

IT'S MY PARTY AND I'LL CRY

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By

Jenna J McDonald

Director: Ron Laboray  
Assistant Professor of Painting and Drawing  
School of Art and Design

Committee Members: Dr. Seth J. McCormick, School of Art and Design  
Susan Martin, School of Art and Design

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## ABSTRACT

### IT'S MY PARTY AND I'LL CRY

Jenna J. McDonald, M.F.A.

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Director: Ron Laboray

It's my party and I'll cry is a party-like installation centered around ideas of celebration, home and feminine identity. The title, taken from the 1963 song 'it's my party' is meant to be a play on words. The work of this thesis exhibition intends to highlight the feeling of simultaneous joy and sadness by exploring the idea of a self-aware party. A collection of 365 hand written and painted poems or 'drawings' is the centerpiece of the show. They account for the entirety of my 29th year ending on my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. Ritual is presented as a meaningful example of self reflection and linked to the personal achievement of surviving another year which is often synonymous with a reason for celebration. All together the poems serve as a dairy of formal, conceptual, and banal patterns revealing biases, daily concerns, celebrations, and lamentations.

These drawings are shown alongside paintings and sculptures referencing party decorations, crafts, and household decor, intentionally blurring the line between art and decor. The daily poems address ideas about how we present our lives to one another, what is important, what is personal, what is hidden, and what is available for viewing. The paintings and assorted assemblages also address ideas of pleasure, priority, and the passage of time. As one year comes

to a close and another begins, the marker or climax (in this case an installation as party) is imbued with a sense of anticipation, fear of the unknown, and remembrance.

## INTRODUCTION

My work explores themes of celebration, home, and inherited femininity. The work refers to an awareness of life's transitory nature as a reason for celebration and by doing so embraces the visual pleasure as well as the inevitable loss of temporary decoration. Home is represented through formal arrangement, cohesive color palette as well as the use of household materials and craft materials that make reference to the interior spaces of home. Feminine identity in this work is presented by using symbolism and aesthetics as the vehicle for delivering a meaning that calls to question normative ideas of power in society. Through an investigation of these themes, a resulting installation of performance, drawings, paintings, and sculpture provide the viewer with a simultaneous experience of pleasure and let down.

## BACKGROUND/ HISTORY

“Those things which seem to take meaning away from human life include not only suffering but dying as well. I never tire of saying that the only really transitory aspects of life are the potentialities; but as soon as they are actualized, they are rendered realities at that very moment; they are saved and delivered into the past, wherein they are rescued and preserved from transitoriness. For, in the past, nothing is irretrievably lost but everything is irrevocably stored.” (Frankl 120)

I grew up in the pristine household that my mother created for my father and I. It was beautiful, immaculate, and inviting. Often in clean houses ensconced with beautiful things one might find the environment to be considered cold, sterile, perhaps even uncomfortable. This was certainly not the case in my home. It was evident that my mother enjoyed preparing her home for anyone and everyone to feel comfortable and at ease. She worked every day, never leaving dishes in the sink or dust on the mantle.

To talk about the loss of my mother and our relationship is an impossibility, it is without adequate description and yet her impression is understood. She taught me how to be compassionate, empathetic, and patient. She showed me how to be a woman through subtleties of beauty and maintenance through routine and how to ration emotion. She showed me that it is important to know when to reveal parts of yourself and when to conceal, how to exercise restraint, and where to indulge. Never missing Sunday Mass or an opportunity to do for others, she made clear the meaning of obligation and sacrifice. Catholicism was prominent in my household and it fostered in me a reverence for sacred space, a greater understanding of sorrow and suffering, the importance of marking time through ceremony, and an affinity for the repetition of prayer and penance.

The artwork is then motivated by the importance of repetition by placing value on multiplicity as a means to achieve a visual cohesion. The work highlights equally both the uniformity of routine and the overall power of the collective. In many ways the work also plays house through its formal arrangement and color to create a space that mimics home, translating the code of my mother's order, my inheritance, into an experience for the viewer.

Inspired by the work of Bridget Riley that unintentionally blurred the line between art and décor my work embraces the idea, creating a home-like environment for displaying art objects. At the same time my work seeks to reveal an honesty through imperfection. This is something I have come to admire through the candor and looseness of line found in Tracey Emin's work. In my work every object has been carefully considered and mothered into being, this being said, imperfection is abundant. It is not perfection but the illusion of perfection that entices me. This impression left by my mother and by her mother before her is more than just a set of rules by which I adhere but rather a lens through which I view material and space. Every formal decision I make is the result of a deeply engrained sense of how to make special the space I inhabit in the way of the women that first shaped me. Endurance is essential when maintaining beauty and maintaining beauty is one of the pillars of my inherited feminine identity.

