Cat & Mouse

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“Cat & Mouse”
   by
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Abstract

An early and pervasive paranormal experience cements my interest in the invisible link between predator, prey, and bait. My sculptural installations and drawings create spaces to evade, lure, misdirect, and trap my elusive phantom. I divide my research into three sections; The Stadium, The Players, and The Game. The Stadium is a separate world, one that holds different laws and physics. Here, I explore the correlation between Slapstick Comedy and Horror genres and their ability to bend reality in order to create a story arch. The Players references tropes played out within these genres, Ophelia and the Final Girl, and their positioning within cat and mouse scenarios. The Game explores Sarah Winchester’s lifetime project of building her mansion where it is said she built staircases that lead to nowhere, windows into other rooms, and doors not meant to open to flee from the spirits who haunted her. Through this thread of seemingly unrelated material, I make links between my work and cat and mouse.
Leah Flook’s sculptures, composite installations, and illustrations she calls “drawings” create worlds. What worlds is a question she probes in ways both liminal and highly constructed.

Her takes on the interior, peopled with decapitated guardian dogs and lamps that slither like snakes, are investigations of paranormal experiences that have propelled landscapes full of foreboding—a series of puzzle rooms that reassure and raise questions.

Like the small, still worlds of poems, they are laced with personal symbolism. Flook leverages a visual iconography rife with the dislocations of mysterious cat-and-mouse scenarios, the implied realities of Rube Goldberg contraptions. She mimics Looney Tunes’ Wile E. Coyote, creating portals. Her implied viewer-participant is kin to the Winchester Mystery House heiress, who built staircases to nowhere, rooms to evade spirits that would ensnare us, leading us to more questions.

A through-thread of death insinuates itself. In Close Call, Ophelia (2020), an almost-still video of fruit and candles against a backdrop where wind blows grasses is a portal to another time or to no time at all, somewhere that never decays. A staircase leads to freedom and constraint. On either side, like guardians—like her other instances of Cerberus, watchdog of the underworld—stand a white column and a tree built of wire, plaster, black flocking, epoxy putty. Death is never really there—or perhaps only in the incomplete mimesis of life.

A young Flook built dollhouses and reimagined furniture into new structures. Now, “I make spaces I feel comfortable in. I make them that way so I can explore the uncomfortable,” she says. The duality is ever-present. Cockroaches and eyes inhabit her “drawings,” like engines of surveillance. But these are spaces of protection—where one can confront one’s demons and mortality.

— Eve Hill-Angus
Cat and Mouse

Constant pursuits; near captures; and repeated escapes. The cat and mouse remain interlocked in a world with multiple realities; cat catches mouse; mouse escapes the cat or a stalemate. The advantage continually shifts, the equilibrium struggles to even out, ultimately leaving the players in an inane game space falling for tricks while subsequently learning from their challenger. The cat and mouse live in a realm of pretend, a repeated storyline used to warn its readers of the repercussions of participating in a never-ending battle, or one impossible to win. Two primal needs control their world; the desire to eat and the desire not to be eaten. The concept of cat and mouse games extend beyond the animals themselves and are instead used to portray an endless cycle. Often, writers and artists use anthropomorphism to tell stories, choosing animals for their specific qualities to amplify the personality of a character. In classical painting, a cat and mouse are depicted as an omen, a representation of lust, or a sign of the devil’s presence. The cat and mouse are frequently represented in the portrayal of Adam and Eve, where Eve betrays her creator by eating the forbidden apple. In mythology, the cat and mouse are written to show the potential dangers of an uncontrollable hunger as a euphemism from greed. Aesop’s story, *Belling the Cat*, warns of proposing impossible remedies. The idea of the cat and the mouse is constantly rewritten and recontextualized, but always remains as a warning, an example not to follow. Even though the cat and mouse are participating in perpetual violence, somehow, they are both free from pain and loss. The consequences of their world are not bound and determined as their story continually shifts. My work makes a connection with this idea, excited by the possibilities and pursuit. I thought of a world where physical confines dissolve, a place where I can explore terrain and thoughts free from consequence, a place made to pretend.
My work creates stadiums for these instances to play out. Here, I can explore the relationship of predator, prey, and bait to further understand the possible outcomes. Multiple characters engage in battle across dimensions. The characters fight to take up space, to claim territories in a world that’s not their own. My work is an arena where never-ending battles ensue driven by two animalistic needs; the desire to eat and the desire not to be eaten. In this world, I create the stadium, the players, and the game.
I. The Stadium

