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Tears of Laughter: Comedy, Genre and Dialectics in Dakota Higgins' Oeuvre

In his upcoming exhibition, *Things Done for Love*, Dakota Higgins will present objects from two recent series, *Impressions* and *The Dentless Portraits*. My essay will serve as a reply to Higgins, one that seeks to elucidate the conceptual through-line that unifies a diverse body of work. Consistent throughout each phase is, I argue, a critique of the intimacy between American cultural politics and global capital. Higgins achieves this critique through a dialectically inflected approach to comedy. Comedy allows Higgins to explore repurposing objects, conventions, and genre histories of which he is not the author. In this sense, Higgin's practice might be compared to a longer tradition of dialectical thinking, one set in motion by dialogue and the earnest pursuit of the contradictions at the heart of historic and aesthetic conventions. The following essay strives (1.) to read Higgins' work for the social and historical content of his critique of American life and (2.) to elucidate why Higgins turns to genre at moments when he seeks to reconcile the negative dimension of his work with an affirmative commitment to the value of aesthetic production.

However one decides to describe the conversational quality of Higgins' practice (comic, dialogic, dialectical, gregarious, sunny-side up), these are objects that come to life in the encounter with the viewer. Out of a desire to introduce the reader to Higgins' work with the least ado, I've restrained my prefatory comments to these notes and to the first section of the paper, "Prelude: *Wet Tomato*." There, I offer an incredibly brief history of some of Higgins' early work from the perspective of the institutions (Apple Inc.) that established the aesthetic and historical context for his nascent intellectual and artistic consciousness. From there, I talk about how these formative encounters with commercial photography provided Higgins with an education in the ideological function of conventionality, one that remains detectable in his approach to comedy. There, I also

clarify what I see as Higgins' consistent, if yet unacknowledged, interest in genre. In the second and longest section of the paper, I attempt to demonstrate the dialectico-comic thought at work in Higgins' sculptural series, the *Impressions*. From there, I work to demonstrate the continuity between the moves made in the *Impressions* with Higgins' most recent series of glitter paintings, *The Dentless Portraits*.

I. Prelude: *Wet Tomato*

Long, long ago, in the hamlet of Los Altos, CA., Steve Wozniak gave birth to the Apple II in Steve Job's parents' garage (Richardson 2008). The year was 1977. The following year, the pair secured a contract with the Minnesota Education Computing Consortium, supplying the first wave of Macs into the American public school system. Saturating as many schools as possible with their product, Apple not only responded to emerging demand for computer literacy but also shaped that demand by accommodating students to the look and feel of the Mac (Watters 2015). From 1978 on, as monochromatic displays gave way to complex graphical user interfaces, the default wallpaper passed from fluorescent arcs and curves into images meant to advertise the power of the dormant machine. In libraries and classrooms across the United States, students would wake their computers and glimpse extraterrestrial auroras sprayed across the screen in glowing blues and pinks (Watters 2015). Mimicking images captured with the Hubble space telescope, these cosmic images impress upon their users the cosmic heights one could reach with their machines.

As graphical power increased Apple doubled down on this rhetoric albeit through a new idiom. Clothing itself in purple mountains' majesty, each new major update to the Mac operating system arrived in tandem with the name and the iconic photo of another Californian summit. Having spent much of his youth surrounded by these Apple sponsored vistas, Higgins recalled that some of his earliest exposures to commercial photography occurred in his public-school computer

labs. Higgins often jokes that the sum of these early influences left him with the sense that, “all commercial photos want to be mountains” (D. Higgins, personal communication, Nov 11, 2023). What holds as a reflection on the glossy images of Mac screens holds equally for the grandeur of the American southwest.

Ringed within the valley of Red Rocks and Sheep Range, Higgins describes the ring of mountains around Las Vegas as the backdrop to a series of malls and shopping centers that populate the City of Sin. Coming of age in a working-class suburb of Las Vegas, Higgins was not exposed extensively to the art world before starting his BFA (D. Higgins, personal communication, Nov 11, 2023). Rather, as with many working-class kids, Higgins’ became familiar with aesthetics through mass culture: movies, videogames, TV shows. In characterizing the ambivalent character of these cultural products in “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” Jameson wrote that any texts, popular or not, can only appeal to their readers by offering them a fantasy of a better life, whether interpersonal, communal or political (144). Just as often as this fantasy lines the work with some affective or affirmative message, even in the most debased works, it is the principle of incoherence that allows a work to offer itself up as a critique of the compromised conditions of its making.