Grief and mourning are universal and yet different for everyone. I do not presume to know the innermost intimacies of the hearts of others but I do know that when a loved one dies it raises thoughts and questions of one's own mortality. The cycles of life are revealed everywhere as though a veil has been lifted. Everything in existence is birth and death. For me, everything has become more precious and at the same time not precious at all. I make work to feel and exist within small births and deaths of my own creation, to reflect on the human condition, and to

better understand the feeling of simultaneous joy and sadness, so closely linked to the impermanence of being a living human being on this planet.

## THE LIFE AND DEATH OF THE PARTY

Celebration is an important part of every culture. Parties exemplify the literary arch of rising action, climax, and falling action. This work is invested in the point in time between climax and falling action where I believe the feeling of simultaneous joy and sadness resides. Because there is no word for this feeling of joy and sadness at once in our language I will henceforth refer to this emotion as happy/sad. It is awareness of life's transitory nature. The moment when the party peaks is the same moment in which one can see clearly its impending conclusion. With each conclusion, each completed cycle, another death. Every song, dance, literary work, and artwork shares this trajectory. Artistic endeavor offers a product that exists outside of it's own creation for further consideration effectively extending or freezing the act of conclusion indefinitely.

Parties are nostalgic for they often remind us of happier times, former experiences of joy in which we long to return or repeat. In nostalgia the same feeling of happy/sad is present. The duality of this emotion is paramount in understanding celebration as a metaphor for life itself. As we age sadness becomes a greater part of the fabric of our lives and thus nostalgic tendencies become more prevalent. Parties have the potential to amplify elation and by comparison reveal the monotony of what came before and what will inevitably follow. While nostalgia offers a respite from daily routine it can be quite seductive, luring us away from actualizing the present moment. For through perception, each moment in existence has the potential to be not only meaningful but sacred and unifying.

Anticipation and pleasure are inextricably linked to celebration. It has often been said that in anticipation pleasure is greatest. Through preparation for celebration there is a tradition of making things special. Preparation often spills into ritual and vice versa. Each time we set out to make special ourselves and our surroundings it is in anticipation of some 'greater' occurrence. I would argue that this preparation is equally as important as the occasion for which we prepare. In my work the preparatory making is equally important to the outcome of installation and exhibition. According to Heidegger's hermeneutic circle he claims that both artworks and artists can only be understood with reference to one another and neither understood apart from 'art' moreover 'art' cannot be fully understood without referencing the former two. The following of this cycle is established in order to get at the essence of the work but as one continues to follow the circle the more apparent the ouroboros paradox becomes.

## MATERIALS AND PROCESS/ WORKS AND INFLUENCES

*It's My Party and I'll Cry* is an installation centered around celebration, the idea of home, and feminine identity. The entirety of the room is carpeted in pink shag, a color that clearly makes reference to the representation of women and female identity. The history of the color pink is expansive but its gender specific association only came to fruition post WWII, prior to this time blue was more closely associated with femininity seen as softer and more demure. Pink, a diminutive of red, was associated with power and passion and thus it was not uncommon to see young men and boys dressed in pink. During the 1950s the gendering of pink hit full swing through advertising and fashion. In the 70s and 80s American culture experienced a brief return to gender neutrality before another surge of gender specification through color in the 90s with the genesis of the pink ribbon campaign for breast cancer. In the digital age pink is still associated with femininity but how femininity is defined is as vast as the history of the color itself.



Figure 1. Jenna McDonald, *It's My Party and I'll Cry*, 2016 (installation)

Carpet has been associated with a woman's sex as a way to objectify her through the use of many crude phrases that will not be mentioned here. These objectifying references are also tied to domesticity, for carpet and drapes are located within the home. The choice to fill the room with pink carpet that references said objectification is made in an effort to reclaim and reframe this negative association in a positive and even celebratory way, to elevate and value the beauty of a woman's sex. The carpet is soft and inviting, comfortable and clean. Exhibiting works in a carpeted room is a nontraditional nod to a very traditional idea of home.



Figure 2. Jenna McDonald, *Stuck*, 2016

*Stuck* is a work consisting of a small ladder made out of steel square bar and round steel rod. Braids have been hung on 2 of the rungs representing biological time and loss. Both the ladder and the hair have symbolic significance universally and thus their meaning is manifold. A cut length of hair can be a symbol for power, identity, attraction, control or submission (depending on who or what is responsible for the cutting). Ladders are used for repair, reaching what is otherwise unattainable, and making improvements. The braids stuck in the rungs mark units of time, each braid is cut at the two year mark of growth. The bottom braid is two years older than the top, signifying a climbing upward and onward. Effectively using this structure as an organic timeline.

