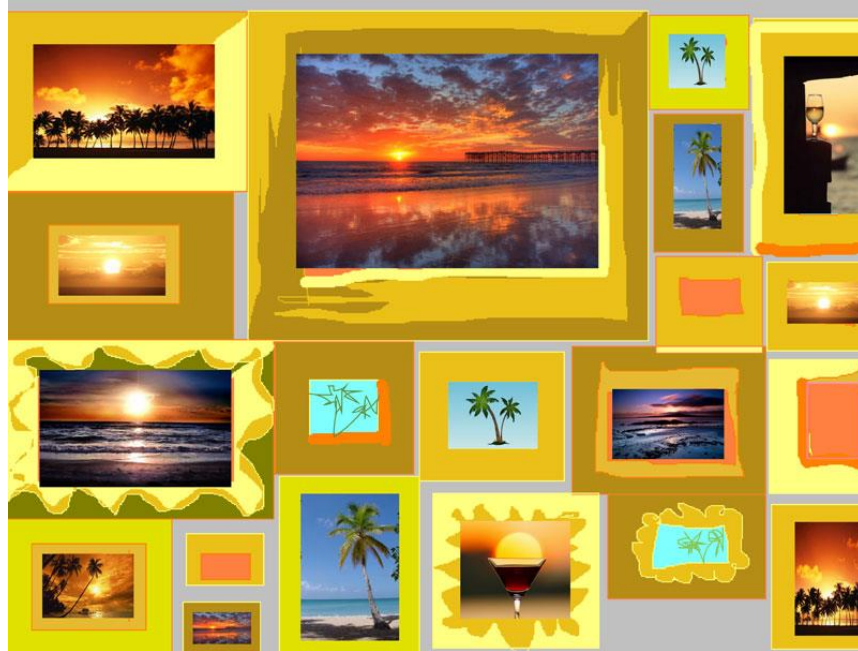


Handmade Complacency:

A Look at Charleston's Vanity Galleries

By Mariah Siegmann

I went to my first "vanity gallery" recently. This was my first impression:



Shortly following was my second impression:



The artist babysitting the boring, glitzy collection explained that this was a "vanity gallery." Vanity . . . Vanity . . . Vanitas? Digging into my Art History word bank – vanitas were still lives, sumptuously rendered, whose overarching theme was to remind the viewer of death. Walking deeper into the vanity gallery, it did remind me of death. It felt like dead things were tacked to the walls, wearing frames that were far too fancy for them to wear in life. The mortician had gone all out, decking the

deceased paintings in cheesy titles, clean glass, and bathing them in stuffy air-freshener and track-lighting. The phrase goes “Museums are where art goes to die” but it could be argued that vanity galleries are better cemeteries.



A vanity gallery is a gallery that rents wall space at a fixed rate per month to artists to hang and sell their work. This yields boring work since it is essentially a “pay to play” game. This particular game had a \$175 per month buy-in, with an additional two days of working as a gallery attendant, which gave you a rectangle of wall space five feet across and stretching from floor to ceiling.

It would have been just as predictably curated by hanging everything with the #godscreation. Writer Rebecca Solnit notes, “for artists of all stripes, the unknown, the idea or form or the tale that has not yet arrived, is what must be found. It is the job of artists to open doors and invite in prophecies, the unknown, the unfamiliar.” There was no mystery in this collection of images, there was no unknown at all. The production of so many of essentially the same original made me wonder if this ongoing deluge of handmade mediocrity was even necessary in our image saturated age. Any middle or upper class tourist could cheaply capture such kitschy photos and enjoy both the sense of themselves as the primordial image-hunter and shooter and also enjoy the artistic prowess afforded them by filters. Why did the images in that vanity gallery even need to exist?

The answer lies in notions most baldly championed by the Abstract Expressionists of the hand of the artist being unique, important, heartfelt, etc. Another reason is the ongoing and age-old view of art as luxury-goods. Those miming high class lives would find it more appealing to impress their friends with “fine art” than with their Instagram accounts.

