

Glitter, Goop, and
Anti-Capitalist Angst:
Teen Girl Tumblr
Artists Make
the Digital Still Life

Warm and cool shades of pink buzz annoyingly against one another (fig. 1). An incongruous phrase—“Existential Crisis”—is written in multi-colored frosting across a generic white sheet-cake edged with bright blue frosting. All around the cake are strange baubles one would find tucked away in an adolescent girl’s bedroom closet. The fabric backdrop looks like the perky textiles typical of a little girl’s dress-up box. On the far left, a cobalt-blue teddy bear holds a “Victory” brand candy-cigarette box that actually offers a real tan-and-white tobacco cigarette. A perfectly round, peach plastic ball with turquoise script advertises itself as the “Magic Date Ball.” Beside it lies a hot pink, semitransparent dildo with a happy-face ring placed over the clitoral stimulator. These are things that might accumulate in an adolescent girl’s closet, saccharine keepsakes of her childhood intermingled with secretive treasures signaling an impending adulthood.

Artist Hobbes Ginsberg made *existential* in 2014 as part of a series of twelve still lifes collectively titled *still alive*. Ginsberg, who is now twenty-two years old and living in Los Angeles, calls herself a “low-key sad girl.” She is best known for her selfie and portraiture work focusing on the visibility of queer, nonbinary, racial, and gender subjects, and has become one of many artists embracing the vulnerability and emotionality archetypal to young American women—among them Petra Collins, Maisie Cousins, and Grace Miceli, as evidenced in Miceli’s



fig.1 Hobbes Ginsberg. *existential crisis*. from the series *still alive*. 2014; Digital photograph on Tumblr.

2015 show at Alt Space in New York, Girls At Night on the Internet.

Saccharine teen-girl art production is certainly having a moment. But the writing about this moment tends to be dismissive and at times bizarre. In terrible taste, Hyperallergic compared the emergent genre to the 2013 tragedy of Elisa Lam, a young woman murdered and left to decompose in the hot-water tank of a Los Angeles hotel: "Like the Tumblr teen-girl aesthetic that is currently making its way through the veins and channels of culture, Lam is everywhere, seeping into the pores of the Internet's most hidden corners."¹ Dazed Digital magazine mentioned Ginsberg in an article describing Tumblr feminism as fourth-wave feminism.² In April 2016, Huffington Post's weekly newsletter "Culture Shift" described such work as "full of glitter and goop," reductively commending the artists on their use of menstrual blood alongside soft, pink "girly accessories."³ This newsletter perhaps intended to credit the innovations of these young photographers, but it actually epitomized the trivializing attitude typical of responses to such work, focusing on the outfits of the models, the personalities of the photographers, and the visual frivolity of the images.

¹ Kate Durbin and Alicia Eler, "The Teen-Girl Tumblr Aesthetic," Hyperallergic, March 1, 2013, accessed November 2, 2015. <http://dazeddigital.tumblr.com/post/142461391748/in-defence-of-tumblr-feminism>.

² Ione Gamble, "In Defence of Tumblr Feminism," Dazed Digital, April 8, 2016, accessed April 20, 2016. <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/30679/1/in-defence-of-tumblr-feminism>.

³ Maddie Crum, "Teen Artists Bring the Gunky, Glittery Realities of Girlhood to Life," Huffington Post, April 18, 2016, accessed April 20, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/teen-dream-art_us_570fe0b4e4b088aea439d57a?utm_hp_ref=arts.

While the work of this cohort varies widely, the main tactic of this teen-girl Tumblr artwork is to push normative notions of femininity to an extreme, producing a caricature of girliness. Dazed writer Ione Gamble remarks:

This latest wave of feminism has not been built on a desire to reject society-enforced notions of femininity, or what it traditionally means to be female...Taking notions of femininity to extremes by championing the reductionist colour palette of pink enforced on women from birth, the latest generation of feminist activists attempt to subvert societal expectations. By pushing the archetypal woman to an almost cartoonish end, artists involved in the movement seek to expose the fallacies of this gendered stereotyping in the first place.

While many of these artists (including Ginsberg) are indeed working with feminist motives, Gamble's categorization is too neat. Gamble does nicely characterize some of the core concepts used by Tumblr artists, but her article repeats a typical oversight by writers covering "teen-girl" Tumblr art. These women are young, but most of

them are adults; their use of the term "girl" is deliberate, deployed in a specific social and economic context. These artists engage the language and visuals of childhood in order to comment on a larger contemporary issue for young adults: namely the delaying of independence due to the post-2008 recession economy, student-loan debts, and a beleaguered job market. Economic instability is reflected in the value (or lack thereof) of cheap goods in Ginsberg's photographs and in her cheap methods of disseminating the photographs online.

Ginsberg began her Internet-based art practice in 2013. This economic and social context, combined with her age, characterize Ginsberg as a millennial—a problematically classed categorization, in which access to technology and the mainstream job market are assumed. In her Dazed article, Gamble goes so far as to suggest that "photography in the digital age is arguably free from class restrictions."⁴ This is simply untrue, as cameras, laptops, software, and payment of a monthly Internet bill are beyond the reach of many. But this is part of the difficulty of this moment, for there is cause for concern, as well, for young people who have enough to survive but not thrive.