*Forgotten Phrase I,II,&III* are acrylic paintings colorful stripes with common phrases interwoven. Each painting has a color theme but avoids traditional color theory. I mixed and combined many warm and cool colors in order to achieve an overall vibrancy. Once the entirety of the canvas is filled in, spray paint is applied to the phrase rendering it illegible. This forces the viewer to question what is hidden, providing the experience of simultaneously receiving and then rescinding an invitation.

In “Thermometers Should Last Forever” an article written by Yve-Alain Bois focusing on the work of Ed Ruscha, the main themes are that of visual noise, noise as refuse and ultimately entropy, and undervalued typography. Visual noise can be defined in a multitude of ways, but what is most prevalent to these works is that of interference. The lines in these paintings intersect and interfere with the content being conveyed and yet the optical color is also the signifier delivering a content of its own. Bois mentions the poet Stephane Mallarme and the value he placed on typography, believing that the signification of a word is supposed as equal to its

referent. In other words the vehicle for the relaying of information is just as meaningful as the words themselves and everything that is lost in translation becomes noise.

In my *Forgotten Phrase* paintings the central text began as a fundamental part of the work as well as a direct response to the paintings of Ed Ruscha. Upon further consideration it became clear that the redaction of this text communicated more effectively ideas of power and play with an added element of control. The spray paint is wily and deliberate causing visual interference between the intention that is the phrase and viewer.

These paintings join the chorus of those that claim that painting is dead, indeed! These paintings lived in their making but what the viewer sees is the completed plan and thus they are alive only in color. This false 'living color' directly connects the work to commodity culture through the utilization of the enticing quality of vibrating color. Influenced by the color field line paintings of Gene Davis, Kenneth Noland and Bridget Riley these paintings aim to extend their reach into a contemporary context.



Figure 3. Jenna McDonald, *Forgotten Phrase I&II, Happy Birthday*, 2016

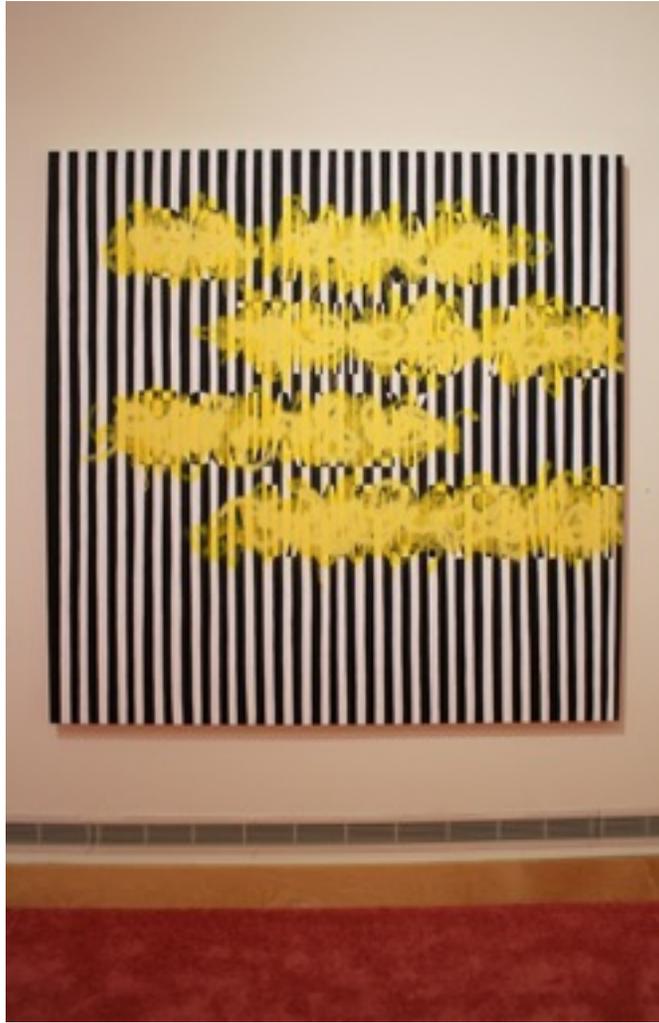


Figure 4. Jenna McDonald, *Forgotten Phrase III*, 2016

*Disruption* is a color field landscape painting of a volcanic eruption. Using 1 1/8" horizontal lines the volcano takes shape through variations on the color red. Ash and smoke are depicted through vertical lines of blue. No two colors are the same in this painting as they have all been individually mixed. Against a background of yellow sky a dark purple splotch of spray paint runs down the surface causing a disruption that pushes the eruption of the volcano into the background. The volcano is a symbol for sexuality, fear, and power.