In his first mature artistic endeavor, *Free Desktop Backgrounds*, Higgins sought to reproduce the casual wistfulness of the Windows XP meadow or the Mac Mountains by other jocular means. In the standout from this series, *Wet Tomato*, Higgins suspends six digital tomatoes above waves crashing on a rocky beach (Appendix 1). The spray bursts upwards; droplets adhere to a perfectly square portion *in front of*, rather than to the falling fruit. In this way, Higgins gathers together the aesthetic elements of commercial photography: images of the raw power of nature (the waves), foretastes of familiar pleasure (the tomato), and the voluptuous surface of the commodity (freshly misted fruit), in a way that reproduces the formal properties of his intended genre by means of a comedic detour. The conceptual gesture at this earliest stage of Higgins’ career consists, I argue, of

the incomplete negation of the spectacles he was immersed in from childhood into adolescence. By incomplete negation, I mean that Higgins's reconstructions succeed at demonstrating the ideological artifice of commercial photography, neither able to undo them nor the structural conditions they mediate. In its wily combination of comedy and critique, Higgins demonstrates a consistent desire to wring a few drops of truth, whether that truth be the honest admission of its own absurdity or the revelation of desires ungratified, from even the most commodified cultural forms.

As will be true with his latter works, in *Wet Tomato*, Higgins does not dismantle conventions, but reconstructs them in a slightly sillier way, highlighting the constellation between the mode of production, aesthetic perception, and ultimately, consumption. What's valuable about *Wet Tomato* is not the sophistication of its execution, pathos, or conceptual agenda, but the way it exemplifies the resemblance between Higgins' comedy and dialectical thinking. Higgins' jokes require his sincere investment in an object to be pushed up to the point of absurdity: what ends up being absurd is the social content at work within the image, rather than the possibility of meaning itself. The joke cannot escape the orbit of its object without exchanging the grounded sociality of his critique for hysteric antinomianism or private psychosis. Without a countervailing commitment to the very conventions it parodies, the comic critique threatens to dismantle everything, up to and including the comedian. As I hope to show in the following section, Higgins seems to know better. It's precisely because of his early immersion in commercial photography that Higgins seeks the comic possibilities of that genre. At each juncture within his work, Higgins commits himself to the search for contradictions internal to received ideas, visual histories and aesthetic conventions that are widely familiar to himself and others.

In this way, Higgins's practice consistently demonstrates a consciousness of genre. Genre consists of a diverse assembly of social, historical and aesthetic conventions that coordinate the

production of artworks with their reception. Because genre refers to a set of norms that are (more or less) stable without being static, the concept has been subject to systemic misunderstanding. In his “Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature,” Hans Robert Jauss explains that critics have mistaken genres as “rules” that determine the qualities of all those works that belong to it as their particular “instances.” (80). Rather than a synchronic system of mutually exclusive categories, genre is a diachronic flow in which historically related groups or families subsist through change. Because genres are historically rather than logically constituted, artworks *opt into* a relationship to them by integrating some constellation their constitutive features. The range of possible features are legion, depending on what aesthetic practices have sedimented in and around a given genre. Regardless of their profusion, in his *Living Genres in Late Modernity* Charles Kronengold argues that these features “make you care” about innumerable aesthetic choices that constitute an artwork (1). These features consist of distinctions (tomatoes not apples, ladders that are leased for free rather than borrowed, glitter not oil paint) by which artists individuate their artwork from what came before. By contrast, these distinctions are also acts of passionate citation (up to and including acts of refusal, negation, disavowal of one artist or tradition by another) by which a common but contested set of genre conventions are reconstituted as the living history of aesthetic practice. Kronengold enumerates an enormous range of genre features that “matter,” that is, describe how a work creates value by signaling how it self-consciously participates in its context. These features include: production practices, conceptual gestures, formal principles, choices of theme or subject, traditions, technologies, modes of dissemination and consumption (21-23). For example, certain genres like landscape painting may be constituted as much by a mode of presentation (desolate, sublime, serene), preferred medium (oil or watercolor), or by a constitutive set of conceptual problems that relates what appears to a longer history of imperial domination. This sets us up to understand Jauss’ most crucial point about the specific kind of classification appropriate to genres. Because genres are

historical families rather than categorical, they can only appear coherently by being *exemplified* by particular artworks (80). Genres become intelligible, coherent, actual, when given concrete form by the works that inherit and modify them.

