

Ohio-born and California-based artist Jennifer Vanderpool was raised near Youngstown. Vanderpool's work always has a quality of regional referentialism, but with this exhibition she comes full circle and embraces her roots as a Midwesterner. Vanderpool's previous exhibitions, across three continents, have created an immediate visceral reaction in us as we respond to the close examination of women's roles in both public and private. No territory has been off limits and the topics are always intensely personal, from domestic roles in relationships to the female sweatshop worker's rights within her own family tree. The title of Vanderpool's show at The Butler Institute of American Art, "Hometown Stories: Youngstown Steel Kitchens" might mentally lead us down the path to a simple historical account of the glory days of the Youngstown Steel Kitchens, yet this is no simple curated collection of archival pieces. Vanderpool is never content to tell the straight story and thus dictate what we should think and feel. Prepare to remember and feel the lure of nostalgia, but also be prepared to have your memories and assumptions poked and prodded.

With the "Hometown Story" installation, Vanderpool explores what she calls the "domestic industrial" side of the steel mills. Youngstown Steel Kitchens were built by Mullins Manufacturing Corporation, a subsidiary of Sharon Steel. Vanderpool created archival digital Archival Prints and a media work that incorporates images of Youngstown Steel Kitchens. These quirky pieces evoke the mythology of mid-century domestic bliss. When these elements are arranged amongst the Mullins Manufacturing Corporation's kitschy salesman's archival video footage and travel kit as well as remnants of a steel kitchen, the discomfort sets in. We know that those glory days are over, and the landscape was forever altered by the mill closures. But we're also forced to examine the role of women and family that were simultaneously being altered dramatically during that period of American history, and any feelings of lingering nostalgia or anger this may elicit. Like her other pieces, Vanderpool's work lives in irony and excess, and we cannot experience her art without having an extreme emotional and sometimes physical response.

Consistently, Vanderpool's work has an activist undercurrent. Her two main passions are worker's rights and women's issues. That is not to say that she makes an activist statement with her work, but rather that Vanderpool is more interested in identifying and examining social justice issues, generally through pop culture. Her work perfectly identifies the volatile touch points where the subtle conflicts in equality lie. She doesn't answer questions, but simply presents the conflict in sculptures and environments that we are drawn into, sometimes happily, and often uncomfortably. Her images are at first so familiar that we naively enter a conversation with the art with the expectation of seeing something that we know and feel comfortable with. Then, when we have lived in the pieces for a while we start to wonder what it is that has flipped that feeling. Why is the vintage kitchen that made us smile when we entered the room suddenly make us feel, well, not like smiling anymore?

While Vanderpool can tell her own strong, detailed and well thought out opinions, her work has the mature restraint to let you meditate on your own thoughts. She may be telling you the story of her family, or a nameless Ohio factory worker, or an over-medicated housewife, but it is okay with her if we find ourselves lost in the story of our mother, our immigrant grandparents, or our relationships. She invites this type of reflection, literally, by providing a space for us to have a physically interactive experience with the art. In our current media climate where an experience isn't complete until we have shared it with others, she tells us that it is okay to have our own distinct reflections and she understands our need to share it; we are encouraged to share our own memories and thoughts on the wall at the Butler. One comment you may find repeatedly written on the wall is that big companies come and go, even those that seem too big to fail, but the workers, the housewives, the salesmen, the communities, those are the really important stories. Our relationships to the stories that Vanderpool evokes will occupy our minds when the story is done being so artfully told.

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