*Happy Birthday* and *Crisis* are banners comprised of felt and cord. They are a physical representation of happy/sad meant to reference temporal homemade decoration of the past, the kind of adornment that in many instances has been replaced with cheap mass produced party decor. By careful construction and attention to detail and material, these banners place value on the celebration for which it is used.

*Artificial Cycle* features a vintage retail display torso with a strand of red craft pom poms falling from between its legs. Like an add for tampons, this simple arrangement highlights the absurdity of advertising geared toward women by conveying menstruation as pretty, clean, and devoid of human abjection. This work is the tampon add equivalent of KiKi Smith's *Train*.

Smith's work addresses themes of mortality, birth, sex, gender, regeneration, and the human relationship with/to nature. I share the same curiosities however my execution is different in that it is less figurative and more saturated. I also share Smith's affinity for the use of a variety of mediums though instead of printmaking, casting, and textiles I use materials that feel more immediate like paint, metal, and paper mache. Overall Smith's work is inspirational but it's main influence in my thesis work is found in response to *Train* in my piece *Artificial Cycle*.



Figure 5. Jenna McDonald, *Disruption*, 2016



Figure 6. Jenna McDonald, *Crisis*, 2016



Figure 7. KiKi Smith, *Train*, 1993



Figure 8. Jenna McDonald, *Artificial Cycle*, 2016

*Understanding is Comfort* is a needlepoint work that is simply sewn with the phrase ‘understanding is comfort’, punctuated with a drop of blood, and displayed in its embroidery hoop. This work again references a relationship to female identity and the home. The phrase itself is a meditation on the idea of the understanding and acceptance of truth (no matter the positive or negative implications) as comfort.

*I Made My Own Breakable Chain* is a handmade stoneware ceramic chain meant as a metaphor for domestic life. Chains are meant to bind but this ceramic chain would be easily broken if used for that same purpose. It’s purpose then becomes something else, a representation of liberation, of choice. Everyone is bound in some form or another. This work explores binding as a choice and thus it is simply hung on the wall and made decorative.



Figure 9. Jenna McDonald, *Understanding is Comfort*, 2016



Figure 10. Jenna McDonald, *I Made My Own Breakable Chain*, 2016 (detail)

*Privilege Piñata* is a piñata made of paper mache, plaster, tissue paper, wooden spool and rod and foam core board. Within is curated confetti from magazine images and hand made I owe you's. The repetition of process is evident here in the layering of paper mache and tissue paper. The piñata is meant to be beautiful and well crafted as a way to appear more valuable and worth preservation. This was an intentional choice in order to create some tension around its destruction. Once broken the piñata will remain on display for the duration of the exhibition. Pinatas were thought to have begun in China. They were broken for new year celebrations and decorated with colors that symbolized favorable climates for the upcoming year. They were filled with different kinds of seeds. In the 14th century piñatas made their way to Europe and were quickly adopted by Spanish Christians and used for Lenten celebration. The word piñata is of

Italian descent meaning earthenware cooking pot. The origin of the of the Italian word Pignatta comes from the Latin word pinea meaning pine cone.

*Privilege Piñata* explores the way in which the piñata can be seen as both male and female. On one hand the treasure contained within is held in faux womb, concealed and temporarily protected and on the other hand the seed is spilled through an act of beating. In the tradition of Mexican Catholic's, piñata is meant to represent man's struggle against the temptations of evil. The act of beating the piñata is a physical manifestation of this struggle. The helicopter is meant as a symbol for wealth, success, ambition, executive excess, and the dreams of men. Through the destruction of this piñata the attempt is made to symbolically destroy monetary success and achievement through lived human experience. "Today's society is characterized by achievement orientation, and consequently it adores people who are successful and happy and, in particular, it adores the young. It virtually ignores the value of all those who are otherwise, and in so doing blurs the decisive difference between being valuable in the sense of dignity and being valuable in the sense of usefulness." (Frankl 151) Power and privilege often go hand in hand however it is the power that lies in those that have the emotional strength to go on living in the face of adversity, oppression, or their own mortality that I find to be the dominant and more meaningful kind of power. In the performance of *Privilege Piñata* I exercise the latter over the former.



