

Happiness is both intangible and fleeting. Without its opposing extremes of depression and sadness, it would not exist as a knowable thing. Equally an even-keeled emotional state makes it fathomable. Happiness can seem trite, especially as the subject matter for artistic inquiry. That in and of itself makes it ripe for exploration and much more complicated to articulate than we might expect (and very personal and cultural at that).

Summer Lee and Christy Chan have tackled its complications in a performance and installation called H.A.P.P.I.N.E.S.S. at Studio 110 Gallery. It seems imperative that this piece stems from a collaboration, one that retains the individual contributions of each artist but creates a dialogue otherwise unattainable. Chan and Lee chose to establish rules for their collaborative performance. Each brought five “cultural artifacts relating to happiness” to the gallery and spent five hours making the installation or performing the piece. Neither knew what the other would bring nor did they extensively discuss the theme. They worked for the five hours in silence. The performance was videotaped from two closely related but differing perspectives within the gallery space, each with its own particular view of the ensuing creation.

Collaboration can be challenging, exhilarating, frustrating, and unbalancing, not to mention its shot to the ego. The framework for this performance is also unsettling to the makers as they are largely reacting to the objects of importance the other performer has brought to the space. This process challenges the artist to comprehend the other artist’s reasons for choosing these objects as representative of happiness. Why does this particular thing represent happiness and within what context might it do so? And now, within this space and established parameters, how do these objects become something else, something that complicates and communicates?

In many ways too, we perform happiness. It is attainable for short periods of time and is therefore a very time-based concept and emotion. It is something we strive for, something that we consistently want and also consistently lack (even the happiest amongst us.) We often think happiness looks a particular way and yet we know the deceptive nature of appearances. In other words, what looks like happy isn’t always happy.

We are socialized as Americans to believe that we can reach whatever goal we set forth (class, socioeconomic status, race, gender and sexual orientation are set aside of course.) This dream usually includes career success and recognition by peers and oftentimes comes with a monetary reward. A seemingly happy and beautifully normative family doesn’t hurt either. It is therefore no consequence that both artists brought self-help books, the pages of which are isolated and incorporated into many aspects of the installation. These books are needed when we realize the dream has not become our reality or when we realize that attainment does not equate to happiness. Various pages chosen for the viewer to read include those emblazoned with statements such as “The Diamond I Wear is Within,” “Take Time for Your Life” or

“Your Sexual Potential: Electric Sex.” We always wish for improvement, for something better, for a more fulfilled and happier self.

The videos documenting the five-hour performance are the first things the viewer sees when entering the gallery space. The installation itself, which lies in the gallery beyond the videotaped performances, is largely made up of black and white objects. In one corner lies a pile of self-help book pages above which an envelope tacked to the wall reads “Free Help Books. Take as many pages as you’d like NEED.” The envelope itself is full of credit card receipts with the service provided listed as “HELP.” There is no charge. On the next wall and the focus of the installation are seven white inflated balloons upon which self-help book pages are affixed. In the middle of the gallery space, a gun pointed at these balloons sits propped on a 1970s or 1980s era “Black Gnat” can opener. Another inflated balloon suspended from the ceiling is attached by a string to the trigger of the gun. But in no way could this precarious balloon full of air aid in triggering the gun’s mechanisms. Guns connote both power and the potential for the taking of a life or the infliction of bodily injury. The can opener makes one think of the opening up of what lies within but also a certain domesticity. Is the gun threatening to let the breath out of these balloons? Does this “breath” reference that which fills us up and keeps us alive or does it reference a last gasp? Does the implied potentiality give us feelings of hope or despair, of an opening up or a violent infliction? It seems that these artists are both taking a critical look at the “help” industry and at the same time are pointing to optimistic, alternative understandings of happiness. One book page contains the following quote from Willa Cather’s “Le Lavandou,” 1902:

One cannot divine nor forecast the conditions that will make happiness; one only stumbles upon them by chance, in a lucky hour, at the world’s end somewhere, and holds fast to the days, as to fortune or fame.

So, happiness is not always something we can find by looking for it. Do the self-help pages stand as protective armor to the balloons or do they point to these bodies being full of hot air? This ambiguity is a strength of the show, especially as these two artists must have different understandings of happiness.

H.A.P.P.I.N.E.S.S is most definitely not a show of conclusions nor does it seem very optimistic for a stable understanding of happiness. However, it seems much more focused on life’s cyclical nature, the hurt and pain we hope to conquer, and the abandonment of the deceptive dream for something more potentially passionate and focused, like spending five hours in silence making an artwork in reaction to and with an accomplice.

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