

THE WILLFUL BLINDNESS OF BUBBLELIFE:
PAINTING AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT
OF PRIVILEGE AND INEQUALITY

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Abstract

Is the accumulation of wealth an immoral action? Willful blindness is the legal concept that liability cannot be avoided by intentionally striving not to see certain information or facts. Through autoethnography and arts-based research, I explore the social norms of an affluent society and their perpetuation of inequality and privilege through willful blindness. Using personal memories, site observations, theoretical frameworks, and social media images, I create paintings that connect images of social inequalities to the actions of the wealthy. By indicating the codependent relationship between wealth and poverty, the privileged and the working class, and persisting social stratification, I hope to draw attention to the willful blindness that is generally accepted in American society.

I'm not "Comfortable"

I am young—very able.

I am White—therefore privileged.

I'm a woman—there is sexism.

Straight—so "the norm."

Healthy—now—because I had access to options.

Economically—well cared for.

Spoiled if I'd let them. Spoiled when I don't.

"Comfortable" they call it.

All-around privileged—painfully aware.

I didn't always understand. I knew I didn't struggle, and that others did, but the picture was only partially painted. "There are people living paycheck to paycheck" they'd say. "Some people don't have running water" I'd hear. Some people, some place, far, far away. 'That's awful' I'd think. 'I hurt for them' I thought.

They never told me those far, far away people are exactly the same as me: an amalgamation of auras swimming inside a sculpture of skin shaped by the will of the world into which they were born. In that far, far away place, a woman no different from me is fighting tooth and nail: to make ends meet; to feed her starving children (who are failing first grade because they can't hear the teacher over the screams of their stomachs); to leave the house of her mother (who invites strange men into the home who sneak into her room late at night); to forget the feeling that she is worth less than him (who always

made sure to tell her how horrible she was at everything she ever tried). They're no different than me, except in everything they see.

I quickly learned not to 'out' myself. "Ooooh...*you're* from *Southlake*" they'd judge. I now hide the privileges I was given, unasked for, undeserved. I conceal the truth of my family's abundances. I cringe at the unfair amount of ease with which I exist in the world. I cry heavy tears for the weight of the woes of others—for the pain I've never been subjected to feeling. "How can I make this right?" I scream uncomfortably into my "Comfortable" bed, under the ceiling of safety for which my parents pay for.

"The world isn't always fair" Mom would say, "but it always equals out in the end."

The end you see is invisible for me.

Maybe they didn't see it. Maybe they chose not to look. Maybe the unequal end flashed its unbendable barriers and they slowly backed away from any attempts of breaking down the wall. "We're Comfortable" they'd concede; self-compromising any egalitarian ideals; denying the truth that is there because it's too much to bear. They surround themselves with people of the same power to quell any fears of superfluity. 'Like attracts like' the adage proclaims. Like hides within like, I counter with disdain.

The inequality, unbearable. The accumulation, suffocating. "We've worked hard to give you a better life" they defend—but I can't reconcile that uncomfortable end.

The Willful Blindness of BubbleLife:

Painting an Autoethnographic Account of Privilege and Inequality

I am a blond haired, blue eyed, young White woman, that was raised surrounded by affluence. All of my friends were White and wealthy, and there were very few students of color in my school. People would refer to our town as “The Bubble”—a term I understood to mean it was a shiny, happy place full of peace and happiness where everything was perfect, and people had no problems. Reflecting back, I see the bubble for what it was and still is: an invisible barrier constructed to keep the reality of the world outside from interacting with the pristinely manicured ‘perfection’ within.

I remember a day when I was 16 and sitting in my English teacher, Mrs. Shope’s, classroom. I babysat her daughter a few days a week and spent so much time with their family I basically became a part of it. Mrs. Shope was working on her counseling master’s degree and asked if I wanted to read the paper she was writing. I do not remember the paper in its entirety, but I remember not knowing what ‘Socioeconomic Inequality’ meant. Mrs. Shope offered some sort of explanation about how people’s backgrounds and social identifiers affect the opportunities they are exposed to and the social imbalance that exists due to this. Being raised in a predominantly White community with very high incomes, I had not encountered many substantial conversations about poverty or race—likely because the people I was surrounded by had no idea how to talk about an experience that was not their own. Mrs. Shope was the only person I knew who grew up in poverty and the only person who offered me a perspective from outside “The Bubble”.