Rather than fearing that the genericity of Higgins' work might compromise the singularity of his vision, it's worth pausing to refuse this either/or outright. In genre, I argue that Higgins finds the condition of comic possibility for his work, namely, by relating the individual act of creation to the living history on which it depends and, in recognizing that fact, finds its freedom.

II. *Impressions, Indexes and other Jokes*

Before proceeding with our analysis of *Impressions*, it's important to preface our discussion with an analysis of Higgins' theory of formal and semiotic play as outlined in his essay, "The Art of the Pun." Borrowing an example from Flobots song, "101101010010100," Higgins offers the line, "I spider 'cuz she's fly" as representative of the linguistic *frisson* created by the arrangement of overlapping yet contrastive meanings. Taking erotic notice of a lover ("I spied her") is set off against the self-consciously predatory nature of sexual pursuit (conjured in the relationship between spider and fly). This example also works negatively by bordering on cliché, which Higgins defines in contrast to healthy pun (Higgins 2022). The cliché consists of the same sort of linguistic overlap, albeit one where the shocking or humor contrast has been worn away by excessive use. When fresh, by contrast, the pun activates a set of imminent yet untapped interpretive possibilities, one that registers for the listener as a kind of secular revelation of what was latent but invisible. For punning to be a reliable mode of critique, Higgins requires a symbolic structure (in the semiotic sense, e.g. linguistic, musical or pictorial) robust enough to aggregate a set of contradictory significations near approximately commensurable terms. Under this rubric, Higgins argues that art objects are capable of the same kind of formal play as the pun. The difference lies in the way the form of the art object

brokers an ironic relation between elements within that art object which would otherwise rest as unquestioned or given. He writes, "...puns may be used to structure artworks dialectically, such that a work made in the present may echo the past, but in the self-aware and self-evident ways prescribed by the pun." (Higgins 2022). When approaching Higgins' work, the difficulty involves distinguishing not only the terms he puns upon but also *how* he sets them at odds with one another. As with the aforementioned line from Flobots, the meaning of a pun has everything to do with which interpretation generates a standard, and which interpretation subverts that standard.

The following discussion of *Impressions* consists of my attempt to take Higgins seriously when he proposes a dialectical dynamic internal to the structure of artworks. By dialectical, I take Higgins to mean that any proposition is realized only through the transformative encounter with the logical instability internal to it. Thus, the task is as follows: to distinguish how Higgins "goes along with" specific aesthetic practices from the contradictions they become embroiled in. Higgin's critique consists of this second part. To do so, I've broken up the analysis into three analytic "moments," each governed by a different definition of the series' title: *Impressions*. The language of "moments" contributes to a sense that the *Impressions* provoke interpretations that emerge in succession. While this conceit may seem like a contrivance, the definitions (and the disjunctures between them) help organize the interpretive contradictions that structure the work from within.

- a. *impression* – a mark made on the surface of something by pressing an object onto it¹. —ORIGIN *Old French empresseur 'to press in'*²

Looking at *Beller*, the first of the *Impressions* which we'll discuss, the original ladder's vibrant primary colors seem to have been filtered through a slick-wavering surface (Appendix 2). The viewer is left with the feeling of having interrupted the act of seeing in the process of getting *stuck* to its

¹ "impression, N. (C)" *Cambridge Dictionary*. Online.

² "impression, N. (5)." *Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 2008, Print.

object. With the lights flicked on, vision and its object hastily try to pull themselves from out of undress, though not before the viewer has seen the definiteness of visual experience in the jelly-like moments prior to clarity. Where with impressionism in the nineteenth-century, painters like Monet sought to paint those aspects of vision which run roughshod over the neat conceptual distinctions between atmosphere and object, Higgins' ladders freeze dry the object in a state somewhere between an unrecognized mass and an identifiable thing.