⁴ Gamble, "In Defence of Tumblr Feminism."

The term "millennial," in other words, is exhausted and problematic, often used pejoratively to address tech-happy, self-indulgent young people. In this essay, I nevertheless continue to use the term in hopes of situating this dialogue in our specific cultural context. Yet I acknowledge that this language is clumsy at best and homogenizing at worst.

Still alive reimagines still life for a millennial moment. Ginsberg's images celebrate the tawdry materials circulating in an unstable economy, and simultaneously critique the capitalist packaging of femininity. The artist's distribution of these images for free on Tumblr obstructs their capacity to be purchased, but these images are still entangled in capitalism and privilege, as they rely upon expensive technologies to be produced and digital literacy to be accessed. At the same time, Ginsberg's artwork exhibits a self-aware optimism. She dares to make aesthetically satisfying and expressive artwork that exaggerates and yet genuinely celebrates an extreme, stereotypical femininity. But Ginsberg does not allow her images to be conventionally beautiful; they are too bright, too colorful, and too busy to be passively consumed. Ginsberg engages the still-life genre as a platform for beauty and luxury, but simultaneously subverts that historical agenda with gaucherie.

When I interviewed Ginsberg, she explained that she was not looking at specific examples of still life when she produced still alive; instead she drew from iconic associations accreted around

the genre, “what everyone imagines when you say still life, like grapes on a dark table.”⁵ The still-life genre developed as a valorization of the material luxury afforded by Northern Europe’s colonial expansion in the seventeenth century, celebrating the most sensual, earthly properties of objects: the sheen of a crisp grape peel, the fine folds of soft and heavy table linens, the subtle translucence of pomegranate seeds clarified by light. These luscious materials were obtained through wealth; thus a celebration of materiality was a celebration of economic power.

⁵ Hobbes Ginsberg, interview with the author via Skype, February 19, 2016.

Imperialist traders imported exotic fruits, animals, and plants to Northern Europe, leading to unprecedented economic growth.⁶ The middle and upper classes benefitting from this wealth commissioned still-life paintings to reify their new opulence, and the still life thus operated in two ways: first, the subjects and rendering of the paintings reflected a social appreciation for materiality; second, still-life paintings themselves became esteemed cultural artifacts with high capital value, to be enjoyed at leisure.⁷

⁶ “Still Life Painting,” National Gallery of Art, <https://www.nga.gov/kids/DTP6stilllife.pdf>. Accessed February 10, 2016.

⁷ S. Ebert-Schifferer, *Still Life: A History* (New York: Abrams, 1999), 130.

The objects in Ginsberg’s photographs also require time to enjoy, but these comforts are acquired cheaply. One untitled image from *still alive* (fig 2.) shows provisions for a bath, complete with skin-treatment products, fresh fruit for snacking, and a whimsical pink marabou fluff reminiscent of midcentury house slippers or robes. This scene implies an indulgent afternoon in, soaking and relaxing—but bathing is also a cheap way to luxuriate.

Though *still alive* presents inexpensive imitations of Dutch still life and representations of exaggerated femininity, these images are not exactly parody. There is something genuinely celebratory and aesthetically engaging in these pictures. They convey a sense of care through their indulgences, suggesting that viewers deserve to take a bath, to see lovely things. The colors, lighting, and arrangements satisfy an artistic impulse. And yet the bright and chilly lighting that emphasizes the garish colors of the featured objects simultaneously gives away their consumerist flatness.

Traditional still lifes celebrate tasteful and luxurious excess, whereas Ginsberg’s photographs celebrate an excess of throwaway objects in a visually saturated field. The objects in Ginsberg’s photograph dominate their spaces through close cropping, not because they are deluxe. They are artificially colorful; even the strawberries

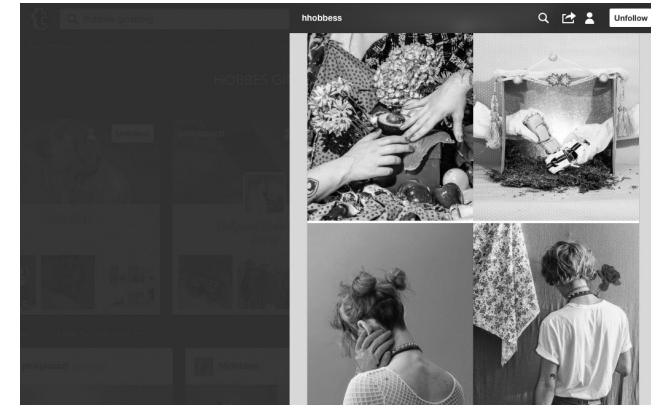


fig. 2 Hobbes Ginsberg. *Untitled*, from the series *still alive*, 2014, digital photograph on Tumblr.

fig. 3 Hobbes Ginsberg, screenshots, 2014, 2015; Digital photographs assembled and posted on Tumblr.

are a kitschy, candy red, lacking the tonal range of great Dutch still-life tradition. As a photographer, Ginsberg of course has the option to light her scene differently or alter it in postproduction. Instead, the photographs from still alive are unapologetic in regard to the poor quality of objects featured. The negative space of the bubble-bath photograph isolates the scene. Unlike the overflowing composition of the typical Dutch still life, this composition produces singularity, as if even this minor indulgence of a bath might not always be an option. This note of criticality complicates our ability to simply consume still alive as pretty pictures. The low-cost, yet pampering and time-consuming, activity of a bath suggests the position of the chronically underemployed. Underemployment offers long stretches of time, but reduces the resources allowing one to enjoy that time.