In class, Mrs. Shope integrated information that made me aware of the privileged position I was in by being raised in Southlake. Outside of class, Mrs. Shope told me stories about what life was like for her growing up poor and being one of the only White girls in her school. I would watch her daughter in the afternoons until she and her husband got home and often stay over for dinner. They would talk about social issues and inequalities, and sometimes playfully mock “The Bubble Life,” helping me see from outside “The Bubble” and outside of my inborn perspectives of cultural norms.

One evening over dinner, Mr. Shope asked me if I wanted to hear ‘The Taco Philosophy’. When Mr. Shope was attending the University of Texas in Austin he worked in a factory driving a fork lift. He was the only White guy working among many Mexican immigrants. To get the job he lied and said he had driven a forklift before, and when he sporadically spun around with the fork thrashing he became known as ‘Rayo’, meaning ‘lighting’ or ‘ray of sun’ in Spanish. As a self-defined “broke college student”, he did not have much money, so he would buy his lunch from the vending machine. One day, while sitting with his friends who were all eating really delicious smelling, authentic homemade Mexican food, a friend turned to him and asked, “Do you want one of my Tacos?” Mr. Shope’s response was “Why? What’s wrong with it? Do you not want it?”. His friend responded saying, “This is exactly what is wrong with American culture! You don’t give something away unless there is something wrong with it or you don’t want it. I am giving you this taco because *I want you to have it*. Not because I don’t want it.”

This became a nearly ritualistic phrase. If a kind offer was refused, it was followed by a genuine *I want you to have it*. I have yet to meet more giving people to this

day, and their genuine generosity deeply influenced me and changed the way in which I view the accumulation of wealth.

With further distance in time and space from “The Bubble,” I came to see the social norms I inherited as more and more strange. In college, my friends were on financial aid, working to make ends meet, on scholarships, and from extremely divergent backgrounds from mine. I started learning about social inequalities and seeing first-hand how different people’s intersectionalities affect how they exist in society. I constantly saw my privilege reflected back at me through the lack of privilege I saw others experiencing.

I became angry that I had not seen the reality of inequality and my place within it while I was growing up in “The Bubble”. I felt as though the general uniformity of wealth and race that I grew up in had prevented me from seeing, and truly understanding, the impact of my privilege, which really just feels like the deprivation of other’s rights.

Why do I face so many fewer barriers than others? Why do I have more than I need when they do not have enough? Why does society allow these injustices to occur? Is it morally acceptable to ‘have’ in the face of the ‘have-nots’? How do you shed light on eyes that are not willing to see?

An artist has the unique ability to allow others to see the world through their eyes. By creating paintings, I attempt to show how I see the community in which I was raised, and how it relates to social stratification. By using autoethnography, I reflect on my own experience in hopes of contributing to a wider cultural, political, and social understanding of wealth, privilege, and inequality.

Theoretical Framework

Various social inequalities, theoretical frameworks, and artistic practices have inspired the paintings I created in this series. By exploring different sociological theories, studies and statistics, I have come to see different ways in which wealth influences and functions in society. By studying ways in which successful artists have used art to speak to problems in society, I have adopted new tools to create change.

The Myth Of The American Dream

The ‘American Dream’ is a widespread idea that suggests that if one works hard enough, they can pull themselves up from the bootstraps of poverty into the upper classes—asserting anyone can have the ‘white picket fence’ with a 9-5 job and achieve anything they can dream of. Horatio Alger, the author of the famous book *Ragged Dick*, or *Street Life in New York With the Boot-Blacks* published in 1868, wrote “In this free country poverty in early life is no bar to a man’s advancement... Save your money, my lad, buy books, and determine to be somebody” (Reeves, 2014). This impression has become deeply woven into the social fabric of American ideology.