At first, what seems to be at issue in Higgins' *Impressions* is the visual lining by which we as viewers are related to the world across a visual plane that admits of no distinction between what is seen and who is seeing it. In its immediacy, vision has its riches before it in a bounty that stretches from 'here' to the horizon line. These considerations count less for abstract proclamations than cues about the issues which Higgins aims to raise by dubbing his ladders, "impressions." According to the Compact Oxford English Dictionary, the word "impression" derives from the old French, "*empreser*" meaning to "press in." The Cambridge endorses a similar meaning, "impression *noun*, a mark made on the surface of something by pressing an object into it." But already such examples of "pressing in" seduce one into imagining a moment where one object forms and another object is formed—to think it so would mean overlooking the reciprocity of the gesture being described. The act of impressing requires that the mold-receiving substance presses into the mold as much as the mold is pressed into and altered by the object. The impression is what remains of a kiss, it is one half of a form imparted and received. Just as the eye is joined to its object across a space that impresses itself on the perceiver, the "impression" refers equally to a zone of indeterminate continuity that connects objects across from other objects in a state of intimate relationality. The absence of any rigorous distinction between orders of what is being related (eye and world, mold and substance, self and other) is a symptom of this desire to de-legislate the subject and object of an action. This analytic moment is governed by the word "*empreser*," a word that denotes little more

than the image of one substance pressing into another, but which attains the status of a concept in Higgins' *Impressions*. This concept consists of a mutual reciprocal relationship in which both parties are implicated and transformed. Rather than challenging the sensuous immediacy of this image, the silicone ladders embrace it.

Once noticed, the reciprocity of impression-making appears to permeate each stage of Higgins' fabrication process. Because each silicone ladder requires an aluminum or fiberglass original, Higgins has recast that necessity into a social process of exchange. Rather than borrow each ladder, Higgins formalized this short term exchanged into a ladder cleaning service dubbed "Dakota Higgins Ladder Laundering Company" (DHLCC for short) (Appendix 1). In this way, the social bond created by the necessity of exchange becomes productive of another series of *institutional* impressions, complete with a legitimate LLC and fee-for-service contract between himself and the various lessees. Rather than enforcing an asymmetrical set of requirements upon the relationship between Higgins and his friends, the social form of the institution allowed Higgins to structure the terms of their reciprocity. One of the bi-lines in the contract allows the lessor of the original ladder, Higgins' friend, to claim a flat-rate percentage of the royalties gleaned from the sale of the silicone ladders (i.e. "biproducts of the cleaning process") (Appendix 4). These contracts were then affixed to the bottom corner of the drop-cloths used during the production process. In the version of the contract screen-printed onto the *Beller* drop-cloth, the pair agreed to a 0% reimbursement rate within four-weeks of the sale (Appendix 4). Rather than governing the exchange of unequal goods or services, the contract-form binds both artists to the promise and performance of exchanging nothing. It's not enough that Higgins borrow the ladders informally, allowing them to serve as the archive of their own creation, instead the contract-form *reciprocates*. Abstracted from the trade in ladders, the process of impression-making does not compensate for a debt, negative, or absence

with payment, but becomes productive of new forms of relating. It's the desire to certify, extend, elaborate the bond between friends and peers that is here gratified.

Turning to the production process itself, the ladders at the center of this second series were created by lacquering the A-frame originals with successive coats of silicone before stripping off the silicone skin —along with bits of old adhesive, dried paint, and the original warning labels. The presence of this debris provides Higgins with the pretext that this process qualifies as a “ladder cleaning service.” While the metal ladders take up the position of “mold,” they equally serve as the passive substance into which the silicone is pressed, its cracks and crevices becoming permeated by the silicone in the same moment that they impart the silicone with form. For proof of this reciprocity, the viewer will have to crane their neck to peek under each step to see how the anti-slip grooves laid the ground for silicone mountains and valleys in the new ladders. Beyond the fabrication process, this reciprocity pertains also to the intimate relationality that links perceiver and perceived, mind and world, viewer and ladder.