Going on Tumblr is another cheap way to pass the time. Like other social-media feeds, a Tumblr feed consists of posts from blogs that the user follows, arriving chronologically in a seemingly unending stream. David Karp, creator of Tumblr, has been adamant that Tumblr's design will remain minimal in order to focus attention on content rather than interface.⁸ But even with the promise for streamlined design and the seemingly simple operations of a scrolling feed, Tumblr is an excessive experience. Forbes writer Jeff Bercovici describes Tumblr as "far more sensory and emotive" than other social-media platforms, "a swirl of photographs, songs, inside jokes, animated cartoons and virtual warm fuzzies."⁹ Tumblr's discordant environment disrupts the viewer's ability to take in images fully. Ginsberg's still-life compositions are primarily vertical, privileging the scroll of the Tumblr feed over the horizontal orientation of the computer screen and accepting their own fragmentation in the motion of the user-operated scroll (fig 3.).

⁸ Jeff Bercovici, "Tumblr: David Karp's \$800 Million Art Project," Forbes, January 2, 2013, accessed September 15, 2015.

⁹ Bercovici, "Tumblr: David Karp's \$800 Million Art Project."

However, Tumblr is still a website based on scanning and acquisition; viewers encounter, like, ignore, comment, reblog, and collect images for their own sites. This system replicates capitalist consumption for those without the means to participate in capital ownership. Artists' decisions to circulate these images digitally enters those images into a millennial context for consumption, with all the contradictions that this generational marker implies. Perhaps, in fact, Tumblr replicates the ultimate end-point of capitalist consumption: dumping. Tumblr accommodates unrestricted dumping; dumping of emotions, images, quotes, and feelings. Internet-based artists Carlos Sáez and Claudia Maté in fact describe Tumblr as a Digital Landfill, replete with the

thousands and thousands of nonsensical, stupid, and beautiful images floating on the internet....in the same way the garbage of a house can define the family that lives inside, a Digital Landfill could be a reflection of contemporary society or our visual culture.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ben Valentine, "Revisiting Tumblr as Art," Hyperallergic, February 22, 2013, accessed March 14, 2016.

A landfill implies a cycle of collecting, hauling, and discarding a mass of stuff. To dump goods requires the inverse acquisition of things, and therefore a landfill indicates consumption. Landfills break down traditional hierarchies between objects and reassemble them in new relationships; precious trinkets, old blazers, vacuum-bag fuzz, old lettuce, coffee grounds, pet litter are no longer isolated in containers and assigned to separate rooms, but lumped together and labeled under one conquering name: refuse. Similarly, images, quotes, videos, diary entries, and articles that are posted to Tumblr merge under the single label "Tumblr." The indiscriminate contents of the digital landfill recall a passage by Robert Sullivan, describing the trash heaps of New Jersey:

The...garbage hills are alive...there are billions of microscopic organisms thriving underground in dark, oxygen-free communities.... [they] exhale huge underground plumes of carbon dioxide and of warm moist methane...I found a little leachate seep, a black ooze trickling down the slope of the hill, an espresso of refuse.¹¹

¹¹ Quoted in Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 6. Ellipses are Bennett's.

The vibrancy and activity of Sullivan's trash heaps parallel the movement of Tumblr as described by Bercovici. Similarly, in the aforementioned Hyperallergic article, Internet-based performance artist Kate Durbin describes "the teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic, [as based on] images [that are]...constantly moving and perpetuating themselves on Tumblr, breathing and existing in time and space as a living body."¹² Of course, Tumblr images do not include the single-celled organisms that Sullivan refers to in the New Jersey garbage heaps. Instead the swirling that Durbin mentions arises in the motion of the Tumblr feed, spurred on by the scrolling of the user.

¹² Durbin and Eler, "The Teen-Girl Tumblr Aesthetic."

Ginsberg's photographs wallow in the material promise of the affluent still life and patriarchal capitalist success. Still alive gratifies a craving for artistic exploration. But in enjoying these images, we must be critical, or we risk repeating a cycle in which we as viewers become girls vapidly consuming girlishness. Ginsberg's photographs are earnest about the objects they depict



and about their skepticism, discontentment, and critique in regard to the systems that surround and generate them. Ginsberg's artwork asserts that we deserve to critically indulge—because we are not dead yet; we are still alive (fig. 4).

fig. 4 still alive, Hobbes Ginsberg, from the series still alive, 2014; Digital photograph on Tumblr.