The American dream of rags to riches, while does prove true for some, is not alive for all. Raj Chetty reports that in the USA, 7.5% of children born into the bottom fifth of the income distribution will achieve the rise to the top fifth of incomes (2017). While this is a low percentage, there can only be 20% of the population within the top quintile at any point. Therefore, in a completely egalitarian nation, children would have a 1 in 5 chance of eventually residing within the top quintile of income distribution, irrespective of that in which they are born (Chetty, 2017). In the US, children born into the bottom quintile have closer to a 1 in 13 chance of reaching the top quintile.

The disillusionment caused by the American Dream affects not only perceptions of upward mobility, but also perceptions of wealth distribution. In Figure 1, Arsenio and Willems found that both adolescents and adults significantly underestimated the wealth owned by the top quintile and overestimated that possessed by the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th quintiles (2017).

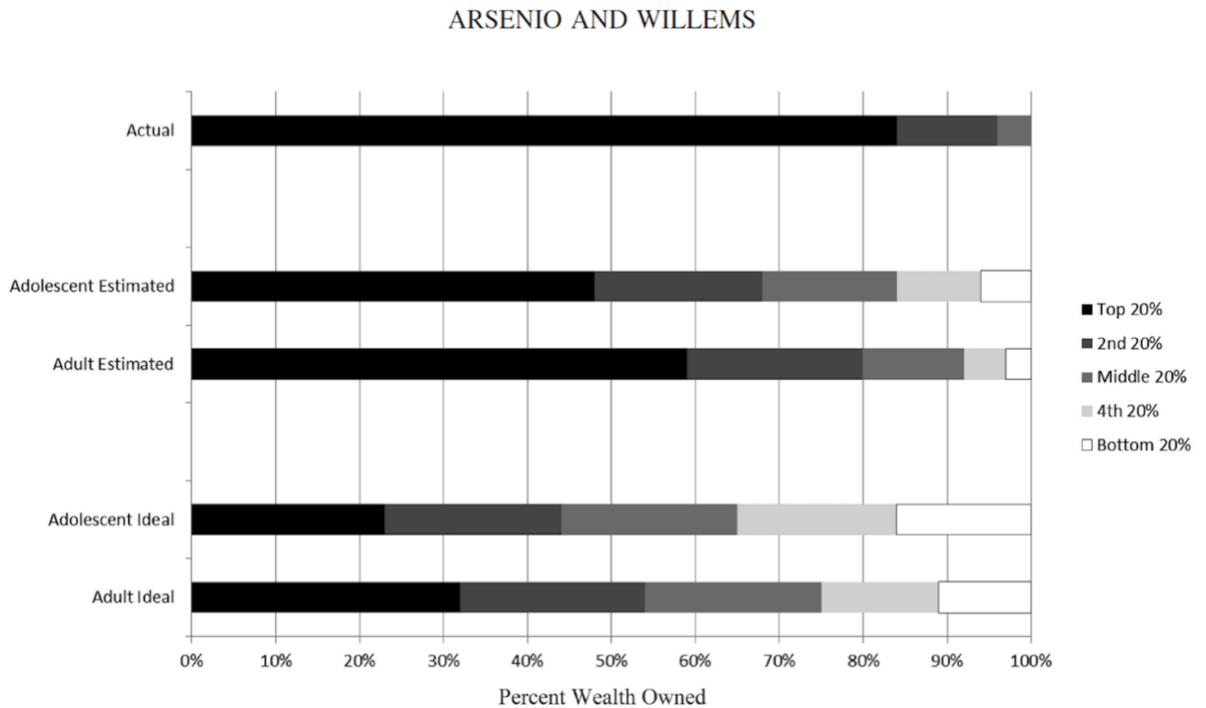


Figure 1. United States adult and adolescent estimations and idealized wealth distribution compared to the actual wealth distribution. In the actual wealth distribution, the 4th 20% possess 0.2% of the total wealth and the bottom 20% own only 0.1%. Copyright 2017 by Arsenio and Willems.

Conversely, the ideation of the American Dream can also have a positive effect; telling children if they work hard, they can achieve anything is not evil in and of itself. Michelle Obama declared “It is our fundamental belief in the power of hope that has allowed us to rise above the voices of doubt and division, of anger and fear that we have

faced in our own lives and in the life of this country” (2017). However, when the notion of the American Dream becomes accepted as absolute reality and believed to be fact, the true gravity of social inequality is disregarded. Richard V. Reeves writes “the Alger myth is little more than a cultural conjuring trick, providing an illusion of opportunity to distract the masses from gross inequalities of income and wealth. It can also act as a convenient untruth for the elite, who can rest assured of their intrinsic superiority” (2014).

