

Momus

The Spinning “YOLO” Sympathies of Sandra Meigs

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An early critique I received as an artist was in jury feedback for an unsuccessful grant application: “why does this work need to be made?” It was a good question. In hindsight, I think my uncritical answer was because *I* needed to make it. Applying a version of that question to [Sandra Meigs](#)’s current exhibition at [Susan Hobbs Gallery](#), entitled *All to All*, yields more sophisticated responses. The most obvious is an acknowledgement of the intensity of production. The gallery is full, as in flirting-with-fire-code-infraction full, and Meigs’s prolific rigor transfers to the viewer: I experienced a smiling absorption as I walked through narrow paths between colorful, hand-painted, and comic imagery. The work’s lightness is infectious. Yet despite its clear sense of play and weightlessness, *All to All* belies a meditative intelligence.

Meigs has been upfront about the influence personal events have had on her work; however, she always reaches for something more universal. Her paintings often describe the tenuousness of meaningful social expression and connection while materially embodying the tender, tragicomic, and slippery psychological space that this tenuousness inhabits. Previously this has resulted in framing strategies that are humorously blunt, such as in *JOYJOYSORROW* (1999), an installation that depicts an image of a wave made from small paintings hung edge-to-edge. Each individual painting describes a rudimentary face, and as the wave swells, the faces alternate between goofy smiles and frowns. At other moments in Meigs’s practice, this fragility of human connection has been more implied than described. Her past series *Bump, Ride, and Its* features paintings of interconnected creatures, animal and human. The pictorial ambiguity in *Girl Kissing Ducks. Blue* (2004) could equally be mistaken for “girl being bitten by ducks.” The boundaries of humor, fiction, pain, and intimacy become a soupy, overlapping mix as the material approach folds easily into the work’s content. The painting’s surface is made from a thick build-up of gesso and raised contours outline a ghostly crew of interconnected figures in both the positive and negative space. More recently, and prior to her 2015 Governor General’s award, Meigs lost her husband to cancer, a personal grief that inflected her series *The Basement Panoramas*. Its four epic mural paintings use imagery of a crawlspace as a fertile emotive ground. When I saw a representative work from this series at the [National Gallery of Canada](#) this summer, *Red. 3011 Jackson. (Mortality)* (2013), I was struck by its balance of pure feeling and structural fact.

This brings me back to *All to All* and the space where the profound coexists with artistic play. In this new exhibition, the quantity and material qualities of the work push “play” at another level. As an installation it may first look and sound like its key influences were the “Ex” fairgrounds, the Party City Superstore, and a dash of Marcel Duchamp’s *Rotoreliefs*. Its dozens of colorful painted-paper disks are hung from small banner-like grommets, and they curl off the wall like posters or prizes. Round cookie tins filled with coins clank as they spin on motors and handleless, numberless wall-clocks tick a time unknown. Almost every electrical outlet in the space is used. The center of the narrow ground-floor gallery is filled with easels upon which round paintings of mostly round things sit, like bull’s-eyes, fish-eye lenses, bulbous-headed cartoon characters, psychedelic swirls and suns. Upstairs the party continues, but it’s more like that late part of the party when things get dizzy and memory slurs. Spinning ghost-sculptures mounted on Roomba vacuums are shrouded in cheerful yellow stripes. The wall mimics the fabric design: concentric circles of varying diameters are painted like sound-waves-as-cartoon. The second floor also provides the site of Meigs’s daily chau gong performance, wherein the ring of the gong is sustained for a full fifteen minutes, making sound an intensely physical presence.

The instrument, often used as a meditation technique, and like yoga widely absorbed into Western culture, suggests goals of mindfulness and self-improvement. It’s one of the many features in *All in All* that references coping strategies: the party-like exhibition experience suggests a joyful, get-it-out-of-your-system catharsis, while the hypnotic swirls, whirlpools, zips, and folds imply shifts in consciousness in their abstract clarity. Motto-like text is strewn across the ground floor, reading

like self-help refrains: “CHANGE;” “EASY;” and “observation is attention.” Others read as notes and diagrams to identify daily basics, like wearing shoes or checking the mail. The sublimation implied by this quantity and character of work is echoed by Meigs herself. In the press release she asserts, “It’s easy. The more you do, the more you do. You keep going. You keep spinning.”

And then there is the pile of painted sculptures by the front door entitled *Ego disks* (2015). These disks don’t literally spin. They carry the scale of gym weight plates, but also over-sized coins. Each one reads “EGO” in all caps, and varies in diameter. Ego is understood as one’s sense of self-worth (and the cliché of course is that the artist’s egos is both outsized and delicate); but also, in Freudian psychoanalysis, the ego is a force that pivots between the conscious and the unconscious, and determines the formation of one’s identity. Cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter’s readable book *I am a Strange Loop* reflects on the ego (Meigs cites the text in an earlier series, *Strange Loop*, 2009). Specifically, in the Cartesian sense, the ego doesn’t exist in a fixed state in one’s brain: “despite our usual intuitions, each of us is housed at least partially in different brains that may be scattered far and wide across this planet.” Hofstadter uses the example of the Alzheimer’s patient as an illustration: as the illness progresses, “who” the patient “is” gradually becomes more fully housed in his loved ones’ brains and bodies, rather than his own. The patient is still the person he always was, but his identity now lives in multiple places and in multiple people. In their implied fungibility and multiplicity, *Ego disks* suggest a weight of being; but also a potential to swap out and trade up. That said, it seems important to note that the artist has left the disks in a pile by the gallery’s entrance: their presence seems “checked” at the door.

All to All proposes an art experience as an array of meditative coping strategies. Meigs’s sense of play through painting and performance suggests the complex and often murky ways we adapt, cope, and go on (as opposed to *move on*, which implies you get over it). Despite the personal place this work stems from, the viewer is invited into the experience: to face the visual and aural noise; the exuberance; the vortex of timelessness; nods to altered states of consciousness; and the strangeness of life-improvement strategies. Perhaps most essentially, the exhibition experience doesn’t seem purely sardonic or esoteric. It seems sincere, joyful, and open. The results are LOL moving in a YOLO kind of way.