Wile E. Coyote paints a plein air landscape of an empty road in the hot Arizona desert. From our view, the painted road fits in perfect registration with the concrete one, the painted road continues into the distance and the concrete road meets the physical canyon’s edge. When Roadrunner approaches, she is able to speed straight through the canvas, unbothered, as if the road is part of their reality. Wile, astonished, steps into the road and is hit by a semi-truck that manifested from his own painting. Now angry, Wile attempts to chase after Roadrunner. He crashes through the canvas and falls to his demise. Dust and debris form into a cloud of Wile’s silent cry, “OH NO!” We can only assume his body morphs into an accordion as he falls, singing a familiar song of defeat.

Wile and Roadrunner act as jesters to an audience, unaware of their purpose to entertain. If shifted to reality, their lives are of a horror film. Wile, an ultimate evil, relentlessly tracks Roadrunner’s every move. Though on-screen, their pantomimed violence is made out as comedy, and their injuries are easily dismissed. The characters are placed in absurd or extreme situations to create a narrative arch. The slapstick comedy genre negates the consequence of wounds inflicted by violence. Instead, personified weapons become figures of justice only to malfunction on their keeper as a source of humiliation and fleeting pain. For instance, dynamite that sticks to Wile’s hand, or a wrecking ball missing his target and swinging back to hit him. Frequently, they are given the ability to bend reality in order to escape. This can be seen through the Roadrunner running through Wile’s painted road on a canyon’s surface, or Bugs Bunny’s escape hole thrown on the ground from his pocket. Fantastical weapons are used against one another and the principles of physics are broken. However, if the tone was shifted in these realities to reflect a
more permanent situation, the chase might look more sinister, similar to what a viewer would see in a horror film. *Final Destination* (2000)\(^1\) acts as a Rube Goldberg machine of death whereas Mcaully Caulkin’s line of defense in *Home Alone* (1990)\(^2\) acts out the same mechanics on a comedic level. Each protagonist treats their enemy to absurd and extravagant mechanics of pain. Slapstick and Slasher films exhibit the same kind of dynamics of cat and mouse scenarios. An ultimate evil continually taunting and preying upon victims, the bending of reality to tell a story, and a perpetual chase.

In reality, our reality, we do not have the luxury of playing out the scenarios of escape. Here, we are not free from pain or loss. If we are preyed upon, there is no divine justice-seeking retribution. We write stories to act out these fantasies, to discover the ‘what ifs.’ My work seeks out a reality similar to that of Wile E. Coyote and Roadrunner’s, aware of the potential horrors of the slasher films. I study cat and mouse scenarios to understand the possible outcomes and escape plans. My work transgresses our reality and takes from the others. It acts as a safe place to evade, lure, misdirect, and trap my elusive predator.

My thesis work, *Close Call, Ophelia*, is a monolith to hindsight - a place where wounds are revisited and stabilized. Humor, beauty, and fantasy help to buffer the uncomfortable. TV monitors depict pseudo-still lives in a conflicting world. On one screen, a fruit bowl sits on top of the staircase. The wind blows leaves and candle flames gently. The video loops seamlessly.

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\(^1\) *Final Destination* (2000), an American horror franchise created by Jeffrey Reddick. The film centers around a group of people who avoid a mass-casualty death due to a premonition had by the main protagonist. After avoiding death, the characters are then killed one by one in bizarre accidents initiated by an invisible force. The deaths are seemingly created by a strange series of events that resemble the actions of a Rube Goldberg Machine.

\(^2\) *Home Alone* (1990) directed by Chris Columbus is a slapstick comedy film that follows an 8-year-old boy who must defend his home from two burglars after being accidentally left home alone by his family while they traveled for a Christmas vacation.
Here, the fruit will never decay, the sun will never set, and the candles will not burn out; death is not welcome. This world is a stadium. It’s separate from ours, a world with different laws and unfamiliar physics. This place resides in a lucid dreamscape - a place with endless possibilities and infinite redo’s. It is a world able to facilitate the game.