In 2017, a study was conducted to examine the effects of wealth on one’s perception of fairness (Ding, Wu, Ji, Chen, & Van Lange, 2017). The participants played games in which they were to either accept or deny an offer (which was often unfair) to split an assigned percentage of money with another player. The authors hypothesized that a player’s wealth would either: “(a) elicit feelings of responsibility to promote others’ welfare, and lead to less rejection of unfair offers (Hypothesis 1), or (b) elicit feelings of entitlement in response to unfairness that favors others, and lead to more rejection of unfair offers (Hypothesis 2)” (Ding, Wu, Ji, Chen, & Van Lange, 2017). Ding et al. found that wealth, even if acquired through luck, makes people feel more entitled and that higher social class citizens tend to be more self-serving in social interactions (2017).

Theory of the Leisure Class

The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions by Thorstein Veblen is a study on the social stratification of people and the division of labor in society. Conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure are put forth as practices of the wealthy to display their accumulated wealth and status.

Veblen describes that during the predatory stage of society, labor was associated with weakness and subjection to a master, leaving laborers with a mark of inferiority. This ideology stays present within society throughout development, and conspicuous leisure comes to be seen as “the conventional mark of superior pecuniary achievement and the conventional index of reputability; and conversely, since application to productive labour is a mark of poverty and subjection, it becomes inconsistent with a reputable standing in the community.” (Veblen, 2009, p. 19).

Conspicuous consumption is the purchasing goods to display with the intention of communicating status to others. Veblen explains society believes “unproductive consumption of goods is honourable, primarily as a mark of prowess and a perquisite of human dignity” (2009, p. 87) The ability to consume beyond the goods that are considered integral to survival, or “the consumption of luxuries in the true sense, is a consumption directed to the comfort of the consumer himself, and is, therefore, a mark of the master” (2009, p. 90). Conspicuous consumption has become blatantly obvious in modern society. Designer brands demonstrate the social desire to label and display status, as well as the knock-off designer items that are bought by those who cannot afford the original in an attempt to elevate their perceived status.

Social Activist Artistic Methods

Artists across the globe are using art as a tool to create social change. Social activist artists have demonstrated being the eyes of society, acted as a mirror of social behavior, and used irony and satire to help reveal social problems in a form more digestible and acceptable to their viewers.

Eyes of Society. An artist that has exemplified being the eyes of society is Jacob Riis. Riis was an immigrant police reporter who:

hoped to open the eyes of his fellow New Yorkers to the intolerable conditions in which the poor immigrants of the city lived...Most Americans thought of the poor as lazy and ignorant, inclined to drink, and not interested in cleaning up their living quarters. Certainly, they knew in an abstract way that the people who lived in the tenements were human beings just like themselves, but they rarely imagined them as neighbors with feelings and hopes, fears and needs as real as their own. (Pascal, 2005, p. 6-8)

Riis wanted to use his photographs of the immigrants living in the intolerable conditions of the New York tenements to shock society into “truly seeing the other half and realizing that the two groups had much in common” (Pascal, 2005, p.8). Riis took it upon himself to be the eyes of society to show others the injustices that needed to be addressed. He captured photos of the human suffering that others were denying to help them see the reality of what was happening.

Mirror of Social Behavior. A quite literal example of an artist’s work acting as a mirror of society is Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s piece The Social Mirror. Ukeles completely covered a garbage truck with mirrors to glamorize and bring dignity to the job of the sanitation workers and also to implicate the public’s role in producing the trash. As the truck drove around New York City, pedestrians would see their reflection be prompted to think about their contributions to the waste. She wanted to point out that “We tend to forget the service workers who make it possible for institutions and cities to survive” (Colangelo, 2016).

