



DON'T LET YOUR MEMES BE MEMES

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DON'T LET YOUR MEMES BE MEMES

THE ART OF MAKING DANK MEMES

I hear the voice in the back of my head: “c’mon, it’ll be funny”, and so it began. The project started as more of a joke than anything. My initial vision was to embark on a creative endeavour that would give me a personal sense of joy amidst the stress of my graduating year. Already having an academic interest in the mechanics of internet memes, they became the subject of my research. *DON'T LET YOUR MEMES BE MEMES* has since evolved into an exploration of the structural and conceptual similarities and differences between fine art and internet memes. Both are powerful and oft-misunderstood mediums that function in strikingly similar fashions. They are political, social, even spiritual, they are for coping, catharsis, memory, they add composure and chaos, but most of all, they make us *feel* something.

As a starting point, it is important to address the origins, progression, and definitions of the term ‘meme’. In *The Selfish Gene* (1976) Richard Dawkins coined the term ‘meme’. He explains that “just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to

body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation (Dawkins, 1989:189). In other words, Dawkins defines memes as cultural phenomena that spread through imitation. Memes mediate cultural evolution and they seek replication for their survival (Wiggins, 2019: 2). Over time popular usage of the term ‘meme’ has shifted from Dawkins’ original intention as it has been appropriated by internet users. Internet memes are a type of Dawkinsian meme, but the concepts are not interchangeable (Wiggins, 2019: 14). Contrary to Dawkins’ original conception of the meme, the internet meme relies on more than imitation. To quote Limor Shifman¹; internet memes are “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users”² (Shifman, 2014: 41). In short, internet memes are digital content that gains popularity by being repeatedly transformed and

shared. Bradley Wiggins elaborates on Shifman’s notion of the internet meme by outlining the development of a meme. He explains that memes are created when spreadable media³ is remixed or altered and shared, thus becoming an emergent meme. When the process of alteration and dissemination is repeated multiple times; an internet meme is born (Wiggins, 2019: 46). Other characteristics of the meme described by Sara Cannizzaro are that of asymmetry and invariancy, namely, memes must be altered over each iteration while maintaining a common attribute (Cannizzaro, 2016:576-577). Though internet memes⁴ are unique to a modern context, many of their defining qualities can be traced back to historical trends.

In *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture* Bradley E. Wiggins argues that meme culture shares characteristics with the Dadaist movement of the early twentieth century. Dada began as a response to the first world war, and artists pushed the boundaries of artistic practice to express their disillusionment with the state of the world and to expose hegemonic conventions so as to shock the public into a state of self-awareness (Wiggins, 2019: 134). Wiggins attests that

“a tendency exists to discuss modern life through invocation and citation of the ironic, satirical, profane, dark and/or offensive humour, etc. in order to make sense of the world” (Wiggins, 2019: 134); this tendency is shared with Dadaists. The use of irony is important in understanding the message produced by a meme, one must be aware of the irony to interpret the memes as intended (Wiggins, 2019: 133). The use of irony as a form of expression is not exclusive to the present moment, but the internet has provided scope for this type of interaction that was previously not possible. Photomontage, collage, bricolage, etc. are methods common to Dadaist practice; their use of intertextual integration of existing forms to create new meaning functions visually and conceptually in similar ways to memes. For example, the union of multiple images using photoshop (digital collage) is common practice in meme creation. The conceptual merging of intertextual elements is also common.

The readymade is another example of a structural link between memes and Dada. The readymade, conceived of by Marcel Duchamp, is a mass-produced object positioned by an artist as an artwork. The readymade asserts

¹ Limor Shifman is a prominent figure in the academic theorisation of internet memes.

² Wiggins defines an internet meme as “ a remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity” (Wiggins, 2019: 11)

³ “Multimedia messages consumed without alteration” (Wiggins, 2019: 44)

⁴ In popular use, the term ‘meme’ is used in place of ‘internet meme’ . Note that for the remainder of this essay my use of the word ‘meme’ refers specifically to memes circulated via the internet (internet memes).

artist selection as of equal or greater importance to their role in the work's physical production. It also blurs the line between art and non-art and calls into question the need for art to be 'beautiful' (Wiggins, 2019: 134). It is useful to think of memes as digital readymades in that existing media is elevated to meme status by virtue of selection. The Duchampian readymade and the meme diverge when considering *who* is responsible for the selection. In the case of the readymade, it is the artist alone who decides. Memes are more complicated in that one user selects a piece of media that is meme-worthy (emergent meme), but it is ultimately the public at large who gives the meme power.

The similarities between fine art and memes do not end with Dada. At their core, both are means to understand and impact the world and our position in it. Both memes and fine art are sorts of 'clubs', wherein some prior knowledge is required to engage with them. Memes exist, in essence, as large scale inside jokes in which the viewer must know the greater context of the meme to participate in its humour. This does not necessarily mean that one must be aware of the meme's origin, but rather the semiotic process of meaning

creation that gives a meme significance. By employing one's knowledge of the *language* of memes, understanding a meme that you have never seen before is easier. The world of memes is thus more accessible to those queued into its history and culture. This need for context is shared with conceptual art in that meaningful interaction typically hinges on the viewer having some prior art historical/cultural knowledge, and knowledge of the artist, artwork and concept.

