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Kelsey Ables | 10 September 2020

The latest show at Von Ammon Co. gallery is a mess. And that's the point.

Imagine a cross between a Toys R Us and a low-budget haunted house. If a Party City threw up inside of it, the resulting mess might look a lot like the latest exhibition at Von Ammon Co., "I'm Sorry You All Ended Up Here." It's pure chaos, and that's the point.

With stolen Dollar General shopping carts, sheets of coupons, balloons and stray signage for 50-percent-off products that are nowhere in sight, artists Alex Bag and Jason Yates have transformed the Georgetown art gallery into a landscape of consumerist waste, populated with shopaholic dolls. Dangling from the ceiling, one carries a Victoria's Secret bag and wears a shirt that announces: "I have arrived." Another, decked out in star-shaped sunglasses and carrying a Dollar General bag, flaunts an apron that reads, "Life isn't all diamonds and rosé, but it should be." According to gallerist Todd von Ammon, Bag isn't sure exactly how many dolls are in the show. Maybe 40? Every time the artist counts, they seem to have multiplied.

The two-artist exhibition deals in excess: excess of material; excess of emotion; excess for the sake of creating more excess. At the front of the gallery, Bag has filled stolen store racks with

shoplifted goods and photographs of cluttered store aisles. On the walls, shelves are crammed with exuberant holiday knickknacks from thrift stores Yates visited as he made his way from Los Angeles to D.C. by car (a drive necessitated by covid). Painted all black, a mass of snowmen and jack-o-lanterns looks like a relic from a bygone era, when commercialized celebrations could pretend to be meaningful. Pushing a miniature cart full of balloons, a blonde doll in the center of the space literally shops for air.

In a country where J. Crew is touting deep discounts on dress shirts that no one even needs any more and you can find Christmas decor on Labor Day — but where many still find it hard to get a rapid covid test, or make rent — aggressive advertising and holiday cheer ring especially hollow. Bag and Yates seem attuned to this, and their exercise in excess is one that — like an unkempt clearance aisle or an ostentatious political convention — quickly devolves into depletion.

Much of the exhibition came together in the weeks before it opened, and the increasingly hysterical mood of the moment features prominently in the work. A 40-minute untitled video by Bag flicks through a collage of Instagram ads. Many are pandemic-related, boasting the merits of a quarantine weight-loss program or “Clear Rear” — bidet toilet attachment to get a “sparkling clean bum.” In a second, collaborative video by Bag and Yates, “Untitled (I’m Sorry You All Ended up Here) 8/20,” a clown has a breakdown in a hotel room as the 2020 Republican National Convention plays in the background. Meanwhile, another clown, played by Yates, reads text from a 1968 manual on how to be a clown.

It sounds a lot like how to be an artist.

Bag, whose work has been shown at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art and Miami’s Institute of Contemporary Art, has long skewered the bubbly cruelty of consumer culture and questioned what it means to be a working artist. In her 2009 video “Untitled (Project for the Whitney Museum),” a perverted riff on children’s television, Bag adopts the character of someone lamenting the meaninglessness of art to a stuffed toy dragon. (“You sad clown,” the dragon replies.) In an even earlier work, “Untitled Fall ’95,” Bag plays a jaded art student, reaching a breaking point in the final scene: “I’m just, like, really tired of all the ads on TV, and all the quick edits and the morphing,” she says. “It’s like, stop morphing. Stop selling my culture back to me, you know?” She continues: “Why is everyone in such a rush to make these neat little packages?”

Twenty-five years later, Bag’s Instagram-inspired video puts the process of constructing those “neat little packages” on full display. Capturing Bag through Instagram’s ad-targeting algorithm, the video functions like a hyper-contemporary self-portrait. Whether it’s an ad for a men’s razor or a wearable cat carrier, for every missed or outlandish swing by the algorithm, the content seems emptier — and the consumer it imagines even more absurd.

If Bag’s untitled video reveals the messy efforts behind 21st-century marketing, the dolls could be seen as incarnations of the consumers these algorithms measure. Like an unthinking Instagram user, the dolls both shop and are sold as products themselves. They, like us, seem to be lured by the glamour of individual taste.

But in the show, brands have no hierarchy. From Dollar General to Sephora, the commercial signifiers of status (and lack thereof) collapse. The companies emblazoned on the dolls’s bags are specific, but the unsettling emptiness they capture comes as one-size-fits-all.

It goes without saying that neither Von Ammon Co. nor Alex Bag are interested in playing the game of feel-good art. And why should they be? Here, art gets at a truth you may not want to sit with.

Before my gallery visit, I had planned to combine the trip to Georgetown with shopping for much-needed new sneakers. But gazing up and down M Street NW, the gallery's dolls seemed to be multiplying, mutating. There was one, one perched atop the canal, drinking from a Starbucks cup. A few more swarmed out of L'Occitane. Suddenly fearing myself at risk of becoming one too, I redirected my worn-out shoes and moved briskly in another direction.

If you go