexts after some heavy, often craft-based altering. They may also be handmade avatars, partial and unrecognizable, as though appearing in a different aspect of their being. In this category, *Holly Hobby Lobby Bow #1* (2017), an angular upright bow made of wood and a skin of matte black paint, stands in for Holly Hobbie (Late 1960s–), a frontier-girl character known from figurines, stationery, and similar items that might be found in a greeting card store. *Tobacco Camel* (2010) is a plusher version of Camel's flat cigarette carton logo, and wears a coat of





the material he pushes. But he is not Joe Camel (1987–1997), an attractive, bipedal cartoon camel who appeared as a company mascot until 1997, when the Federal Trade Commission banished him for appealing too much to minors.ⁱⁱⁱ

That Little My, Holly Hobbie, and the spirit of Joe Camel can somehow all exist together in their various deformations, “next to” each other but fragmented and emotionally “beside themselves,” so to speak, represents two related registers of appearance, both marked by desperation. One register senses the processes of dissolution and reconstitution that have resulted, for example, in Little My’s debased yet ergonomic form.^{iv} The other tries to string these alienated objects together with tenuous narrative and imagined relations. Together they might behave as a diagram, which, as another artist recently described, is something that “creates a certain dynamic that can be seen as a form. It is not something that follows. It is a machine that is producing something different than itself as part of itself, something that is different each time a repetition occurs.”^v In Lapinski’s hands, the diagram is a condition that feels like a cross-over special, or an expanded universe, as in the popular branding and content-production phenomenon that allows for certain comic book characters to break off into their own side stories. It can also result in the jarring revelation that two separate cinematic worlds are actually the same world, where previously unrelated characters pass seamlessly into and out of each other’s lives without much concern for their own histories.

This is not to say that Lapinski is particularly interested in visualizing the commercial machinations of intellectual property or licensing. A higher dimension of her work is concerned with the splintered integrity of characters, objects, and styles as they appear in the present, often severed from their source materials or original referents. She semi-directly engages, for example, with illustrator Patrick Nagel (1945–1984). In a series of paintings-in-sculptures titled *Th th th th th Snow White* (2010), Lapinski reproduces found paintings of bikini-clad women executed, probably without direct referent, in the style of Nagel, “the most successful & anonymous American artist of the 1980s.”^{vi} Nagel, like other figures who appear in Lapinski’s work, is extremely iconic, but is unnamable for most. His off-iconicity comes back around as ubiquity. History forgets his particular position while his graphic formal tropes, sharply reduced facial features, and bleached-out skins define 1980s popular erotics. Nagel reaches a “higher power of generic style called existence,” a diagnosis also worked out in Lapinski’s writing on Haim Steinbach, objects, and appearance.^{vii}

A sculpture like *Nightstand* (2005) pushes a dynamic of integrity and ubiquity as well, but directs its energies at the textures and aesthetic imperatives of modernism and other standardizing forces. At its core is an assortment of painstakingly handmade Shaker-style sewing chests, all of which serve as pedestals for caned screens, a jewelry display hand, a crystal vase with feathers, and photographs of Art Deco birds by artist

Gustave Miklos (1888–1967), another achiever of the “higher power of generic style” that has turned out to be modernist sculpture. *Nightstand* recounts the sweep of early American design into Midcentury mass market into entangled legacies of craft practices and industrial aesthetics, all uttered in one breath, while the sculpture itself explodes into a mess of parts with all of its drawers flung opened and emptied out. The exposed drawers of *Nightstand* perform a constant swing between expression, expressing expression, and expressionlessness in Lapinski’s work: it’s an exasperated, ecstatic gesture (or gasp) that yields nothing inside, only more on top.

Alongside the perverse joy of edging up to Lapinski’s work with sympathy or pity for her spiraling subjects, there is a greater and more perverse seduction in starting to doubt that any object, character, image can convey anything about its own “object history,” as if it might have nothing to express but an object present, or the fact of itself. Consideration of any element in Lapinski’s exhibitions is locked into a larger accounting of floating hints of characters in an equalized world without stories, often punctuated by the uncomfortable alienation of misunderstanding or non-recognition.