The issue of access comes to mind when considering Western art and memes. Memes are very accessible in that anyone with an internet-connected device has the opportunity to interact with them. It is also important to note that meme culture is largely led by marginalised groups⁵. In contrast, though the Western art world has made some moves toward inclusivity, it remains largely exclusionary. Art spaces can be uncomfortable for those outside of the hegemonic spheres for which the white cube caters. Brian O'Doherty explains this phenomenon thusly:

"For many of us, the gallery space still gives off negative vibrations when we wander in. Esthetics are turned into a kind of social elitism

- the gallery space is *exclusive*. Isolated in plots of space, what is on display looks a bit like valuable scarce goods, jewelry, or silver: esthetics are turned into commerce - the gallery space is *expensive*. What it contains is, without initiation, well-nigh incomprehensible - art is *difficult*... Never was a space, designed to accommodate the prejudices and enhance the self-image of the upper middle classes, so efficiently codified" (O'Doherty, 1999: 76).

For most, art is untouchable (literally and figuratively). It is elevated within the gallery space to an almost sacred level. Each work separated by expanses of white walls, and only to be seen, never touched. Memes on the other hand invite interaction, in fact, they require it. Their survival relies on synergy and appropriation. Art wants to be eternal and unreplicable; vastly different from the claustrophobic, fleeting, and appropriated imagery of the internet.

My work gleans inspiration, in terms of visual language, from Western trends of abstraction from the early twentieth century, particularly geometrical abstraction. I have chosen this style because to me it represents a mode of art-making that has been afforded (within Western art canon) great value. In other words, it stands out in my mind's

eye as a representation of 'high art'. In terms of scale, my works are intended to emulate standard commercial art. The aim is to partake in normative Western art practices while also engaging with a mode of expression which is divorced from the art world in order to compare and contrast the two. My intention is not to assert the superiority of either medium, but rather to offer a comparison and navigate personal grievances using tools that are familiar to me, namely, memes and art, and perhaps offer an access point or sense of familiarity for those uninitiated in either field.

DON'T LET YOUR MEMES BE MEMES has been employed as a coping mechanism to deal with a number of prevailing personal dilemmas. These include my feelings of inadequacy as an artist and concerns about entering an unsure job market, both of which have been exacerbated by the current global pandemic. I have used ironic and self-deprecating humour to address these issues. Using humour as a coping mechanism is commonplace, and has been proven quite effective. A study by Rod A. Martin, Nicholas A. Kuiper, L. Joan Olinger and Kathryn A. Dance for the University of Western Ontario found that "individuals reporting higher levels of coping humour also perceived themselves as having more control over their own lives, felt less overwhelmed and anxious, and less stressed, than those

⁵ Meme culture is heavily influenced by black and queer cultures. For more information, see <https://www.wpr.org/your-favorite-meme-chances-are-it-was-influenced-black-culture>

individuals scoring low on the Coping Humour scale” (Martin et al., 1993: 93). Interestingly, the same study showed that the use of humour for dealing with stress “benefit[s] the body’s capability of warding off possible viral and bacterial infections” (Martin et al., 1993: 90), pretty useful amid a viral pandemic.

As much as I would like to, it is impossible to avoid the impact of COVID-19 on this project. The internet has become indispensable in the effort to keep in touch with those closest to us and the world at large. At a time defined by isolation, the need for human connection is palpable, thus, an important theme elicited by the pandemic is that of connectedness. I, like many others, moved back in with my family during the lockdown; this prompted a sharing of skills with those around me, hence aiding in the production and conception of artworks. For example, my mother taught me to sew when I was younger, a skill refined during the lockdown period. I have implemented this skill into the works *Actual Art* and *An Abstract Meme*. My mother also helped me to fashion the wooden structures that the fabric is stretched over. The process of mentorship garners a feeling of mutual understanding through shared skill and impels time spent together. Many of the skills learned are used in conjunction with skills acquired from internet tutorials.

With the rise of social media, it has become increasingly easy for almost anyone to share skills and ideas. Many have been able to disseminate technical processes to large audiences with ease, and communities of skilled individuals form sorts of digital guilds. The implementation of practical skills learned from others has allowed the project to exist as not only a theoretical exploration of connectivity but a practical pursuit of connectedness, both with those proximate and those on the other side of the screen.

