

Review: Consuming Passions at Hagedorn Foundation Gallery

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Installation image, *Consuming Passions*, Hagedorn Foundation Gallery, April 9-May 25, 2013.

Consuming Passions, on view at [Hagedorn Foundation Gallery](#) through May 25, borrows its title from a collection of essays [published](#) in 1986 by Judith Williamson, a British theorist of visual communication. The book maps the ways our desires are shaped by visual culture, especially its evanescent forms: advertising, advice columns, Hollywood films, protest slogans, romance novels. Curator Amanda Parmer has assembled works by six young artists that aim to update these concerns for the age of digital reproduction, exploring how cultural representations both mediate our desires and shape our identity. The exhibition is conceptually rich and often visually compelling, but emotionally restrained, tending to prefer the slightly safer realms of detachment to more fully embodied passionate engagement.

[Jessica Bowman](#)'s photographs humorously contemplate the ways in which commodities come to us not merely as things, but as parts of an idealized, imagined self. Her images float in abstract, sparkling, bubblegum-pink spaces that exist only to advertise their contents: tableaux of plastic bling, junk food, perfume, pacifiers, vodka bottles and Red Bull. These tacky heaps suggest a hollowed-out form of female identity—a self as shiny and empty as a soap bubble. At the same time, though, her works are freighted with art-historical allusions (Aertsen, Chardin, Claesz), the purpose of which is ambiguous. Does parodying historical still lives elevate these objects by associating them with the cachet and sumptuous visual delights of high art? Or does it suggest that high art itself is just another display of the same patterns of commodified desire?



Jessica Bowman, *May U Alwayz Align Urself W Abundance*, 2012, archival pigment print, 30×20 inches, edition 2/3, courtesy the artist and Hagedorn Foundation Gallery.

By contrast, [Colby Bird](#)'s photographs retreat to a restrained palette of formally patterned green, black, white, and blue. In one image, *Shirt Over Poster* (2012), a white Ralph Lauren shirt hangs in front of a chipped Tupac poster, which appears only as the corners of a crooked black rectangle, an occlusion that hints at the shamefaced, if earnest, relation between white suburban rap fans and black culture. The style of these works relies on indirection and concealment. Bird prefers to show us a carefully arranged poolside towel rack bathed in shadows [*Still Life With ReadyLoad Film (Tokyoview 4x5)* (2012)], rather than the pool itself. Other works of Bird's follow this pattern: *Painting Window Ocean Reflection (Kodak Star 110)* (2012) (not part of this exhibition) depicts a seaside view diminished through reflection in the glass of a painting hung in a darkened hotel room. These cool, distant photographs seem bothered by their own picturehood, alienated from desire rather than animated by it.



Colby Bird, *Shirt Over Poster*, 2012, c-print, 37×29 inches, courtesy the artist and Fitzroy Gallery, New York.

The complex technological mediation of desire is taken up in [Becca Albee](#)'s work, *Coffee_Run_NYC_Detail_01* and *Coffee_Run_LA_Detail_01* (both 2013). Her images present curated Google search results containing dozens of East and West Coast celebrities captured by paparazzi getting coffee, hidden behind their oversized purses and sunglasses. At one level, this suggests a hopeful yearning for a common identity that levels distinctions of class and status (everybody drinks Peets and Starbucks). At another level, it regiments tabloid voyeurism. These little figures are boxed and stacked in a grid for our inspection. They exist both to be identified with and to be consumed. The economy of Google search itself is based on a kind of exchange: Through it, we can create an instantaneous personalized archive of our wants, while trading our private thoughts to be mined and turned into raw material for advertisers. The observer is always the real product.

[Phillip Birch](#)'s six and a half minute video, *Concerning Human Understanding*, puts a didactic spin on these themes. It gives a brief history of the Grand Tour of Europe in the form of an informational slideshow, tracing its erosion in the face of the democratizing technology of the railroad. Authentic first-hand experiences could once be purchased, but only by an elite few; now, he implies, we must settle for cheap copies, representations of others' experiences. This intersection of class and authenticity is worth exploring further, but the video's flat pacing and lack of affect blunt its impact.

Anxiety dominates [Nikita Gale](#)'s four large works on paper, which overlay blown-up text from credit card solicitations with an obsessively repeated monologue in gold spray-on stencil lettering. The words "THE THINGS I WANT THE THINGS I NEED" loop and shimmer, blocking our view of a churning sea of legalese. The speech is slippery and

potentially disunified. We don't know whether the 'I' who wants is the same as the 'I' who needs, and the wants and needs themselves are never stated. These are uncontrolled, bare expressions of abstract desire.

The show's centerpiece is [Bryan Zanisnik](#)'s large photographic triptych, *Off Season* (2010), which achieves a visually and emotionally satisfying synthesis of many of the show's themes. Each photograph contains a central figure haloed by a swarm of greeting cards and torn pieces of white bread mashed with thumbprints. In the leftmost image, the figure is a life-size cutout of Larry Bird, while the other two feature dark, enigmatic filing cabinets. The cards—hung from lines of string—proliferate out-of-control, reflecting our commonplace hoarding of trivial objects that exert a weak sentimental pull on us—as does white bread itself, which is characterless but for the faint taste of nostalgia.



Bryan Zanisnik, *Off Season*, 2010, digital c-print, 40×78 inches, edition 1/3, courtesy the artist and Aspect Ratio, Chicago.

Zanisnik's cabinets allude to the notion of the archive, a theme also touched on by Albee, but they are also easily personified. They are enmeshed in memorabilia, just as we are trapped by our own possessions. Two empty drawers are slightly ajar, with mysterious light pouring from within. This luminous absence exemplifies the peculiar anxiety of consuming. The things that we desire—and that promise to make us desirable—are snares. Placing our identity in them is a way of emptying ourselves, and avoiding the difficult work of self-creation.

Where does this tour of identity and affect leave us? Wanting, perhaps, just a little bit more. Williamson titled her collection for an essay on the sex-drenched film *Body Heat*, and it's noteworthy that no such carnal passions appear in these works. Indeed, few people appear at all—the landscape of consumption is a lonely one. But romance and sexuality are also domains in which we incorporate cultural scripts and images into our identity, as well as ways we connect with others. And to consume each other is a far more intimate act than consuming mere things.

The conceptual terrain explored by the works in *Consuming Passions*, however, is rich by any measure. As a complex visual dialogue and meditation on the idea of desire, it succeeds in sharpening our appetites.

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