Satirical Pairing. An artist well versed in the use of irony and satire is street artist Banksy. His work includes images such as a starving child wearing a burger king hat, or a child holding a machine gun loaded with crayons in front of crayon drawings of flowers on the wall. His work is widely acclaimed, and “in 2010, Time magazine named him one of the 100 most influential people in the world, alongside Barack Obama and Steve Jobs” (Ellsworth-Jones, 2013). I believe a prominent aspect of his acclamation, despite his pictorial criticism of modern society, is his use of satire and irony. Scholar James Brassett asserts “irony generates an important critical self-distance” and “can foreground a sense of doubt over our own most heartfelt beliefs regarding justice” (2009, p. 219, 223). Brassett proclaims, to accomplish this an artist can “continually identify the messiness, contradictions, and the tragic irony of global ethics” (2009, p.230). People are receptive and appreciative of Banksy’s critical reflections because they are both honest and slightly humorous, allowing viewers to both laugh at the ridiculousness of the world they live in and also think about their responsibility as participants in society.

Methods

Multiple methodologies have been integrated in this work. I have used autoethnography, arts-based research, and my artistic practice to create paintings that communicate my account and observations of wealth and privilege.

Autoethnography

In writing an autoethnography, a researcher utilizes their experiences to illuminate and relate to a larger societal issue. This process is centered on reflexivity—the practice of critically analyzing one’s own positionality while engaging in the research process. Positionality refers to the researcher’s race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation,

culture, location, and any other factors that contribute to a person's perception of the world. These factors affect how information is processed within the researcher's own interpretations and can also affect their presentation of findings and how they are received by the finding's audience. Additionally, "a researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions" (Malterud, 2001, p. 483-484).

By examining personal identifiers such as gender, race, class, culture, and so forth, a researcher can examine issues that they are a part of and use their experiences, perceptions, and opinions to bring a reader into the mindset of someone involved in the chosen social issue. Autoethnography also allows one to "search for an understanding of others (culture/society) through the self" (Chang, 2008, p. 40). By thoroughly understanding a phenomenon and how it affects you personally, you can then empathize and begin to understand how it affects others. Likewise, readers coming to your work can learn to empathize and understand how a social structure has affected you. To spread awareness of and dismantle social issues, we must first understand how issues are enacted and experienced. Large social systems can come to be understood by studying their smaller manifestations.

Art-Based Research

Research has shown "when presented with a morally questionable behavior, individuals' gut reactions determine whether the behavior feels immoral or not, forming the basis of subsequent judgments" (Feinberg & Willer, 2015). When viewers see my paintings, I hope they have a visceral reaction in response to the inequalities I am

depicting that encourages them to question and grapple with the morality of wealth. Numbers and statistics showing inequality and global relations can be impersonal, distant, and un-relatable; but images can inspire a personal emotional reaction. Patricia Leavy asserts “visual images are unique and can evoke particular kinds of emotional and visceral responses from people; they are typically filed in the subconscious without the same conscious interpretive process people engage in when confronted with a written text” (2015).

For this reason, arts-based research has unique qualities and capabilities that other methodologies cannot utilize. Art can elicit the gut reactions that can influence the formation or adaptation of moral judgments. Additionally, research is typically performed by, published by, and read by scholars and university students. The ordinary citizen does not have access to, nor the education level necessary, to read and fully comprehend a scholarly article. This leaves the information found and the new knowledge created to be shared amongst the small percentage of society that has had educational advantages. By using arts-based research, an artist/scholar can present their findings in an artistic fashion that is accessible and comprehensible by people from all educational backgrounds.

In addition, art has the ability to implant an entire conceptual or theoretical framework into your consciousness through images, bypassing the need for a viewer to read a lengthy text. For this reason, art can reach a broad and diverse audience faster than scholarly research. Art also has the ability to “inherently open up multiple meanings that are determined not only by the artist but also the viewer and the context of viewing” (Leavy, 2015, p. 224). Instead of being didactically told what to think, a viewer can form

their own interpretations of the thoughts being put forth in a painting and feel ownership of, and attachment to, their new perceptions.