My production process begins with looking through meme pages on Instagram as a way to select reference materials. I find this useful in that I am able to utilize an exercise that is typically time-wasting in a productive way. Viewing memes also provides a needed lightness and a feeling of connectedness to others through shared experience. Once a meme has been selected according to my criteria⁶, I think of a title that will ‘transform’ the meme to fit whatever narrative is attempting to be conveyed. The titles of the works provide a textual element which communicates the punchline of the meme. As previously mentioned, I have used ironic and self-deprecating humour to address my insecurities about my position in the art world (a soon to

graduate student), my ability to create art that has cultural and/or monetary value⁷, and consequently how these factors will impact my future. Once the work is titled, I create sketches using a technique of reduction to abstract the memes. Materials are selected to provide tactile qualities to the immaterial imagery and to compliment the learned skill that has been applied to a given artwork, and finally, the physical production begins. Each work is meant to function as an artwork that makes visual reference to a specific meme while also functioning as a meme in and of itself.

I have created an Instagram page (@pointlessmemeart⁸) which functions to encourage engagement, share my process, and highlight an interplay between the digital and the ‘real’. The process of creating physical artworks that exist as memes extracts the memes from the digital realm, then the artworks are digitised through photography and reinserted into the context from which they originated. Thus, the physicality of the artworks is ‘erased’ for online viewers. The works are afforded engagement that is more accessible, and the aforementioned ‘sanctity’ of the artwork is dismantled. Thus, both formats work together to offer different yet connected viewing experiences.

Before closing, I would like to explain my choice of title for this exhibition. *DON’T LET YOUR MEMES BE MEMES* is a play on the phrase “don’t let your dreams be dreams” from a 2015 video wherein actor Shia LaBeouf gives a cliched motivational speech. *Just Do It*, written by fine art student Joshua Parker, is an excerpt from a longer monologue from a collaboration between LaBeouf, Nastja Säde Rönkkö, Luke Turner, and Central Saint Martins⁹. The collaboration involved art students writing short monologues for LaBeouf to perform, the footage was then manipulated as part of their final projects (Edwards, 2015). The fact that LaBeouf is the subject of a number of memes and the inclusion of a green screen background is a recipe for meme creation. The choice to release the footage publicly suggests that the creators made this video with the knowledge and intention that others would appropriate and manipulate the footage for memes. Aside from being one of my favourite memes, *Just Do It* is an interesting example of the intersection between memes and art, thus I felt that making reference to it in the exhibition title would be appropriate.

To conclude, *DON’T LET YOUR MEMES BE MEMES* has evolved into

⁷ This is what I mean when I reference “good” or “actual” art in titles.

⁸ See cover for QR code.

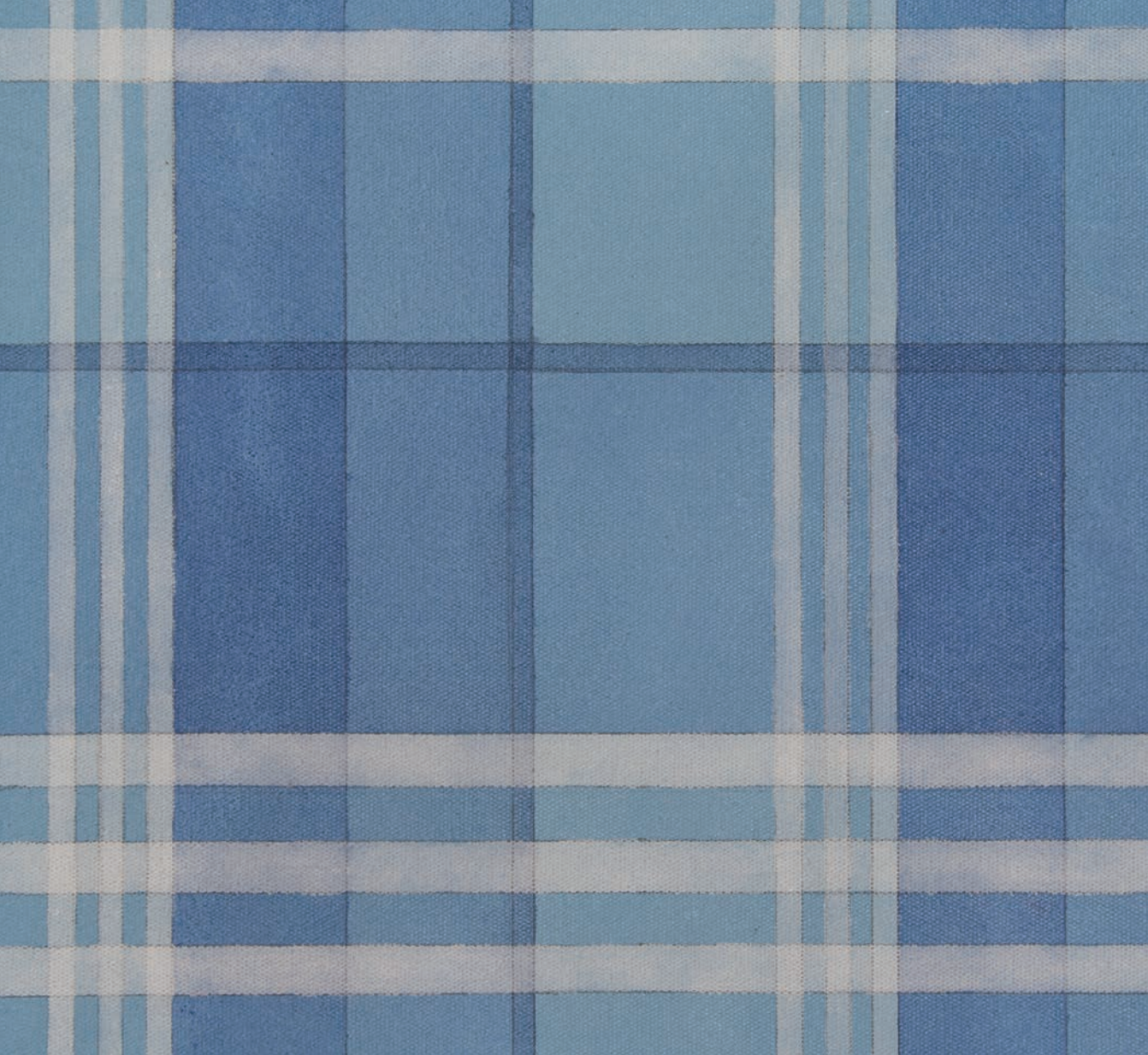
⁹ Central Saint Martins is a London Based art school (Edwards, 2015).