I was warned by the “artist/gallery attendant” at the vanity gallery that *other* galleries on the same street were selling Giclée prints and paintings produced by “Chinese companies who will paint any photo for 10 cents.” The niche is being outsourced. Mediocre locals used to playing the hero-artist role are bitter about it.

Distance and remove are key elements in much of contemporary art right now, such as Wade Guyton's work. It's a perfect intellectual spin on the cost-effective method of printing paintings. The remove of the artist's hand and the slippage and translation that occurs when technology fills new roles are among the concepts this fad tackle. This high art trend makes utopian landscape Giclée prints or factory-worker produced paintings seem super fashionable; intellectual and apathetic in the right proportions. What could be more hip than an art object made overseas or printed with a cultural and physical remove from Charleston's palm trees and fraught history? It's so cold; it's so smart.



I stopped into Ella Walton Richardson Fine Art, which is not a vanity gallery, for the opening reception of Jeff Jamison's show, *Shades of Charleston*. About half of the oil paintings were street scenes or architectural details obviously pulled from Charleston's historic downtown district, with its mansions and distinctive ice cream color palette (a conservative bet on the artist's part). The other half were paintings of street scenes that were harder to place. Many had figures, in motion or in exchange, who were backlit against wide, wet or shining streets. When I asked the artist what locations these latter paintings were of, he replied, "Your favorite city." Jamison went on to explain that as soon as he attaches a specific city to a painting viewers could react to it. "If I say 'Paris,' they could say 'oh, I got mugged in Paris.'" This



explanation left me feeling slimy. This artist, supposed to be tiers above vanity gallery artists, was exhibiting work with the same bland aversion to opinions, specificity, or content. Though Jamison had

better mastery of his color relationships, he was reducing his paintings to the most generic in an effort to please and to sell. He did not have to defend women's rights or affordable healthcare, it was just standing by one city, innocuous as saying "Yes, this is Brussels." Jamison had backed himself into a position where he had no agency or would not allow himself any. Generic, neutered paintings are not just in vanity galleries. I was reminded of the Russian short story by Nikolai Gogol, "The Portrait," in which a poor artist is tempted to make pretty but listless crowd-pleasers for the profit of it and completely loses his true self and his initial passion and talent for painting in the process.

The invention of the camera re-baptized painting rather than killing it. Painters were no longer responsible for high fidelity documentation of the exterior appearance of the world around them. They could deviate and explore, exaggerate and reduce. The Giclée influx in Charleston galleries could present a similar freedom to local artists. Now that China and printers have gotten the sunsets and palm trees covered, the local artists can reinvent their role as artists in that community, providing works, social exchanges, or perspectives that are impossible to prefab overseas. These local artists can afford to take bigger risks than Jeff Jamison since they are not "too big to fail" artists branded into impotence. For the First Friday victuals, for example, the vanity galleries had prepackaged cupcakes and peanuts while Richardson Fine Art presented an assortment of crackers, meats, and soft cheeses. The local small-time artists don't have as much to lose, so they should go ahead and make something weird, something specific, something that resonates instead of blending in. They should be making the poignant statements, popup street installations, and social reform because Jeff Jamison is busy distilling his work into "your favorite city." They can afford to make the pieces that have direct ties to Charleston's mucky past and extreme class divisions. As Sarah Schmerler writes in a review of Rico Gatson's show which delved into racial identities, "... an honest tension is better than complacency."

Image index

Mariah Siegmann, *Vanity Gallery I*, 2014. Microsoft Paint.

Mariah Siegmann, *Vanity Gallery II*, 2014. Microsoft Paint.

Adriaen van Utrecht, *Vanitas Still Life with Flowers and Skull*, 1642. Oil on canvas, 67 x 86 cm

Photo of some of Wade Guyton's work being printed

Jeff Jamison, *Beautiful Plans*, oil on canvas. 36 x 24 in.

Jeff Jamison, *Neapolitan*, oil on canvas. 36 x 24 in.