

Elise Boudreau Graham, *If It Makes You Happy* (It Can't be That Bad)

Good Sport Gallery

July 23rd to August 20th, 2016

Genevieve Flavelle

Nestled between London's long standing artist run centre Forest City Gallery and a bike shop run by artists, Good Sport announces its residence with large, anachronistic hand painted letters. Entering through the conspicuously pink facade, visitors to the gallery find themselves in a small exhibition space that is an almost-welcoming, almost-comforting, perhaps-domestic space. The space is sparsely decorated, but a hand-hooked welcome mat pushed up against the far wall invites viewers in. The floral velvet bean-bag chair seated in the center of the gallery offers another recognizable symbol of domestic comfort. If a viewer is at ease enough to take a deep seat in the bean-bag chair, they may notice a seemingly discarded empty makeup tube on the floor, or perhaps they will begin to browse through the pages of paper piled into a plinth like stack. If they do, they will find article after article printed out from the artist's browser history ranging from the latest news on Black Lives Matter and

police violence, "Black Lives Matter protesters crash Toronto police department LGBT mural unveiling" to "Resort Style: How to Wear a Summer Caftan From Day to Night". These seemingly disparate, irreconcilable subjects form the heart of Elise Boudreau Graham's exploration of political and personal worlds in *If It Makes You Happy* (*it can't be that bad*).

As individuals we navigate constantly between being immersed in the public sphere and our inner psychic lives. As scholar Heather Love writes, "politics and feelings are very different kinds of things: the public sphere is big, feelings are small; social life happens out there, psychic life, somewhere inside".¹ Boudreau Graham puts on display these daily experiences of personal and political incongruity. Examining contemporary constructs of self-care, activist practice, and waged labour, Boudreau Graham connects private and public realms, personal economics and political landscapes by asking, in the

worried lyrics of Sheryl Crow, "if it makes you happy, then why the hell are you so sad?".²

The idea of self-care (that one should make time to emotionally and physically check-in and care for oneself) has been an important act of resistance for people living through daily marginalization and oppression. It has, however, also been highly critiqued as an easily commodified strategy for dealing with the hardships of contemporary life. *CONFUSED "SELF-CARE" WITH "SELF-INDULGENCE" AGAIN**, a light-up hive shaped essential oil diffuser which puffs out a revitalizing diffuser blend into the gallery may be calming as we consider the shifting labour dynamics of neoliberal and globalised capitalism; how secure unionized jobs have been systematically eroded, the anxiety of being precariously employed as a freelance/self-employed/contract worker, the stress of always working or trying to be working, and how having off time to relax itself becomes work. Then again, the irony of paying hard earned money for relaxation commodities in an attempt to relax from the daily stress of waged labour may cause one to spiral into a renewed anxiety vortex.

Even staying up-to-date on the issues we care about becomes another form of labour, as *10 Successful Women Share Their Morning Routine*, the ongoing record of Boudreau Graham's online browser history attests. The endless list of internet links and articles, many of which she bookmarks for later, are ordered into a stack producing a material quantification of intellectual consumption. Boudreau Graham helpfully provides a remedy tincture and USB stick containing the links, so that you too may save these articles for later and attempt to counter the effects of constant stress and unpaid emotional labour while you relax into the bean bag chair aptly titled *I Have A Feeling I'm Not The Only One*.³ Seated in the bean bag chair viewers are in a perfect position to con-

template the enigmatic quality of *I'd Fuck You Right Here, Right Now But I'm Too Tired & You're Too Depressed*, a rumpled paper blanket, unclear from its floating position whether it is entering or exiting the space. The blanket, which Boudreau Graham constructed by photographing her hand tie-dyed sheet, digitizing the pattern, reproducing the pattern on sheets of photocopied paper, and then taping them back together mimicking quilt making, speaks to what is lost in the translation of material to digital to material again, the handmade reduced to the quickly reproducible. The blanket, a symbol of comfort, rest, and warmth loses all of its original functions and offers only empty comfort. Similarly, the stack of articles illustrates another instance of the disconnect between digital and material translation; the emotional and political investment to which the articles attest is often not translated into tangible acts of activism or solidarity, leaving an empty feeling of care and solitary consumption.

The works that comprise *If It Makes You Happy* unhesitatingly mix the handmade with the ready made. Through her material choices Boudreau Graham encourages symbols of contemporary life to rub shoulders with signifiers from the past. Latch-hooking, tie dye patterns, and floral velvet upholstery fabric recall the 1970s, an era of intense social critique and activism. This aesthetic choice gestures to an earlier era of strong feminist activism and collectivity. Boudreau Graham links the impasse of our present moment to the past in an endeavour to connect past and present struggles, acknowledge repeated mistakes, and questioning the ways in which the personal has become selectively political.⁴ Titled *ONCE AGAIN CONFUSED "EMPATHY" FOR TAKING RESPONSIBILITY***, the pink cursive letters of the hand-latched welcome mat reference personal failure while also recalling collective failures of the past. Failures such as white feminists placing their needs above

those living at the crossroads of multiple oppressions. The failure to understand the importance of intersectional analysis and coalitional movement building is a failure we are seeing repeated in the present. When white members of the gay community accused the 2016 Toronto Pride honoured group Black Lives Matter of derailing celebrations when they took up space and used their platform to question Pride's commitment to queer and trans people of colour, we witnessed the welcome mat being rolled back when responsibility knocked on the door of the privileged.

Tacked low onto the wall of the gallery Boudreau Graham makes a small gesture in the form of two photographs depicting a digital light board at a dark construction site flashing the word TOMORROW. If, as Lauren Berlant argues, the things we desire are often actually an obstacle to our flourishing—a cycle of cruel optimism in which we feed a harmful system in our efforts to cope with life—the future, while appearing dark, does offer an opportunity to think and desire differently.⁵ Rejecting normative ideas of happiness and success, opportunities for new ways of thinking and doing are made possible. Rosi Braidotti compellingly argues that, “the conditions for renewed political and ethical agency cannot be drawn from the immediate context or the current state of the terrain. They have to be generated affirmatively and creatively by efforts geared toward creating possible futures, by mobilizing resources and visions that have been left untapped and by actualizing them in daily practices of interconnection with others”.⁶ A concept such as self-care has the potential to be reimagined and rechanneled into renewed ideas of collective care, while the already interconnected nature of social media offers an opportunity to rethink collective networks of care and resistance that go beyond the hollowed act of “like” and “share”. By connecting feelings of

personal futility and exhaustion with past moments of resistance and the impasses of the present, Boudreau Graham's work may renew our desire to collectively mobilize for a different future or it may leave us wondering that if it will make us happy, perhaps we should burn it all down.

1. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, (Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 2007) p 11.

2. Sheryl Crow, *If it Makes You Happy*, (A&M Records, 1996).

3. An excellent titled to add to the list on the topic of emotional labour is Jennifer Tamayo, “When You Handle Poison”, *MICE Magazine*, <http://micemagazine.ca/issue-one/when-you-handle-poison/> .

4. Lauren Berlant describes the present as a moment of impasse; “the impasse is a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help clarify things, maintain one's sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event”, in *Cruel Optimism*, (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2011) p 4.

5. *Ibid* 1.

6. “The notion of the univocity of Being or single matter positions difference as a verb or process of becoming at the heart of the matter: Interview with Rosi Braidotti”.

*Titles taken from *WHY ARE YOU LONELY: A TEXT GAME* written by Mallory Ortberg for the-toast.net

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Curated by Genevieve Flavelle.

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