⁶ The memes must be recognisable and I must find them funny.

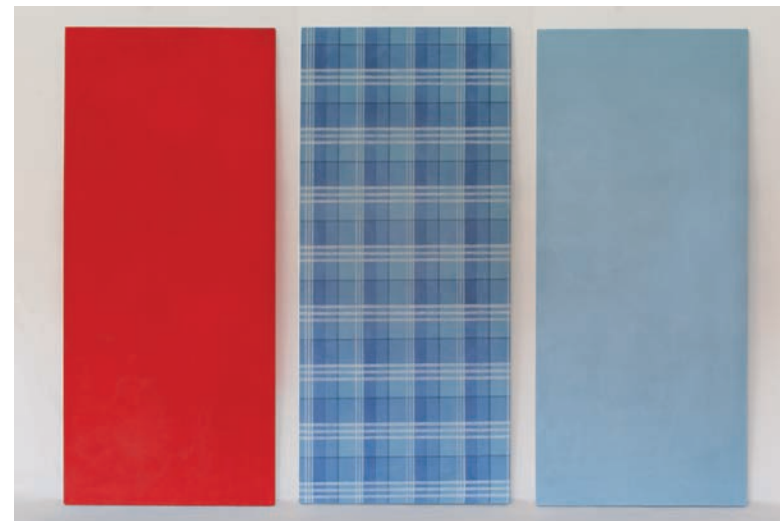
a project that is near to my heart. It has been trying, but also therapeutic. I set out to create a body of work that would give me joy, and I believe that I have succeeded in that endeavour. I have been able to engage with a field of research that is compelling and that I will likely continue to explore. I have built connections with others throughout the creation of this project, and have learned a number of skills. Memes are so much more than trivial internet quips; their impact on modern communication is substantial, and in many ways, they are as much art as any painting or sculpture. I hope that in some way my work has bridged the gap, or offered an entry point into both conceptual art and memes, two mediums that have a great deal in common. One of my favourite aspects of the project has been seeing people's reactions to the artworks. More often than not the works have been met with a smile and a laugh at the recognition of a familiar meme, thus, I am lead to believe that *DON'T LET YOUR MEMES BE MEMES* has offered a sliver of joy to more than just myself. Plus, it was pretty funny.

