

Joe Mama-
Nitzberg,
“picture not
portrait”

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Grant
Wahlquist
Gallery,
Portland,





Susan Sontag reminds us in her 1964 text *Notes on Camp* that the Camp aesthetic is “something of a private code,” its essence being “the love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.”¹ Camp is a centralization of queer taste and an unspoken appreciation of the “bad.” Camp is something so bad that it in turn becomes good, a sensibility created through an effort to perform the perfection of popular consumption, and while it is so slippery, when something is Camp, it’s

2001 words
by

Julien Langevin, *Camp*.

photographs

by

Tad Beck

Joe Mama Nitzberg’s solo show “Picture not Portrait” at Grant Wahlquist Gallery calls upon interfolding layers of aesthetic references to Sontag’s *Notes on Camp*, Oscar Wilde’s poetry, and other queer and pop cultural influencers. *Modern Sensibility*,² an austere installation tucked in a back wall of the gallery, digests the sensibility of the Modern age by turning to Google image search. Sontag writes in *Notes on Camp*, “The two pioneering forces of modern sensibility are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony.” At first reading I was curious to see how these two seemingly opposite sensibilities could somehow form one of the most beautiful and entertaining modes of aestheticism. Upon connecting Sontag’s notion to Mama-Nitzberg’s visual rendition, it could not have been clearer.

Modern Sensibility positions an image of German Jewish political philosopher and writer Hannah Arendt in tandem with a portrait of poet and playwright Oscar Wilde. The two portraits of Arendt and Wilde point literal arrows to a central, modestly sized lightbox housing a bizarre image of a Caucasian female doll dressed in exuberant excess. The backgrounds of the portraits of Wilde and Arendt are hot pink, a decision that caught my eye immediately, presumably as a result of a subconscious feminine aesthetic preference instilled in me by targeted female consumerism, but also of an appreciation of the excessiveness of the color itself. Mama-Nitzberg quite literally illustrates the formation of Camp as a modern sensibility through Jewish moral seriousness (Arendt) and homosexual aestheticism and irony (Wilde, who was imprisoned for sodomy). Yet in an act of true tongue-in-cheek appropriation, Mama-Nitzberg presents us with the exact image that Google image search algorithms associated with “modern sensibility”: a plastic doll, wearing a decadent fur jacket and copious amounts of makeup, with a skeletal anatomy that does not resemble human proportions whatsoever and skin so white it blends with the artificial background at even the lowest point of highlight. The algorithm at Mama-Nitzberg’s hand chose her, but she exists so confidently in her overkill of modernity, so repulsively fake and disgustingly idealized, that her irony becomes good. So, so horribly bad, but good.

The hands-off technological interference in *Picture not Portrait* highlights important aspects of its appropriative nature: time and



labor. The images produced by Google image algorithms are instantaneous, chosen through a specifically calculated mode of taste based on a combination of word entries and previous searches. Mama-Nitzberg exploits this accessible culture generator by entering lines from *The Artist* and *Fin de Fête*, two poems by Wilde and Charlotte Mew, respectively. With the images he finds, Mama-Nitzberg creates slideshows (these two from 2016) that run through the duration of each poem, producing some poetic yet absurd image pairings that reference many eras and cultural contexts. As a twenty-something who experienced the late 2000s in the U.S., I nearly gasped at the sight of an old paparazzi image of Kanye West and Kim Kardashian that happened to be paired with a phrase from Mew's poem. I was taken again with a jolting, humorous surprise when I saw an image of a snow-filled, snow-buried car next to the line "It's Goodnight at the door," reminding me of arduous Maine winters and the absurd excess of snow that could possibly create a situation like that in the image. In another slide, "In the moonlight above your bed" floats hauntingly above a poorly composed Michael Jackson quote-and-picture combination image, another powerful pop reference that elicited an audible scoff. The short slideshows exhibit algorithmically generated cultural imagery; there is no making sense of the juxtaposition of images except for how they could have possibly been generated by key words in the poem. Combining deep poetic references that influenced an older version of Camp that Sontag discusses as dandy culture, with the more modern, popular-consumption-concerning Camp we know today, Mama-Nitzberg's bilateral

approach to Camp mimics Sontag's and functions as a throughline in *Picture not Portrait*.

Our Grandmothers, a manipulated photo printed on canvas, demonstrates a sensitivity to the performativity of Camp. Mama-Nitzberg appropriates a stock photo of red, smeared paint meant to resemble smudged lipstick, a subtle semantic gaff, and places it behind a section of text from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde: "They paint in order to try and look young, our grandmothers painted in order to try and talk brilliantly." In the context of the novel, Wilde describes women as being separable into two categories: one, the plain, who are very respectable, and the other, who paint their faces in order to appear young (and that this is their mistake). Mama-Nitzberg's work obviously references the action of painting the face, appropriated by early drag culture as a means of alternative gender expression and performance, as well as the Campiness of many drag personalities. It also references and challenges the formulaic aesthetics of Modernism, in which the act of painting is "High Art," because although it is printed on canvas there is no paint. Mama-Nitzberg created a show that looks like art, and questions what that even means by throwing so much decision-making to the algorithms of the Internet. Another piece, *Abstraction is the Prerogative of an Elite*, 2016, utilizes the same technique of printing a digital image on canvas. The piece incorporates the phrase "abstraction is the prerogative of an elite" from *Notes on Camp* in an address to what artist and critic Walter Robinson refers to as Zombie Formalism:



