

Jennifer Vanderpool and Dion Johnson in conversation

DJ - This exhibition brings together a diverse group of artists working in various processes and media; how did the exhibition theme develop?

JV - The idea for *Imaginary Selves* happened in conversation with Jane Callister. Summer 2013, we were sitting in her studio, drinking coffee, and talking about her recent body of work, *Found in Translation*. She was in the process of moving to a new space, so some of her earlier paintings and painterly sculptures were out of storage and easy to see. Callister was reflecting on this work in which she portrayed imaginary landscapes, and how these abstracted, or even contrived generic land formations were really vistas created from an amalgamation of scenic snapshots that she remembers from her childhood growing up on the Isle of Man, living in Las Vegas as a grad student, and now in Santa Barbara. While pondering the idea of consolidated imagery, she developed a kind of coded inventory of remembrances that proved useful as she explored her heritage and Manx identity, which ultimately manifested into a fictionalized memory of self in *Found in Translation*. This evoked childhood reminiscences of the Isle of Man TT race—an annual high-speed motorcycle race along the island's narrow winding roads flanked by stonewalls and buildings. The carnival atmosphere created by the race escalates on 'Mad Sunday' when locals and tourists have a free for all race on the track. The title of her work *Mad Sunday* pays homage to these amateur racers portraying smoke produced by the motorcycles in the painting and the sculptural baroque helmet with metallic belts spilling out of it. Anyhow, Callister's ideas resonated with me, because at that time I was finishing work for an upcoming exhibition in the Ukraine for which I mined my grandfather's stories of being a Ukrainian immigrant to develop a mythology of self in the exhibition. Shortly thereafter you and I were having lunch in Old Town La Verne and you suggested that I guest curate an exhibition at the gallery. 'Imaginary self' seemed like a theme worth investigating through other artists' practices in a curatorial project that would both complement and expand my studio practice.

DJ - The exhibition title, *Imaginary Selves*, seems to indicate alternate personas, or secret identities. Do you think that notions of disguise, identity and fantasy facilitate a conversation between artworks in this exhibition?

JV - Yes, but I think the construction or perhaps fabrication of 'imaginary self' reveals itself differently in the artist's work. James Van Arsdale's installation integrates his musical career with his artistic practice by drawing from his memories as a member of various eighties hard rock bands based in New Orleans and then in Austin. For *Electro-Explosive Time Machine to the Seventies*, he crafted hexagon tapestries from denim and leather, evoking the 'uniform' of heavy metal bands and their fans who wore denim pants, leather jackets, and rock band silkscreened t-shirts. The tapestry symbolized the group and hung behind the drum kit functioning as visual imagery during the performance. It seems Van Arsdale's recent bands have become more

experimental and he has harmonized his performances on stage with his work in the studio—it is an integrative practice where both the music and visual art are of equal importance. *Electro-Explosive Time Machine to the Seventies*, portrays a recollection and consequently contrived image of who Van Arsdale once was through the lens of who he has become. On the other hand, Brian McArthur created a series of contemporary mythological self-portraits through Canadian iconography, while also cynically questioning if he is exploiting this imagery. In *Goose Boy II*, McArthur portrayed himself as a boy cloaked in a Canada goose costume, sort of like a strange superhero on a mission, while in *Northern Ride*, he represented himself riding a moose through the northern forest, destination unknown. Perhaps a little tongue-in-cheek, McArthur made a wooden sculpture of his head with a vignette of himself sculpting his own portrait in *Constructing Self!* Catalina Jaramillo Quijano in turn selected the Medieval tapestry *Lady and the Unicorn* as inspiration to invent her own taxonomy of mythological imagery and inscribe an imaginary land.

DJ - While Van Arsdale's installation of indexed recollections and McArthur's sculptures of personalized mythologies balance a sentimental awareness with a generous humor, Việt Lê's video appears to indulge in a glitzy fantasy to create, as you described with Callister's work, 'fictionalized memories.'

JV - I think of Lê's performance as fictional rather than a consolidation of 'fictionalized memories.' He created a transnational pop star character who is a mash-up, if you will, of Western über pop stars' personas with iconic T.V. characters and couture fashion. He then samples from this generalized genre of popular culture to orchestrate the saga *Love Bang!*, which portrays an appropriated and unattainable glamour of Western culture. Similar to the stylized images of performers, the transnational pop star character is one of Lê's personas, through whom he critiques materializations of Western pop culture on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh. Lê envisions his practice as praxis. He is an artist, curator, writer, and university professor working as a 'transactivist' who questions cultural production and its relationships to social justice.

DJ - Lisa Jevbratt has focused on genealogical research in *Caring for You*, which emerges in her practice as a tactile installation that viewers may participate in and is a counterpoint to Lê's pop culture extravagance.

JV - In *Caring for You* Jevbratt positioned herself as a genealogist who researched the vertical networks of her own family. The installation emanated from a 1905 family photo that documents Jevbratt's matrilineal genealogical line: her infant grandmother, great grandmother, great-great grandmother, and great-great-great grandmother. These mother-daughter pairings are vertical or deep networks, rather than the horizontal sprawling social ones we participate in everyday and which Jevbratt employed as a tool to create her earlier data visualizations and more recent body of work on animal vision and interspecies

collaborations. She sculpted the four dolls in *Caring for You* from the photo, so they resemble her ancestors. Jevbratt welcomes visitors to sit in her family room, evocative of a home in bygone rural Sweden, and cradle the dolls. Through their participation, spectators restructure Jevbratt's matrilineal vertical network into a horizontal format. Participants' performative actions metaphorically situate them as spiritual caregivers to the likeness of Jevbratt's ancestors.