Close Call, Ophelia
2020
Mixed media
Dimensions variable
II. The Players

The cat is a war general, strategizing a game plan. The mouse is a mathematician, calculating all possible outcomes of escape. They categorize and define their opponent to predict their movements and capabilities. Strategizing becomes a leg up for the cat and a beacon of hope for the mouse. Laying out movements to paper, running through all possible scenarios, finding the perfect play. To understand an opponent, they should be studied. Many mice have been written and played out for audiences. They are small, feeble, and feminine; perpetually chased and almost never caught. Mice are made to be wanted and desired. They are lost, waiting to be saved or devoured. The cat is a villain and the mouse is a damsel in distress.

Shakespeare’s Ophelia, the hysteric and theatrical female character in Hamlet, is a mouse. The potential wife of the eponymous is betrayed when he murders her father. In her grief, Ophelia protests Hamlet by song at a public hearing only to be ignored; her actions made out to be theatrics. Throughout the play, she falls into a downward spiral, becoming unhinged, deranged, and sorrowful until her eventual suicide by drowning. Ophelia is commonly clothed in archetypal white virginal garb, flowers strung through her hair, barefoot running through the thicket. Her beauty is as important as her fate: young, sexy, and doomed. Ophelia acts as the hyper-femminine counterpart to the male protagonist. Commonly, she is used as a prop throughout the storyline to display sexual desire or a potential bride, an object to be acquired. Feminist theorist Judith Butler describes the idea of a bride in her book, Gender Trouble, as a gift, an object of exchange. She argues, “she reflects masculine identity precisely through being the site of its absence.” The Ophelia trope has been played out on-screen in various narratives; Vertigo (1958), The Virgin Suicides (1999), Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004), and The Royal
Tenenbaums (2001). These Ophelias, or mice, are defined by their clear skin, overall loathing of life, and they’re being longed for by all men alike. The cat yearns for its opposite, the mouse, as it needs her to survive.

I draw connections to Ophelia and Hamlet (cat and mouse) and the work of artist, Pamela Rosenkranz. Her 2014 work Attraction (Red and Blue) used 6 different projectors, 3 beaming red light, and 3 beaming blue. The gallery space was filled with synthetic cat pheromones, which have a powerful effect on some mammals (including humans) because of toxoplasmosis, a disease that infects the section of the brain where sexual arousal occurs. When mice are infected with the disease they become attracted to cats, inevitably leading the mouse to its own demise. The disease causes humans to be attracted to cat pheromones as well, companies sometimes use this to their advantage, for example, the perfume Chanel N°5 contains synthetic cat pheromones. Rosenkranz’s work attempts to unveil the disease, to draw attention to the fact our sexuality is
out of our control. The projectors, red and blue, signify magnets and the room becomes its own. I’m interested in the cat and mouse in Rosenkranz’s work, how the mouse has no control over its attraction to the cat. They are magnets, inevitably moving closer and closer, until contact.

The “Final Girl,” another mouse, was coined by professor of Medieval Studies and American Film, Carol Clover, in her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*. The Final Girl acts as a moral compass for the audience. She is virginal, intelligent, curious, strong-willed, feminine but usually has boyish attributes, and is most commonly white. She is known to turn down flirtations, party favors and not fall for seductive traps - as she must encourage viewers she is worthy of life. Clover suggests that the Final Girl acts as a character to identify with. Although presenting as female, she oscillates between genders as a means to obtain male empathy from an audience. In most films, she is linked to her predator and is the main target which is made apparent through the deaths of her close friends and acquaintances. She is taunted and trapped as the cat, her attacker, and she, the mouse, are constantly circling one another. In the end, she is face-to-face with her predator and is saved by a hyper-masculine hero or by vanquishing her enemy.

*The Gender of the Final Girl is likewise compromised from the outset by her masculine interests, her inevitable sexual reluctance (penetration, it seems constructs the female), her apartness from other girls, sometimes her name. At the level of cinematic apparatus, her unfemininity is signaled clearly by her exercise of the “active investigating gaze” normally reserved for males and hideously punished in females when they assume it themselves; tentatively at first and then aggressively, the Final Girl looks for the killer, even tracking him to his forest hut*
or his underground labyrinth, and then at him, therewith bringing him, often for the first time, into our vision as well. When, in the final scene she stops screaming, looks at the killer, and reaches for the knife (sledge hammer, scalpel, gun, machete, hanger, knitting needle, chainsaw), she addresses the killer on his own terms.