Figure 11. Jenna McDonald, *Privilege Piñata*, 2016 (post performance)

The work entitled *29* is a collection of 365 poems or 'drawings', one for each day of my twenty-ninth year. Completed each day, every drawing includes the date, the moon phase, menstrual cycle, and written reflections of the day at hand. Each poem is written out in pen using a font of my creation and then the text is filled in with watercolor to complete it. The colors are mostly arbitrary but here and there hold significance in conveying the mood of the text. For example purple tends to be reserved for meaningful moments. Some days are banal and others filled with importance but viewed together they are all equal in providing a physical representation of a year of my life. This vast timeline is without noticeable literary arch due to one year being just a small portion of my life. These drawings deal with the daily-ness of life and the disappointment that may come from that fact that it doesn't really seem to add up to much. Through this work I aim to show that a micro view of existence is equal to a macro view of existence and that quantity is irrelevant.



Figure 12. Jenna McDonald, 29, 2016

## “I'm still alive” -On Kawara

This work in particular was influenced by the awesome work of On Kawara. Turning each day into a monument, Kawara used minimal means for maximum effort. A part of the conceptual movement of the 1960s Kawara's work “brings cosmic time down to human scale, and makes an individual life feel as broad as the universe.” (Farago 1) Over the course of his lifetime he produced nearly 3,000 date paintings in which he painted the date only. Here and there he paired the paintings with newspapers from that day as a means to offer additional information relating to culture or climate. He set out to complete each painting before midnight and if he did not, he destroyed it. The date paintings went on for 48 years, from 1966 until his death in 2014. The scale of Kawara's work is unparalleled.

In 29 each drawing is made on 9"x12" Canson watercolor paper to emphasize the accessibility of precut, manufactured paper for daily use by all. In the beginning I set out to complete each drawing by midnight just as Kawara did and over time I had to amend my rule to complete the drawing before I went to bed. The idea was to complete a drawing each and every day for an overall impact of 365 at the end of a year and so I had to adjust. Losing a day to a self-imposed rule was not acceptable. When I began making the drawings I often finished them in the afternoon but as the year progressed it turned into the last thing I did before going to bed. This way I was sure to have experienced the entirety of the day in order to reflect properly upon it. The recording of my period seemed a logical choice in that it is a biological calendar. From the time of puberty women are responsible for their own bodies in a way that men are not. It was fascinating to gain a greater awareness of this cycle through monthly charting. The most surprising discovery made during this project was that of memory. Through recording daily

events I found that my recall and memory improved. Days no longer slid into the oblivion of the past but appeared clearer in my mind. I found that I could recall the major events of the year with ease.

No matter how burdensome that task became when sitting down to make the drawing I always found a sense of meaning inherent in carefully writing out and painting in the text of the day. This self-imposed meaning was the main force driving me to press on and complete the task. On my 30th birthday I made my last drawing and haven't made one since. It is important that the drawings only be made in year long increments. If I were to embark on the project again it would have to be for the entirety of a year, for it is the daily practice that significance lies, and not in the individual day. The result is evidence of performance. In this new world of technological expansion where sharing our lives is easy and encouraged, 29 places value on the intimacy of the handwritten.

The work of Tracey Emin has been a huge influence on the entirety of this body of work. Her ability to draw from personal life experience as inspiration for works through drawing, painting, video, installation, needlework, and sculpture is of great importance. Often criticized for making work 'about herself' she sought to defend herself by contesting that "my subject starts with me and goes on to the rest of the world." (Emin) She argued that everyone has had the experience of being fucked over and everyone has felt loss of love and that those experiences are what makes her work universal. Emin's work echoes the feminist tenet of the 'personal as political'. She argues that her work is not the truth but rather how she wants the truth to be. My work relates to this sentiment. I received criticism regarding the piece 29 in where my critic stated that in reading my accounts it seemed as though I was letting the viewer in but 'the room

is staged'. By this the critic meant that the work was not raw enough, that its appearance was not as truthful. I ruminated on this criticism before ultimately arriving to the conclusion that, yes, the 'room is staged' but this, in itself, is a reflection of female identity. Women have been forced to curate themselves in order to be viewed and valued by a society that only values them if... All work draws upon personal experience whether it is informed by personal relationships, political conviction, or simply material. It is all a reflection of the artist and it is all valid.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, these works can be viewed as feminist but are more accurately, undeniably human. Through poetry, painting, sculpture, flooring, and performance the installation provides a comfortable space for reflection and engagement. Themes of celebration, ideals surrounding home, and feminine identity have found voice through soft pink carpet, the smashing of a piñata, quiet poetic reflection, a few locks of hair, and the rebellion of spray paint. Exploring destruction and revision, imperfection and illusion, and through color, texture, tedium, and play this work attracts as a means to deliver content that is meaningful for further consideration as well as disrupts notions of normative power structures at play in our society.

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