There is always a fidgety question to be asked of Lapinski’s work. What do all of these people and things have to do with each other? Are Little My, Holly Hobbie, and Snow White (1812–) all on the same page? Maybe a better question to ask is: what kind of familiarity is Lapinski’s work

about? Generic familiarity like the Miklos birds in *Nightstand*, or the barely-legible painting of a skeleton-witch trudging through a swamp perched above them, which looks like a German painting but is actually modeled on a blown-up textile pattern? Or familiar within the idiosyncratic suspension of disbelief that requires Holly Hobbie to appear as a knotted ribbon with an Atari-esque silhouette in order for her to communicate with Little My about different expectations for young women in Scandinavia and New England, or whatever else they have in common.

Appearance, Lapinski’s work shows, is not pure and direct, nor is it completely structured by external forces of economics, aesthetics, or other. Her work trades instead in complex, extended interactions of misidentification, misremembering, tracing the intricacies of influence, offshoots, affinities, productive and unproductive associations, false morphological comparisons, dead ends of interpretation, revised assessments. It picks apart the world to figure out if things are becoming more different or more the same. They definitely know what they’ve been through, but do Lisa Lapinski’s sculptures really know each other? The only work in the show that actually speaks says: “What do you think I am, a messenger boy?”^{viii}

- i. Giovanni Intra, "Lisa Lapinski: Sculpturicide," *Artext* 76 (Spring 2002), 50–55.
- ii. Lisa Lapinski, "Raider's Blanket," in *Special Project: Mr. Peanut, Haim Steinbach on Mike Kelley* (Los Angeles: Overduin and Kite, 2008), 17. In an essay on a Haim Steinbach work installed in a guest bedroom in Mike Kelley's house, Lapinski references part of Hegel's distinction between *appearance* and *essence*.
- iii. Joe Cool typically dresses up in a tuxedo or dresses down in a brown leather jacket and jeans, but he has other outfits, too.
- iv. For Little My, this is a large-scale, decades-long, international project in licensing. Little My is much better known outside the United States, where there are Moomin adventure parks in Naantali, Finland and outside of Tokyo, with live costumed characters walking around. The brand's popularity can be attributed to an animated series produced in Japan in 1969, 1972, and finally in 1990, when the characters (slipping into the genre and style of anime) took off internationally and it became desirable for them to appear as toys, dishware, and chairs. A company called Små Möbler ("Small Furniture") Sweden AB holds the worldwide license for the design of Moomin furniture.
- v. Falke Pisano and Lucy Cotter, "Beyond Language: A Dialogue with Falke Pisano," in *Reclaiming Artistic Research*, ed. Lucy Cotter (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2019), 65.
- vi. Per the subtitle of *The Artist Who Loved Women*, Patrick Nagel's 2016 biography.
- vii. Lisa Lapinski, "Raider's Blanket," in *Special Project: Mr. Peanut, Haim Steinbach on Mike Kelley* (Overduin and Kite, Los Angeles), 17.
- viii. *Marker*, 2012.

IMAGES WITH ESSAY

Top to Bottom, Left to Right

Holly Hobby Lobby Bow #1, 2016. Wood and paint. 49 × 49 × 7 in. (124.5 × 124.5 × 17.8 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Kristina Kite Gallery, Los Angeles.

Little My #3 (Shaker board), 2017. Wood, tung oil, Little My chair and hardware. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Kristina Kite Gallery, Los Angeles.

Little My Chair 2, 2011. Found chair and cane. 15 × 11 × 30 in. (38.1 × 27.9 × 76.2 cm). Collection of a lady.

Tobacco Camel, 2010. Foam and tobacco. 41 × 52 × 11 in. (104.1 × 132.1 × 27.9 cm). Collection of Peter Remes.

Nightstand, 2005. Walnut, cane, glass, feathers, paint, photos, and oil. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Kristina Kite Gallery, Los Angeles.

Th th th th Snow White (Yellow), 2010. Wood, paint, and ceramic. 78 × 56 × 6 in (198.1 × 142.2 × 15.2 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Kristina Kite Gallery, Los Angeles.