Carol Clover, Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy (pg 210)

Often, Final Girl’s plot alludes to the idea of “until next time” where she will be at odds with her predator once again. She has never truly escaped. Where the mouse represents mortality, the cat represents death.

How many times do these women have to die until they are laid to rest? I mourn for Ophelia and the Final Girl. I chose to build a memorial for these women through my work. I marked each of their almost deaths (mental and physical) with a tombstone, a place they would feel at peace. I picked flowers for Ophelia, sealed them inside polyurethane, sand, and mud. The leaves mimic the decorative carvings seen on tombstones. TV monitors show images of earth, water and air to represent how Ophelia was bound to nature. An abstracted rug rests underneath a bed, the assemblage resembling a fainting chair. The rug is upholstered with sherpa, made to mimic sheep's wool, representing the act of counting sheep. A dog lays on the rug, it’s headless body holds up a leg of the bed. The dog is a guardian who herds sheep for an eternal slumber. For the Final Girl, I draw hallways, fragmented architecture, rooms for safety, and escape routes. I create somewhere to breathe. Somewhere she can pull out of her pocket, throw on the ground and jump into just like Bugs Bunny. It’s warm, but there’s a cool breeze. The dangers are no longer looming, instead, they fight to protect her and this space. In the jungle it’s quiet, but no
one can hear her move. Exploring does not give her away. Here, dogs become her protectors, guarding the gates of her new home. Growling, howling, warning when enemies approach.

*Close Call, Ophelia* (detail)
Close Call, Ophelia (detail)
Space Gaze
2020
Vinyl
Northpark Center
Howl Growl
2020
Neon
36” x 46” x 11”
III. The Game

Sarah Winchester\(^3\) embarked across the country and settled on the west coast where she took on the life-long project of building her mansion. The Winchester Mystery Mansion is surrounded by rumors of hysteria, spirits, and seances. Journalists and theorists tell stories of a chase; Sarah, evading those killed by the rifle of her namesake, must build a mansion to appease the spirits. The mansion consists of 160 rooms (once close to 500, but destroyed by an earthquake); windows open onto blank walls, staircases lead to nowhere, and doors can not be opened. It’s rumored Sarah created these architectural nightmares as a red herring, potentially being able to throw off the ghosts who haunted her. She would sleep in separate rooms each night to deceive the spirits and construct trap doors for capture. It was once said that Sarah was caught by the spirits. An earthquake devastated her home and trapped her in her seven-story tower for several hours. “Oh God, help me! The spirits have taken over the house,” she pleaded. When rescued, she left the mansion and did not return for 6 years.

In reality, these claims can easily be disproven. Sarah Winchester did not flee to California to escape the spirits of those killed from the Winchester rifle, rather, after the death of her child and husband she was recommended by her doctor to seek out a more even climate as a cure for her depression. Nor did she build a mansion to appease the spirits, instead she sought out a project to keep her busy. The staircases to nowhere, windows to blank walls, and doors that can’t be opened can easily be explained away by the fact that the mansion was an ongoing project, with each new room added, another would be sealed off. She moved her bedroom in her

\(^3\) Sarah Winchester, heiress to the Winchester Rifle fortune. Often referred to as “the gun that won the west” because of its ability to fire off multiple rounds before having to reload.
house at her own will and the trap doors were made for a greenhouse - acting as drainage for water runoff. However, she was trapped in her tower by an earthquake and relocated, but only for 6 months while the repairs were taking place. Nonetheless, I’m intrigued by the perceived game between Sarah Winchester and her ghosts. A game made for red herrings, barricades, and capture. The ghost, a predator, Sarah the prey, and the rooms of the house made bait. Sarah, bound to her creation she desperately wishes to leave.

