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## *JULIA WACHTEL ON KIMYE AND THE CHAMPAGNE LIFE*

The [Independent Art Fair](#) took place last week in New York, and one of the most talked about (and Instagrammed) things there was by Julia Wachtel, presented by [Elizabeth Dee](#) Gallery. The work was Champagne Life, made up of silkscreened images of Kim Kardashian and Kanye West, turned upside-down, interspersed with two (nearly) identical paintings of a Minnie Mouse figurine. It was completely spot on, wonderfully relevant, and our personal favorite thing we saw all week.

We spoke to Wachtel a few days before we got to see the work in-person at the fair.

**WHITEWALL:** At the Independent Art Fair, you have new paintings on view at Elizabeth Dee's booth. Can you tell me a bit about those works?

**JULIA WACHTEL:** I have five paintings on view representing two related series: the "Landscape" series and the "Celebrity" series.

Essentially my work is about locating myself within the overwhelming reality that we are passive consumers of unquantifiable representations of the world on a daily basis. The "Landscape" series deals with the world of politics and history and the "Celebrity" series deals with the world of entertainment/advertising. On the side of the political, I see the cartoon characters as witnesses

reflecting the existential condition of exposure to the global reality of horror and deprivation that exists somewhere on earth all the time. Whether it's famine, civil war, genocide, etc., we are exposed to these realities and updated continuously in real time.

On the side of the entertainment/advertising reality, I see it as a shimmering surface, a Mobius strip of exteriority that captivates us, but that has no gravity or place to enter into it. The cartoon characters here represent a place of interiority. Even though they are found images, taken from the commercial world of representation, they reflect a vulnerability both in content and in the fact that they are handmade, and reveal a sense of intimacy. What I'm attempting to do is find some kind of suggestive, emotionally true feeling in respect to both of those realities. So that's the larger project, which hopefully the five paintings I have at Independent address in different ways.

**WW: Right, the painting Champagne Life, featuring Kanye West and Kim Kardashian, is sort of the pinnacle of our entertainment/advertising moment right now. Why did you want to focus on them?**

**JW:** Kim Kardashian really is the embodiment of the idea of pure exteriority. Her entire life is broadcast by reality TV, and there seems to be no moment that is kept private from public consumption. The pursuit of physical perfection/beauty as well as luxury consumption is an obsession that is shared by the entire Kardashian clan, and constitutes the lion's share of content on their TV show not to mention the tabloid press. Kanye attempts to have a critical relationship to social issues, but I feel his message is largely overpowered by his identification with the power of fame. Kanye sees himself as a rap music version of a conceptual artist. I find that interesting.

In the painting I take their image and literally turn it upside down. It is my attempt to control my relationship to the imagery. At this point I see myself less as an appropriation artist and more of a reclamation artist. We are forced to be consumers of media. Even if you don't want to be, you're sitting on the subway and it's there. I consider it to be my right to reclaim that imagery and to try to re-conceptualize it, to personalize it for my use.

Next to the silkscreen repeated images of Kim and Kanye I have two repeated Minnie Mouse hand-painted oil paintings. The Minnies are duplicates like the silkscreen panels, but because I am not a machine, they are not exactly the same and reveal my own subjectivity through those differences. Needless to say I have always employed comedy as well as pathos in my selection of the cartoons. One can't take oneself too seriously!

**WW: Why Minnie Mouse?**

**JW:** Minnie Mouse is an image that I found on the Internet that is many iterations away from the original Minnie Mouse. It is a painting of a cheap plastic figurine of Minnie. For me it has a poignancy that I hope entwines the institutional with the personal.

**WW: I don't know if you know this, but Kanye has compared himself to Walt Disney in recent interviews.**

**JW:** I didn't even know that, that is so interesting. He's also compared himself to God!

**WW: And the title of the piece, Champagne Life, how did you come up with that?**

**JW:** That is the title of a Ne-Yo song from 2010. That song is all about living the “champagne life,” “where dreams and reality are one in the same.” Images of champagne are so widely referenced in hip hop and pop music because it’s probably the cheapest way to have the affect of luxury. You don’t have to buy a \$500 bottle of champagne, you could buy a \$20 bottle and still have the feeling that you are living the glamorous lifestyle. And Disneyland, represents the more pedestrian reality of where those fantasies land for most people.

**WW:** Earlier you broke down your practice into two categories, political and celebrity. Do you think since you started your practice, our relationship has changed with how we consume and process images of each?

**JW:** There has been a giant change of scale of information and distribution due to the Internet which did not exist when I first started making those respective series. We have knowledge of and access to massive amounts of information that is beyond our emotional not to mention brain capacity to reconcile. On political issues, such as President Obama’s citizenship, or environmental issues such as global warming, people choose from a myriad of information sources to establish the truth. To a frightening degree, truth has become untethered from any empirical reality, and is just one amongst many consumer choices.

When I first started making my work I was more interested in a psychoanalytic investigation into the ways in which subjectivity is inscribed and defined through our relationship to the media. I now take that as a given and even though the subject matter is essentially the same and the basic strategy of making the painting is the same, my focus is more about the vibration of all of that information rippling through our emotions and brains and creating a visual aesthetic experience that reflects this.

**KATY DONOGHUE | MARCH 14, 2014**