Both in terms of its central conceit (“*empresser*”) and in its troubling of the concern for the sensuous as a bridge between mind and world, Higgins’ second series evokes Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished fragment, “The Intertwining— The Chiasm.” Published after his death in 1959, the extant fragment asserts that in vision we relate ourselves to Being, to the whole of what exists. In seeing “the flesh of the visible,” the viewer learns that space is not an empty thing but an indeterminate something, partly sensual and partly thingly, that joins body and world in a mutual relation to one another, “It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication.” (135-136). If space has a thickness, that thickness is consubstantial with the thickness of the viewer’s embodied form; the irreducible *thereness* of a being pressed up against

another being. While we will never apprehend the substance common to it and to the world, namely Being itself, in the flesh of the visible, we apprehend “a prototype of Being, of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant, but whose constitutive paradox already lies in every visible.” (ibid). For Merleau-Ponty, the paradox lies in the capacity of individual beings to detect the whole of Being as the absent condition by which individual beings appear to us as themselves. So, when we look at things, we do not situate ourselves across a distance from that which we look at, but rather, we use our “own being as a means to participate in theirs...” (137).

The ladders commemorate the condition of being-with, whether that with-ness links one authentically to the world or to those from whom Higgins drew inspiration and companionship. Because “Being” serves as the condition of our common existence, we as viewers are embraced by the ladders in a relation of immediate co-presence. Sans interruption, the viewer settles into seeing *seeing*, or what is the same thing, to seeing the infinite diversity of objects that must be out there.

Although Higgins’ silicone ladders are at first presented under the aegis of *Impressions* without negatives, this notion of absolute reciprocity only gets us so far. The faculty of vision and the visibly appearing object are given independent existence in the silicone ladders, one that forces the viewer to confront the seamless unity of vision *as if from outside it*. While in and of itself, this does not violate the immediate continuity of perceptual experience, the silicon ladders appear like skin tags on the flesh of the visible, vestigial excesses that work to direct the viewer’s attention to their own, one-sided befuddlement. In the very effort to reproduce what is immediate about visual experience in the silicone ladders, Higgins forces the viewer to confront the continuity between viewer and viewed as an alien entity, one that confronts the viewer from outside first-personal perception. While fostering a set of interpretations that gratify and expand the range of possible connections between artist, substance, and making, Higgins endeavors equally disrupt the continuity

of visual experience with the world. At the heart of the visible, the old distinction re-emerges between the seer and the seen, re-generating the antinomy between the voyeur and exhibitionist, activity and passivity, subject and object.

b. *“Impression³” – The way that something seems, looks, or feels to a particular person.*

While, in themselves, the ladder-forms appear as slivers shaved from the visual plane, once that plane has broken up into distinct positions, the forms re-appear as the fragile remainder of that violent process. This second sense of “impression,” that which connotes how something appeared to a *particular* person, collects a whole range of discourses that condemn vision as the faculty most associated with masculinist voyeurism, a sense of ethical remove, and power enforced over space. With the second sense of “impression” Higgins activates a set of critiques of the power relations internal to the situation of looking in general and photography in specific. In describing his own work, Higgins remarked that he, perhaps unwittingly, “painted a sculpture a photographer might make” (D. Higgins, personal communication, Nov 11, 2023). Unpacking the incredible richness of this joke requires us to understand the centrality of photography and photographic criticism to Higgins’ *Impressions*, where he pursues the idea of the photographic impression into sculpture and painting.

Normally, when producing a film photograph, light emanating from the intended object is briefly admitted through the camera’s aperture, burning away a determinate shape on a plate coated with a volatile substance and generating the photographic negative. From the inception of photography, there has been an immense struggle to arrive at adequate terms for the photographic negative, with early photographers and critics reaching for sculptural terms in order to authenticate the visual and evidentiary status of the photograph as an trace or index of the object it depicts. In

³ “impression, N. (2).” *Cambridge Dictionary*. Online.

his essay, "Roman Death Masks and the Metaphorics of the Negative," Patrick Crowley recounts how, at the end of the nineteenth century, French construction workers stumbled upon a Roman grave that contained molds made of the faces of those buried there (66). Casting the molds with plaster in order to create "positive" versions of the recovered molds, scholars at the time reached for the photographic language of "positive" and "negative." (66-68). The sculptural mold, the *volumetric inverse* of the face of the deceased, became equated with the photographic negative, the *tonal reverse* of the object. Thus, the explanation of sculpture in photographic terms in the nineteenth century created a precedent for the reverse, namely, the sculptural explanation of photography in the twentieth century.

