

Jennifer Vanderpool
Bonkers!
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miki garcia e s s a y

Vandallister, the collaborative team of Jen Vanderpool and Jane Callister present “Bonkers!” their third project to date which further celebrates the exuberant, witty, and sometimes absurd practice of creating and experiencing art. A site-specific installation produced especially for Galeria Nina Menocal, Vanderpool and Callister’s multi-disciplinary work extends throughout the interior walls and floors of the gallery, into the atrium, and out in the public sphere. “Bonkers!” acts as an inclusive site combining the artists’ shared talents and interests, further developing their past collaborations and taking their own work into new territories. Callister, primarily a painter, and Vanderpool, a performance-based installation artist, joined forces to embrace the syncretic nature of contemporary art making. Expanding their individual projects outside of the self-seeking tradition of studio practice these two artists prefer a perspective that allows them to be expressive through a diversity of approaches.

Callister and Vanderpool both teach at the University of California at Santa Barbara, and during studio visits, initiated an ongoing dialogue regarding notions of humor, beauty, and subversion explored in their respective disciplines. Vanderpool’s artistic practice reflects an absorptive methodology that utilizes video, performance, sculpture, and sound. It is also informed by theory and cultural influences parlayed through the artist’s extensive knowledge of art history and culture. In 2003, motivated by their mutual interests, Vanderpool wrote an essay on Callister’s paintings and mixed media projects. Callister, who has been included in numerous national and international exhibitions, has developed a sophisticated style that nimbly and deliriously moves between abstract landscape and psychedelic graphic design. In the series “Liquid Landscapes,” for example, Callister employs a day-glow palette of greens, pinks, oranges, and reds, letting the acrylic paint drip fluidly onto the canvas and creating self-styled landscapes suggestive of lava formations or mountainous terrain. Seemingly intuitive or accidental actions, Callister’s paintings however work alongside the formal tradition of painting in the exploration of space, perception, and color. Throughout, there exists a mischievous character that exposes Callister’s desire to destabilize the rigidity of the medium and has led to her large mural installations using poured paint on vinyl adhered directly on the wall and floor. Vandallisters’ initial artistic collaboration occurred in May 2004 when Callister was invited to participate in a group show at Southfi rst in the arts enclave Brooklyn neighborhood of Williamsburg, New York. The exhibition was titled “Sadie Hawkins,” after the American tradition where a woman takes the initiative of inviting a man

of her choice to a dance. For this show Callister invited Vanderpool to contribute a video performance piece to accompany her landscape wall sticker component. Theirs was called "Round the Bend," a term suggesting a wacky or exaggerated state of mind. It also recalls Johnny Mercer's "Moon River" line, "We're after the same rainbow's end waitin' round the bend, my Huckleberry friend," of desire and hope.

In the spring of 2005, the two artists reunited on a commissioned work entitled "Re-imagining Landscape" for the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. They were asked by the museum to participate in its Master Class series, pairing professional artists with teen-age students to create a temporary installation in its Project Gallery. Callister and Vanderpool were asked to consider the theme of landscape. The investigation of nature and artifice is one that both artists have explored in prior works. For Cy-Fair College in Cypress, Texas, Vanderpool created "In/Wetlands", a site-specific installation of a pre-fabricated wetlands garden, created from artificial landscaping rocks and origami sculptures made from maps of Texas.

"Re-imagining Landscape" gently challenges the artificial landscaping tradition of Santa Barbara and other coastal California towns. Callister and Vanderpool take their landscape into extreme territory. What resulted was a diorama-like installation that led the viewer through a whimsical scene made up of floral wall stickers, astro turf flooring, bright green garden rocks, pastel wax and plaster casts, plastic figurines and sound recordings embedded throughout the gallery. The color, objects and "manicured" pathway all suggested a suburban lawn albeit a topsy-turvy one where the audience was allowed to delight in their surroundings. "Bonkers!" follows the trajectory set in the previous installations. Whereas in their last collaborations, the artists each brought a component from their personal practice to the overall work, this project was formed in a truly cooperative spirit; the artists worked jointly on the conceptualization, the fabrication, and the installation.

"Bonkers!" is a zany platform for the complete synesthetic experience, teasing all five senses of sight, sound, smell, and touch. The foundation of the piece begins with an undulating landscape of grey gravel rocks. Embedded within the pebble formations are cast resin objects resting on light boxes. The soft emanation of light through the resin gives a jewel like quality to the sculptures, creating a glowing effect.

Growing from the rubble are wire blossoms made from bright plastics and trash. Wooden sculptures reminiscent of spiders, lace doilies and even floral motifs also adorn the scene. The most collaborative effort within the project, are foam objects placed in random order throughout the terrain. Vanderpool sculpted abstracted objects out of foam and delivered them to Callister who then used her distinctive palette to paint them in bright yellow, blue, pink and green hues. The sheer array of elements glides coyly between a field of jeweled treasure or a crowded visual feast.

Integral to much of Vanderpool's practice is a multi-disciplinary attitude that combines sculpture and installation with audio-visual elements. "Bonkers!" accordingly incorporates a looped video performance and ambient sound also set within the landscape. In it, the audience is presented with an assortment of gum and candy placed on a table in a colorful grid. Seated at the table is Vanderpool who begins to chew each of the candies. With each piece, Vanderpool takes a number of studious bites and then takes each out and assembles them on a piece of paper in the middle of the table. What looks like a glutton's fantasy slowly turns into a painful, if tedious task. Little by little, the masticated pieces of candy start to form multicolored mounds on the paper creating a wacky, sugary landscape that recalls Callister's paintings. As the viewer circulates the installation and centers on the video, they hear an ambient noise. Set at intervals between smacking sounds and eerie whistles going up and down, the audience gets an aural connection to the arduous and eccentric process.

The video reveals Vanderpool's concerns with the sociopolitical nature of food products and notions of conspicuous consumption. Yet in this collaborative piece, the audiovisual takes on a more nuanced approach; one that tantalizes the viewer and simultaneously examines greed, desire, and beauty to an absurdist extreme.

Framing the assortment of floor elements are exuberant paint splashes by Callister. These vivid abstractions are poured onto the sticker vinyl and adhered directly onto the walls corresponding to the floor pieces so that they create an extension from two to three dimensional form. "Bonkers!" becomes a complete visceral experience for the audience with sensory elements guiding them through the installation and providing multiple entries into the work. Overall, there exists a tension between the real and the abstract that becomes a zone of delirium and sheer wonder. In all of their collaborations Vandallister express an underlying and unapologetic optimism and happiness through their explorations of pleasure in art. This shared effort allows both artists their own unique voice while also falling into a sphere where the work merges and intertwines finding potency in both systems.

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