JUST DO IT





Me, 2020
Detail



Abstract Memes, 2020
Acrylic on canvas
170x75 cm

Me, 2020
Acrylic on canvas
170x75 cm

Good Art, 2020
Acrylic on canvas
170x75 cm



Distracted Boyfriend



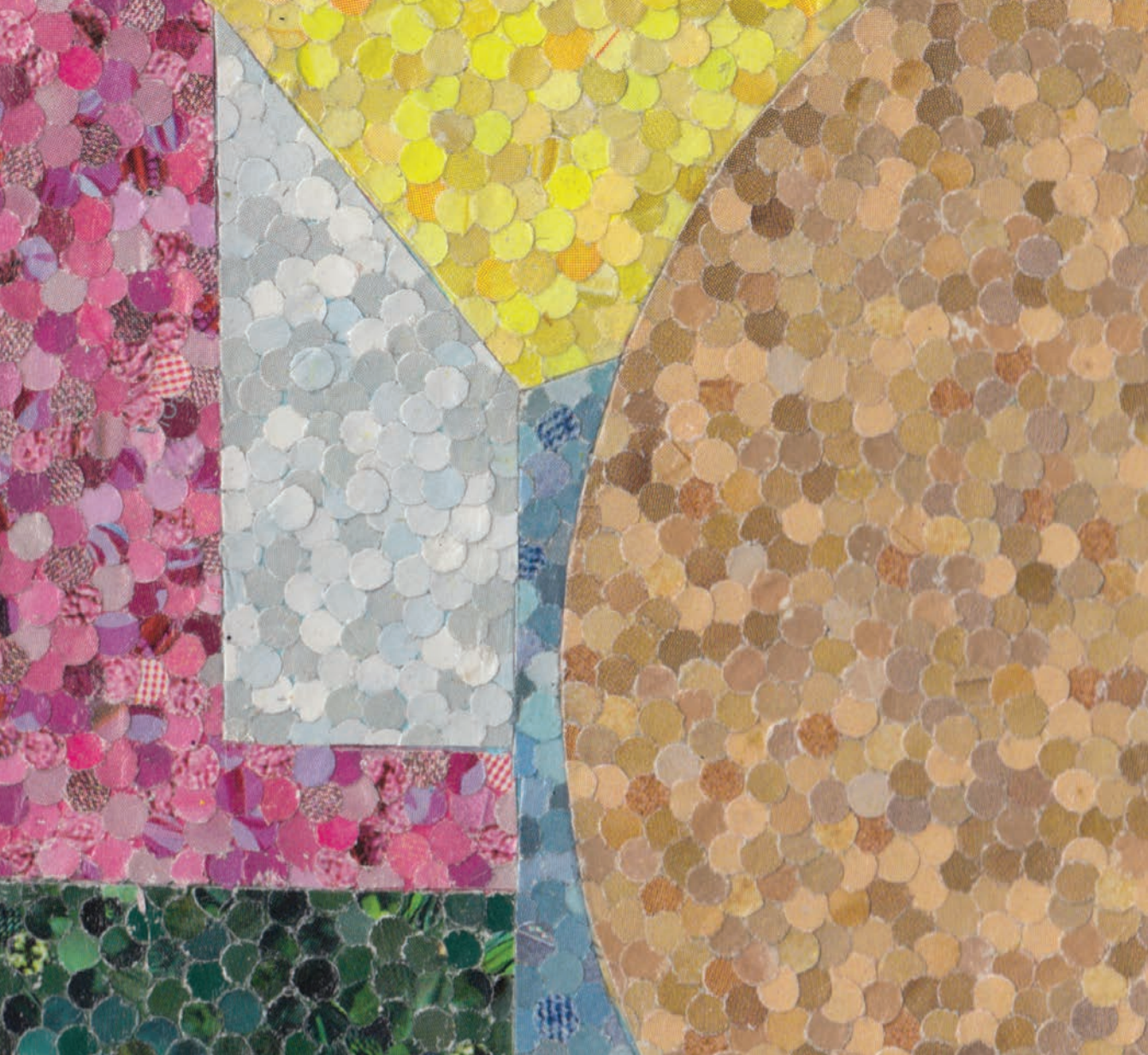
*Watching My Friends Work Toward
Viable Careers, 2020*
Detail



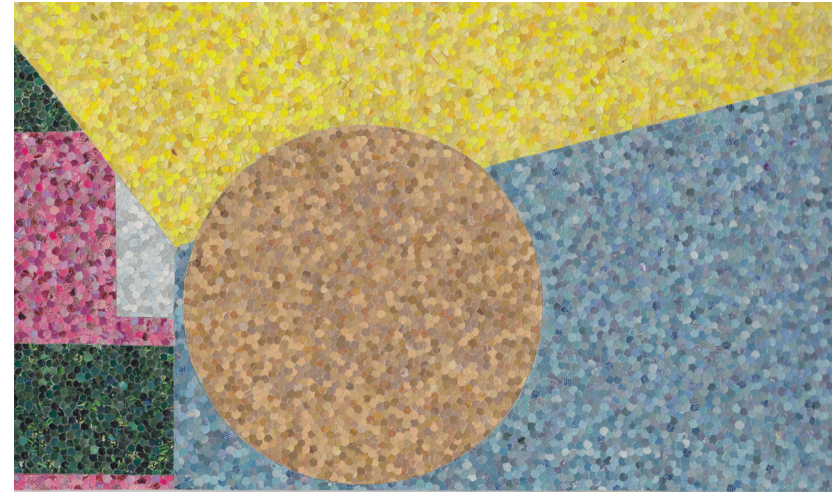
*Watching My Friends Work Toward
Viable Careers, 2020*
Magazine clippings on board
23x30 cm



D.W. Holding Fence



*When There's a Pandemic but You
Still Gotta Make Art, 2020*
Detail



*When There's a Pandemic but You
Still Gotta Make Art, 2020*
Magazine clippings on board
18x32,5 cm



Arthur's Fist



*Thinking About Making a Living as
an Artist, 2020*
Detail



*Thinking About Making a Living as
an Artist, 2020*
Faux fur, beads, cardboard
47X61 cm