In the 1947 essay that unintentionally laid the foundation for the late-twentieth century attack on photography, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," André Bazin described the photograph as the sculptural mold or death mask of the original object, "One might consider photography, in this sense as a molding, the taking of an impression, by the manipulation of light." (7). These sculptural terms of his description enable the more famous assertions by Barthes and Sontag about the morbidity of photography, yet all of these accounts rely on a series of fundamentally sculptural metaphors. For each of these critics, light is said to press itself into the reactive plate, forming a two-dimensional image "impression." Strictly speaking, however, the photographic negative lacks the volume required to retain the concave trace of a body pressed into it. The photograph negative reproduces only the details that can be flattened onto a two-dimensional plane.

In *Impressions*, Higgins realizes the sculptural metaphor at the heart of photography by producing a voluminous impression of an original object, albeit one that concretely takes the substance of the object into itself. But in order to realize this photographic aspiration, Higgins' must

first transpose the gesture at the heart of photography into a distinct medium, preserving that gesture not as a material practice but a principle of making in organization. That is, the physical constraints imposed by the camera and its social situation are translated into aesthetic principles, conventions by which Higgins remains conversational with photography and its history, while transforming what is determinate in the former into what is elected in the latter. Put another way, Higgins' ladders *participate in photography as a genre but not as a medium*.

Having established Higgins' interest in photography as a history, a set of aesthetic principles, and ultimately, a set of conceptual contradictions, we're now in a position to understand Higgins' critique of this version of the impression. This second sense of "impression" connotes how something appears to a *particular* person. When someone says, "I had the impression that..." the speaker proposes something about the world only to quickly qualify that proposition by restraining its connection to an incomplete, hopelessly particular perception of that thing⁴. The Cambridge Dictionary has it as, "to think that something is true, especially when it is not⁵." This kind of statement also creates a precedent. Speakers may continue to make claims about the world by tacit agreement that those claims refer to their own, ultimately private, experience of the object. The object in-itself is kept back, pushed away as something we encounter obscurely. But rather than block our access or consideration of the object, this limit causes a proliferation of accounts that claim to negate everything subjective in our account in favor of what is "more-than" human. In the following discussion, we'll begin by looking at how Higgins uses his silicone ladders to perform a critique of these one-sided positions by, paradoxically, attempting to provoke and gratify them.

In looking at *Shin*, for example, the viewer cannot escape the feeling that Higgins has flayed

⁴ This moment of the analysis assumes that subject and object are incommensurate categories. Having divided the field of analysis into subject and object, any analysis of the object must be made from the subjective side of the division. But then, the subjective side breaks up into another, this time internal division. On the one side, there is the analysis of the symbolic, social or psychic ways the subject is given to make sense of object. On the other side, there is the analysis of the empirical or phenomenological description of the object as it appears to the subject.

⁵ "impression, N. (B2)" *Cambridge Dictionary*. Online.

the object and left it out to dry (Appendix 5). Hanging there, bolted to the wall, the now lifeless form of the ladder exerts no more resistance to the passive inspection of the viewer. Where once the brackets joined each rib into a dependable series of steps, they now indulge the impulse to curl into ribbons. Outside these rubber ribs, the spreaders that kept the ladder ready to expand and retract, scissor-like, have gone slack. To riff momentarily with the metaphysicians of yore, one could say that the attribute of extension (i.e. the quality of taking up space) has become enfeebled. To parse a few lines from the *Ethics*, Spinoza defines finite substances what 1. extends and 2. enforces a limit on the extension of another substance of the same attribute (3). In *Impressions*, Higgins' ladders are made to appear as if they have lost the strength to exert or endure their own force. Relieved from the burden of holding upright, the ladder must be mounted above the earth so as not to cause itself further injury. Taken as a series, the ladders hang like skins from the rafters of a hunter's cabin.