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paintings created after High Modernist abstraction that all seem to look (and cost) alike.³

Almost all of the source images in *Picture not Portrait* are appropriated, and this is done very deliberately as Mama-Nitzberg connects himself to artists of the Pictures Generation through a reclamation of recognizable imagery. The importance of pop imagery is undeniable in the work of Louise Lawler, Barbara Kruger and other artists associated with the group, who rose to prominence in the late seventies to early eighties. Mama-Nitzberg emphasizes its importance to his work as well, not only through the use of influential pop imagery but also through its juxtaposition with Sontag's Notes. In *The Sensibility of... Time (Clock of the Heart)*, a collaged image of performer and musician Boy George from the music video for Culture Club's 1982 song *Time (Clock of the Heart)* separates a fragment of Sontag's text. To Mama-Nitzberg, the fabricated image of Boy George represents "a rupture between moments," as does the appropriation of the song title for the name of the piece —Notes is "so much about time" to him.⁴ The text in this work provides one of Sontag's definitions of Camp: "the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience." The video-still image of Boy George emphasizes the theatricality of identity and time as a variable of experience because in both developing a "sensibility" and an "experience" time plays a determinant role for the individual. While unpacking Sontag's phrase carefully, the piece retains its playfulness by using a brightly colored palette reminiscent of pop art. It celebrates the reproductive aspect of pop art by being printed on fabric and hung with simple clips, suggesting that its creation could be repeated exactly again if necessary. In this way *The Sensibility of... Time (Clock of the Heart)* resists seriousness as a discrete object and, like most of the work in the exhibition, resists being defined as painting or sculpture but instead exists somewhere in-between.

Appropriated and edited portraits by Carl Van Vechten that hang opposite *The Sensibility of... Time (Clock of the Heart)* display an exuberant sense of rupture, their subjects torn from their original respective settings, modifying the original images. In these three works, which hang clustered together, the figure is prudently removed, leaving only the patterned ground of the wall or surroundings. Edited and transformed to almost complete abstraction, they are almost unrecognizable as the work of the portrait photographer and writer. The vibrant colors of the first two prints *Untitled (Henri Matisse by Carl Van Vechten 1)* and *Untitled (Henri Matisse by Carl Van Vechten 2)* hinder the viewer's recognition of the original images further and could have been intended to allude to the photographs' original sitter, but for me speak more to the potential for abstraction once the figure is removed as well as the capability of digital colorization and editing. However, I experienced the opposite when considering the print on the right, an edited portrait of jazz musician and composer Noble Sissle; it floated delicately next to the Matisse photographs, printed on fabric and hung openly rather than being tucked behind a glass frame. The image is not only edited digitally but its physical form floats freely and distorts the image further, a materialization leaning more towards impermanence. In these prints, Mama-Nitzberg challenges the definition of a portrait, leaving me to stew on the notion of permanency but also to consider that the original photos would have not gained so much notoriety without the subjects involved. Van Vechten gained notice as a photographer partly because of his prior successful careers as a writer and critic, but also because of his patronage of the Harlem Renaissance, whose members became familiar subjects of

his photography. Mama-Nitzberg's removal of these subjects in the altered photographs initiates a reconsideration of the subject/object relationship by questioning if the subject constitutes the portrait or if the portrait itself is the subject, leaving only the picture (visual context) that remains. This alludes to contemporary political discussions of privilege and accountability, as well as authorship and interruption.

Using the same basic tools of Photoshop required to edit the Van Vechten photographs, Mama-Nitzberg created *Sensibility*, a flowing piece of fabric hanging loosely and singularly on its own wall. It appropriates the cover of an old edition of *Sense & Sensibility* by Jane Austen, chosen by Mama-Nitzberg (again through a Google image search) for its use of the applicable text, but also for its austere composition. In editing the extra words from the title image Mama-Nitzberg noticed his own hand in the haphazard Photoshop patch-up and decided to recreate the same "drawing" in another image positioned next to the altered original. *Sensibility* is a representation of the personal sensibility of the artist, and if there is but one constant throughout the work in *Picture not Portrait*, it is the tender presence of Mama-Nitzberg's own sensibility. He graciously analyzes the relationship of specifically queer icons with pop culture, Camp's own queerness, and the value of the subjective, the presence of the artist's hand. He harnesses Camp's pop-ness and revives it through the language of fine art and accessible culture in an information age.

1. Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'" originally published in *Partisan Review* (1964), available at <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html>.
2. All works discussed herein are dated 2017 unless otherwise stated.
3. Walter Robinson, "Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism," *Artspace.com*, April 3, 2014, https://www.artspace.com/magazine/contributors/see_here/the_rise_of_zombie_formalism-52184. For more evidence of the recent ubiquity of both Zombie Formalism and discussion thereon, see Jerry Saltz, "Zombies on the Walls: Why Does So Much New Abstraction Look the Same?," *New York Magazine*, June 17, 2014 <http://www.vulture.com/2014/06/why-new-abstract-paintings-look-the-same.html>.
4. Mama-Nitzberg discusses the presence of time in *The Sensibility of... Time (Clock of the Heart)* in an artist Q&A about *Picture Not Portrait* at Grant Wahlquist Gallery (<https://vimeo.com/238335180>).