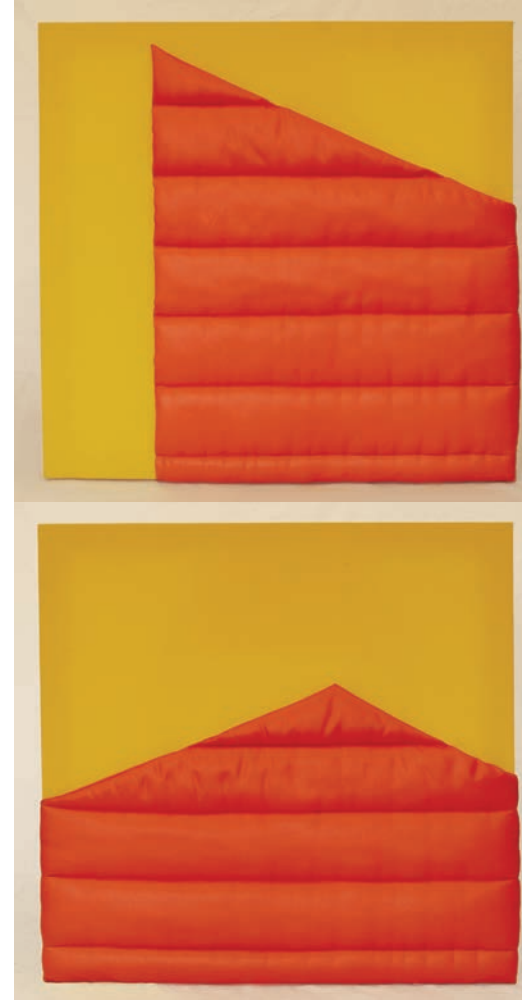


Crying Cat



Actual Art, 2020
Detail

Actual Art, 2020
Stretched fabric, batting
75x75 cm



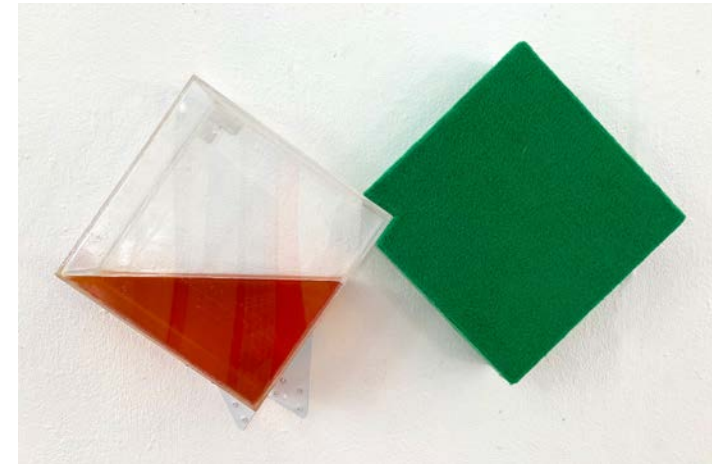
An Abstract Meme, 2020
Stretched fabric, batting
75x75 cm



Drake Approves/ Disapproves:



This isn't Art...But that's None of My Business, 2020
Detail



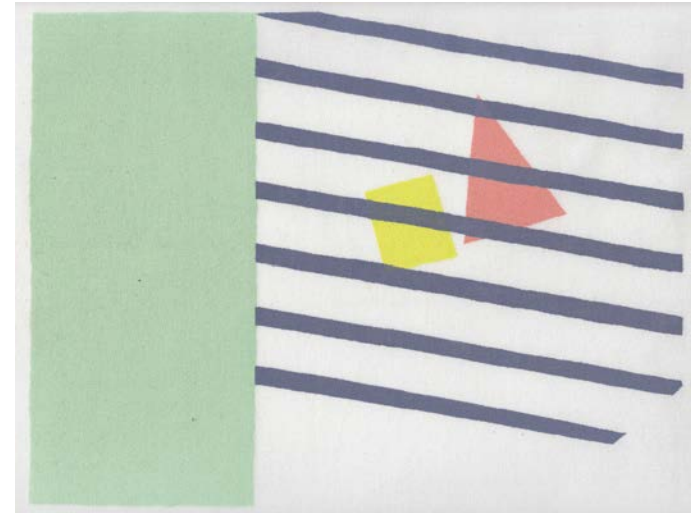
This isn't Art...But that's None of My Business, 2020
MDF, fleece, glass, tea
40x64x10 cm