I draw inspiration from Michael Jones Mckean’s installation, *Ground* (2017). Where a warehouse holds his large scale installation made up of multiple rooms, each seemingly interwoven and connected physically and by content. The work shows past, present, and future - coexisting and frozen. Rooms become display cases, beckoning a viewer to walk among the set,
to become a part of the installation. However, there is a sense of urgency to stay away, as if the objects are too precious as they are protected in a vitrine. The work is modern and sleek while simultaneously being hand-crafted. When looking closely, finger and palm imprints are unveiled within epoxy putty. I’m drawn to Mckean’s spaces. How each room presents a different era. I think about a viewer being able to step inside, to walk among time, and bend it to fit their reality much like Sarah Winchester.

I imagine what the Winchester Mystery House would look like as a game show. The objectives made more clear and light hearted. I pictured it existing in a similar game space as *Legends of the Hidden Temple*, a children's game show produced by Nickelodeon in the mid 90s’. The game was a combination of Indiana Jones and Jeopardy. The game show featured children performing physical stunts and answering questions based on history, mythology and geography. I’m interested in the elaborate sets the players interacted with - a labyrinth that included puzzles, traps, and hidden objects. I wonder what Sarah’s game show would look like. The house would be moved to a film set, where it would be sliced in half for the viewing audience. It would be made into a dreamscape where hallways transform into mazes and trick doors would open to blank walls, new rooms, or an enemy waiting. The show would recreate scenes similar to *Scooby Doo*, where characters run amok in hallways retreating through doors only to come through another into the same space. There would be teams, some would win, others would lose, only to be repeated every Saturday night 7/6 central.

I’m the creator of my own game show. I meticulously place objects, gateways, and barriers to interfere, as I consider myself a player as well. I draw open architecture for an audience's viewing pleasure. The rooms are sliced in half, the rectangular walls made into a set
for television screens or theaters. There is a sense of dramatic irony, as the viewer knows what players await behind each door. Rife with symbolism, the characters are specific; the dog, a guardian, the snake, a trickster, sheep that represent safety - until they grow ram’s horns. The objects are personified, a candle holder is no longer an ornament, but rather a vessel of surveillance. Winding and twirling, following, its metal arms extend as it watches its target. Plants grow and replicate to create small jungles. Their beauty makes for a delicate resting place, their oxygen stabilizes the players as they call out “home base.” Windows become wormholes, facilitating quick escapes for the contestants. Inside, the portals open to a world of paradise, where time stands still. But, as time may stop inside, the offense awaits their return. There are teams - good and evil; cat and mouse.
A Very Long Couch
2018
Archival inkjet on paper
60" x 74"
Homegrown
2020
Vinyl
18.5" x 21"
Borgen Wolfe
Slow Burn 1, 2, & 3
2020
Archival inkjet on paper, framed
18" x 24" each
Lola Jane, Cerberus
2019
Archival inkjet on koozo paper
18” x 24”
Pete, Repete
2019
Archival inkjet on canvas
90" x 60"
Howl Growl, Leg Room, Roaches, Green House
2019 - 2020
Archival inkjet on canvas paper, framed
8.5” x 11” each
Conclusion

Unfortunately, the safe moments can only last so long. These places are mirages that are seen in a state of extreme fatigue and desire. It’s said, before death you are engulfed by bliss, time plays before you - only your favorite moments. For the mouse, a bowl of freshly cut fruit. She craves the juices to relax her dehydrated body. She melts inside of the rinds, her soul becomes liquid, filling each crevice or imperfection of the fruit. She is a scent, a taste, a feeling of safety, salvation. Even so, what is eternity for the mouse is only mere seconds for the cat. The cats bowels are made from a maze of steel piping, sharp angles finding their way past obstacles. The mouse’s body seeps towards the drain, is guided through the maze, digested and discarded. The mouse is a ghost; soul separated from body, haunting the innards of walls. I picture the cat and mouse tethered at the tail, their bodies form the figure 8, turned sideways. The cat and the mouse are infinite. Only driven by two animalistic needs; the desire to eat and the desire not to be eaten. I hope one day to see the mouse eat the cat.

Close Call, Ophelia (detail)
The inside of walls are made for mice. Small ghosts that hold your secrets safe during the day, but speak them loudly at night. They travel through pipes and sleep in nests made of electrical wires. They whisper through vents and scratch the drywall in morse code. They are engines of surveillance, watching meticulously for your mistakes. I set traps for the ghost mice, but their bodies passed through them like smoke.
Bibliography


https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/pabzay/a-taxonomy-of-the-sad-girl