Artistic Process

In this series of paintings, I utilize collage in an attempt to reframe viewers perceptions by placing depictions of lives that are seemingly disjointed, alternate realities side-by-side to implicate they have an interconnected relationship. Picasso described that in the practice of making a collage, the “displaced object has entered a universe for which it was not made and where it retains, in a measure, its strangeness. And this strangeness was what we wanted to make people think about because we were quite aware that the world was becoming very strange and not exactly reassuring” (cited in Brockelman, 2001, pp. 117-118).

The beginning of my process is consumed with reflection on my upbringing, my current situation, observations of wealthy communities, and conversations with others. I also read scholarly research and theoretical frameworks to inspire my thinking and content matter. Once I have formed an idea, I use images from my past, social media, and various web sources to create digital collages in Photoshop. I then play around with different compositions and images until I feel that I have communicated the thoughts and feelings I am trying to portray. When the composition is set, I create large oil paintings from the digital collages.

I choose to turn the collages into paintings because I feel like a painting commands a different kind of attention. The amount of time and effort put into a painting communicates a certain level of importance to its viewer.

Reflection

To address a problem, you first must have an understanding of it. In the case of social inequality, both wealth distribution and class mobility are generally misunderstood as more egalitarian than they actually are. To change both social conceptions and perpetuations of inequality, we must reframe the way we view our actions. Consumerism and Commercialism use advertisements geared towards personal pleasures to sell us products that appease social desires for conspicuous consumption. They do not advertise the operative system of cheap exported labor, poor working conditions, and massive profits for the select few at the top of the capitalist food chain. To counteract the obstruction of reality that advertisements enact, I am creating paintings that question how the lives of the wealthy relate to the lives of the working class or the impoverished.

This series of paintings was inspired by Southlake, Texas, the city I grew up in. Southlake Town Square is a shopping center known for its high-end boutiques and fine dining. Many of my memories from childhood are of warm summer evenings running around ‘Town Square’ with friends, going to eat, watching a movie, meeting up with other friends at the ‘Old Fountain’ or ‘New Fountain’, and thoughtlessly spending money. While I started babysitting regularly at 12 and spent my own money, most of my friends were regularly given \$40 to have fun for the evening, or often their parent’s credit card. At the time, I did not even think about this. We would buy what we wanted, have our fun, then call our parents to come pick us up.

I came to see the strangeness of these cultural norms over time. I began picking up on gentle ridicule from students from surrounding areas and knew they judged anyone associated with Southlake as a ‘Spoiled Rich Kid’. Out of fear of that label, I would often

lie and say I was from a less affluent neighboring city instead. I continued this practice through college and felt even more pressure to conceal how I grew up as I met more and more people from low-income backgrounds and learned about the innumerable social inequalities that our country and global community face.

Now that I am removed from the Southlake atmosphere I have recognized the willful blindness I partook in and have removed my metaphorical sunglasses. When I go back, I see the same settings through a different lens. The little kids running around in designer clothes shine like a beacon of conspicuous consumption. I look at them and feel a guttural disgust while envisioning the waste accumulation of the fashion industry and imagine ways in which that money could have been spent by families in need. At the same time, I also sympathize with them. I know they do not see the world as it is—they can only see through the social lens they have grown up with and through the distortion of ‘The Bubble’ they live in.

Themes in the Art

Willful Blindness is a term used in law to describe the avoidance of liability by intentionally striving not to see certain information or facts. Willful Blindness is portrayed in each painting through the wearing of sunglasses or something covering their eyes. The characters representing wealth are depicted this way to represent the lens through which they see the world around them and show the obscuration of truth their lens provides. Each character has the option to remove their sunglasses, but hides behind the comfort of their filtered view.

In each painting, I use photos of people from divergent socioeconomic backgrounds and place them side by side to show the strange and unnerving truth of these

seemingly disjointed, but deeply connected worlds. I intend for the satirization to dislodge the viewer's willful blindness and disarm them enough to allow for introspective thought. I hope the viewer will question their role in society and can see the grotesque reality of social inequality reflected back at them.

Conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure are also depicted in each painting. The prominence of these elements in social stratification is emphasized in each work. This portrayal questions the wealthy's use of time, money, and assertion of power.