But That's None of My Business



Watching My Peers Make Actual Art,
2020
Detail



Watching My Peers Make Actual Art,
2020
Screen-print on cloth
27x33 cm



Squidward Looking Out the Window



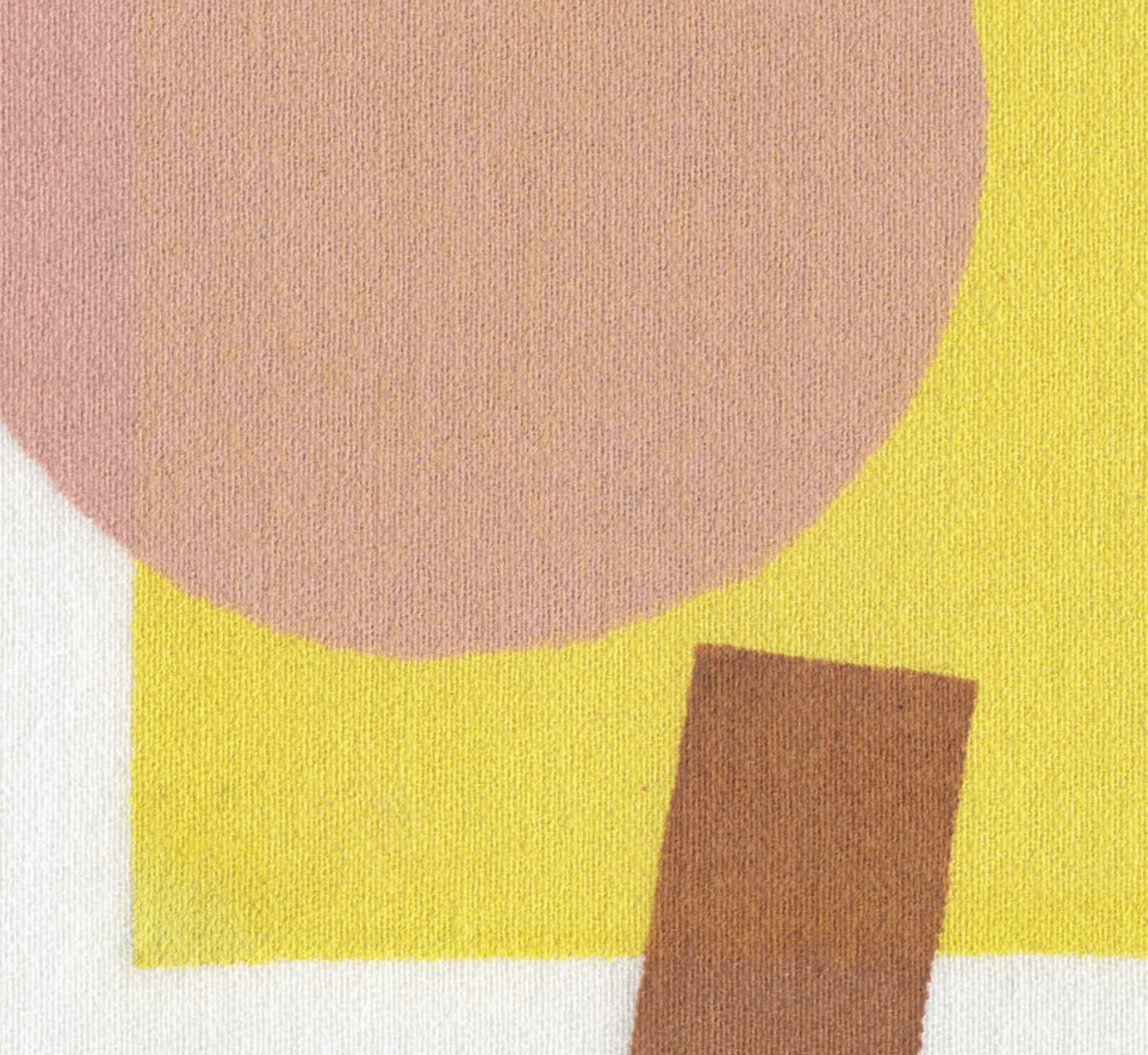
*How About This One? I Call It: An Abstract Meme ... More Like: Belongs in the Trash, 2020
Detail*



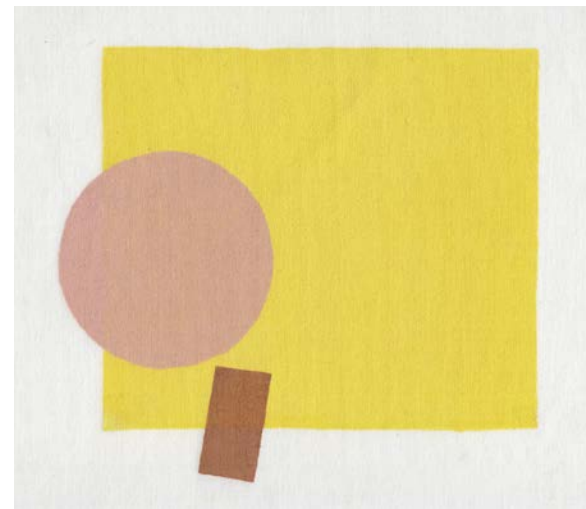
Bold and Brash



*How About This One? I Call It: An Abstract Meme ... More Like: Belongs in the Trash, 2020
Screen-print on cloth
28,5x24 cm*



*When Someone Asks Me What I'm
Going to Do After Graduation, 2020*
Detail



*When Someone Asks Me What I'm
Going to Do After Graduation, 2020*
Screen-print on cloth
24,5x26 cm