In each painting, the images of People of Color are 'defaced' in some way. The 'defacing' was inspired by the problematic practice of speaking for others. I do not know the experience of these people, nor does my use of their images represent the entirety of their lives. My intention for my art is not to tell the story of People of Color; rather it is to reveal how they are often disregarded within the social stratification of our society. The 'defacing' adds another layer of questioning into the interpretations of the work: How does society treat these people, or these images? How are they being represented?

Painting 1: The Domain



We've seen the photos of the starving children, the slums, the atrocities—but we ignore the 'writing on the wall'. We forget to acknowledge the effects of our actions when they are obscured by the advertisements on the flashing screens and in the shiny magazines convincing us we need to buy these pretty things. In this painting, I've placed the 'writing on the wall'—the living conditions of those making our imported goods—next to the 'scene of the crime'—the high fashion stores that sell those products.

In this work, one child stands drinking out of a disposable cup next to the trash can, implicating that she is adding to the trash that the father and daughter in the mural will eventually have to dig through. She is in the center of the canvas, just as she is

egocentrically in the center of her universe. She stares straight at the viewer, confidently consuming, but from behind the darkened lens she has acquired from the culture in which she was raised.

The second child stands tall with arms poised behind her back, mimicking her father's actions. She is being taught how to behave, how to think, and what to want from life. She gazes into the store display of material desires learning to live for luxury and blind herself of the consequences of her actions.

Meanwhile, the girl in the mural painted on the wall inspects the food she may be able to salvage from the mountains of trash. She is also learning from her father, but instead to rescue what other people have left to rot and deemed as waste.

Painting 2: Born in the USA



While visiting my parents at home in Southlake, I decided to spend a day at Town Square to observe and try to find inspiration for the next painting. I wandered around the stores, listened to shopper's conversations about their daily lives, and tried to force inspiration for the next piece. Eventually, I stopped and sat on a bench by the "New Fountain". I watched kids run around and splash in the water and felt their joy as I remembered my own childhood days spent the same way. Then I saw a mother giving her children coins to throw in the fountain to make a wish, but it quickly turned into a competition to get the coins in the top tier. I thought "how many people in the world can afford to just throw away money"?

In *Born in the USA*, two girls wearing bikinis and sunglasses lounge on a white swan pool float in the top tier of a fountain wearing American 4th of July décor. Money is floating in the water and they toss coins in a show. Bits of water trickle down onto workers below who are cleaning the drained bottom of the fountain. Surrounding the fountain, children throw coins, trying to get their coin into the top tier so their wishes are granted. The girls in the top tier are oblivious to the reality around them and only concerned with flaunting their joyful abundance. The children surrounding the fountain are not yet fully aware of the unequal distribution of wealth concealed by the American Dream, and throw their coins wishing for an ascent to the top.

Painting 3: Self Portrait of a BubbleLife



During the process of this research, I have analyzed the world in which I was raised and its isolation from reality. Children growing up in Southlake often refer to the city as ‘The Bubble’, and there is even a publication titled “Southlake BubbleLife”. The term is an acknowledgment of the sheltered lifestyle and a vague awareness that life is different outside ‘The Bubble’s’ borders. When I was young I heard the term, but did not realize how limited my perception of the world was when looking out from within ‘The Bubble’.

When reflecting back on my life in ‘The Bubble’, I feel grateful for what I had, but it is intermixed with feelings of guilt for having what many others never will. I see

my privileged past—and present—as unjust when comparing it to the struggles so many others experience. Why was I the one born into a protective bubble of affluence? Is it morally acceptable to have had so much instead of having less and giving more? Did my parents love and desire to provide the best they could for me blind them to pain of others?

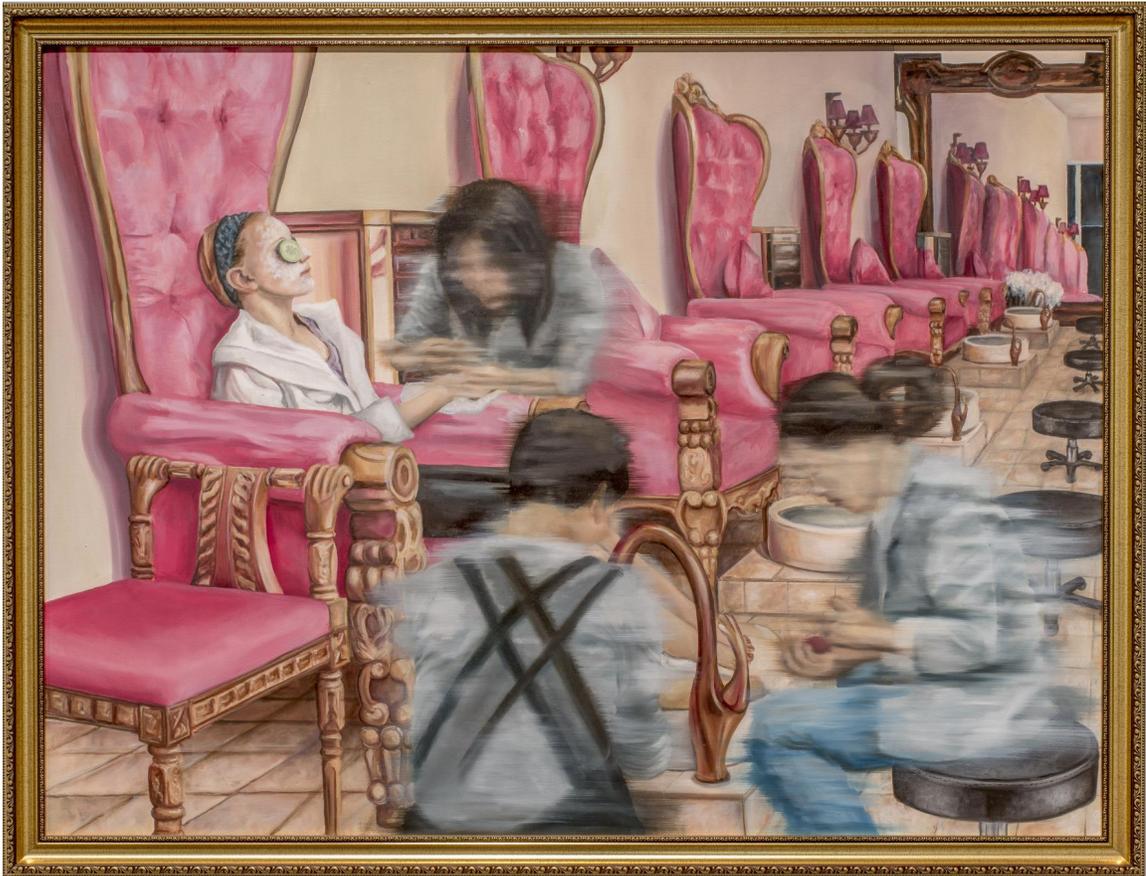
Painting 4: Let Them Eat Cake



In recent years a trend has emerged of doing a photo shoot of 1-year-old children smashing cake for their birthday— often expensive, elaborate sets in photographer’s studios. I created this painting to contrast the superfluity of our society and the extreme lack in other’s.

The title ‘Let Them Eat Cake’ is rumored to have been said by Queen Marie Antoinette when learning the peasants didn’t have enough food. While this cannot be proven, there are different interpretations that can be drawn from the phrase. Did the speaker genuinely care for the peasants and hope to feed them? Was there a lack of understanding of the reality of the issue? Or, was the phrase a sarcastic dismissal and disregard?

Painting 5: Nail Supreme



This work is inspired by the strangeness I perceive when observing nail salons. In Southlake, and many other high socio-economic areas, it is not unusual to see a young girl being pampered and groomed. This scene is normalized and familiar, but if analyzed perpetuates historical power dynamics and class divides.

Conclusion

My intent for these paintings is to dislodge complacent participation in willful blindness and encourage questioning of privilege, conspicuous consumption, conspicuous leisure, and the morality of amassing wealth. Wealth is venerated as an accomplishment of ascent to high social status, but what are we failing to acknowledge? Why is it not standard to question the moral implications of exercising power through wealth and privilege? I believe it is because it is easier to choose not to acknowledge one's personal interest in accumulating and consuming for one's own pleasure, consequently neglecting to challenge the system of inequality we perpetuate through our choices.

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APPENDIX

Full Sized Images