Spongegar

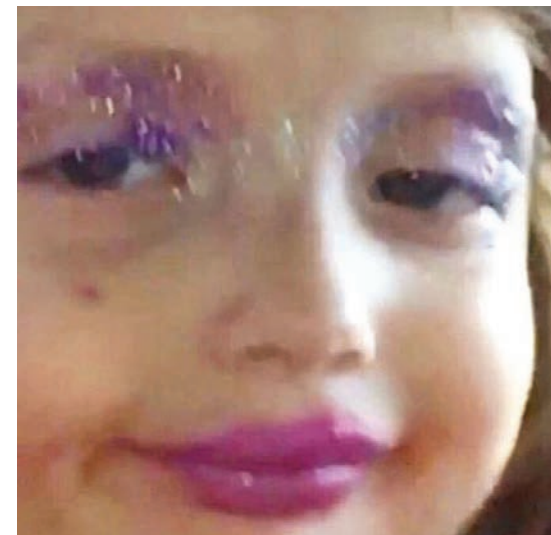


*On the Ride Home from a Gallery
Opening I, 2020
Detail*



*On the Ride Home from a Gallery
Opening I, 2020
Acrylic on canvas, glitter, beads,
Rhinestones
27x80 cm*

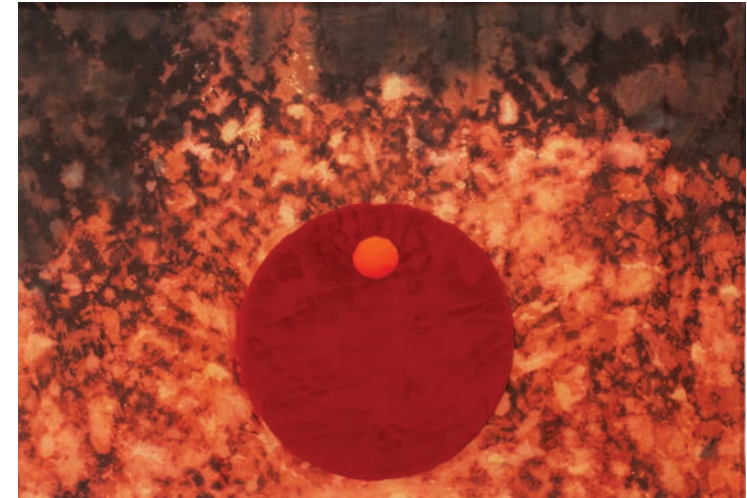
*On the Ride Home from a Gallery
Opening II, 2020
Acrylic on canvas, resin
27x80 cm*



Coming Back From the Club



*Me Coming Up With the Idea of
Making Abstract Meme Art, 2020
Detail*



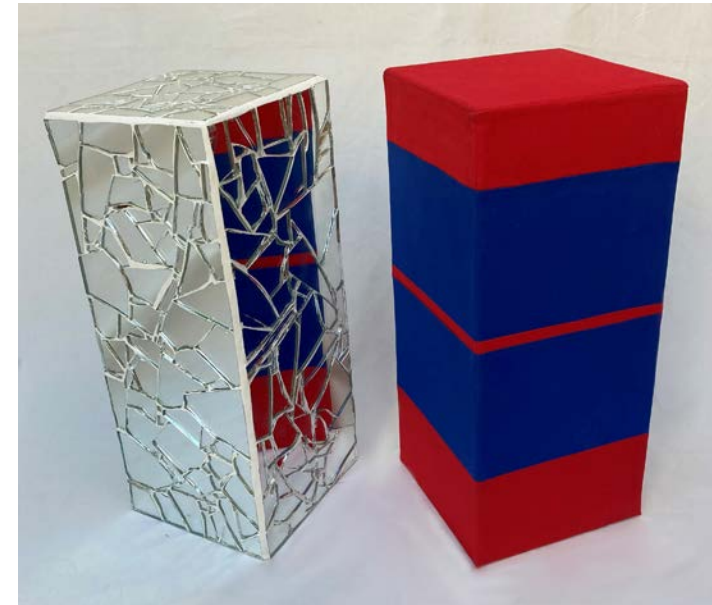
*Me Coming Up With the Idea to
Make Abstract Meme Art, 2020
Tie dyed fabric, faux fur, batting
108x156 cm*



Elmo Rise



Me Complaining that I don't Understand Art While Making Art that is Hard to Understand II, 2020
Detail



Me Complaining that I don't Understand Art While Making Art that is Hard to Understand II, 2020
Mirror, polystyrene, grout
16,5x16,5x38 cm

Me Complaining that I don't Understand Art While Making Art that is Hard to Understand I, 2020
MDF, fabric
16,5x16,5x38 cm



Spider-Man Pointing at Spider-Man

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Squidward Looking Out the Window: “That Sinking Feeling/Karate Star” [still]. 2010. *Spongebob Squarepants*. Series 7, episode 18. 8 July.



Actual Cannibal Shia Labeouf