In the history of art criticism, one does not have to look very hard to find a rendition of this visuality-as-power-argument. For the purposes of simplicity, we might take Susan Sontag's argument in *On Photography* as paradigmatic. There, Sontag includes classic zingers such as, "To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time." (14-15). Sontag describes the inequality between photographer, photograph, and photographed in such a way that the theoretical niceties of the medium are exhausted by the ethical situation it engenders for the viewing subject. It's this range of critiques that Higgins strives to incarnate by fabricating objects that interpolate the viewer into a situation of visual sadism.

Unfortunately, critique of power relations internal to the situation of looking remains impossible to realize in any lasting way. In Sontag's critique, to take a photograph is to divide the object from itself, immortalizing it only as it appeared from one particular vantage, as it appeared to one particular viewer. Neither can the viewer escape the position from which they see the object, nor can the object make itself appear to others in a way that reveals it fully. Unable to envision the possibility of a universal or de-situated perspective, the critique of the particularity of looking leads critics like Sontag to universalize that particularity, along with its constitutive ethical asymmetry. By consequence, the viewer finds themselves under the obligation to relate to perception as a violent subjectivism that must be perpetually renounced but can never be surpassed. Two contradictions emerge from this critique. First, Sontag regenerates the objectivity of looking as the determinate other of the permanent subjectivism she cannot abolish. The consequences of this first contradiction will be addressed more fully in the following discussion of photographic objectivity. Second, Sontag unwittingly testifies to the way subjectivity thrives on its own renunciation. By critiquing the particularity of looking, its one-sidedness and asymmetrical power relations, Sontag misses the way subjective desire, rather than being stymied by the confrontation with its limits, *thrives on them*. By launching a moral critique of power against desire, which she conceives as a problem to be improved or eliminated, Sontag invites her readers into a posture of infinite critique, one that aggravates the problem it set out to solve. With *Impressions*, Higgins demonstrates how the critique of subjective particularity *on behalf of subjective particularity*, opposes itself to itself in a way that prevents it from noticing anything but itself. Frustrated with its desire but unable to abolish it through abstract moral self-critique, the *Impressions* lead its viewer to what seems like an impasse.

Having foundered on the critique of power, let's turn our eyes back to the erotic aspects of *Shin* (Appendix 5). Having gone soft, the ladders give themselves over to the viewer's approach. Around the ladder's midriff, viewers cannot help but espy the tender under-side of the pail-shelf, the

shelf that usually juts out below the apex of the device when erect. As the name implies, this little shelf is meant to support a pail of liquid (often paint). Or, as with each ladder's head, the pail-shelf is also endowed with orifices where the user can leave their handled tools in easy reach. In *Shin*, Higgins seems to have soft-boiled the rough and tumble features of the ladder form until supple. Where before it flagged, the pail-shelf sags, the blue of its lid bleeding through the central hollow. *Disgusting!* This situation is equally comic as violent. Imagine if *Shin*'s original ladder waddled into a changing room at a public pool. Closing the door behind it, one might see Higgins's replica being draped over the stall door moments before its noumena appears clad in a red speedo. Higgins' layer of silicone skin is what remains when one imaginatively subtracts the object's appearance from its ineffable substance. In viewing the ladders up close, it's almost as if all that remains is the purely visual dimension of an object's surface area, or the sensuous clothing that the object simultaneously wears and is. The veil between existing and appearing has never been so scandalously *sheer*. One touch, one misplaced sigh or glance would surely cleave an opening between them. And yet, the very temptation to do so betrays the desire to see "behind" seeing, or to see behind that which has no back. It's in this sense that vision struggles to interrupt its own continuity, to achieve some kind of certainty about where it ends and begins, without any luck.

In this second glimpse of *Impressions*, Higgins strips the skin from the flesh of the visible, in order to evoke horror and excitement at the one-sidedness of that which appears without integrity of its own. But this critique of scopophilia and visual sadism does not amount to an exhaustive account of vision's particularity in this analytic moment. Rather, the sculpture-as-photograph gives free reign to the viewer's sadistic impulses precisely because it gratifies the desire to capture the object "in itself." Thus, the critique of the particularity of vision not only touches on the ways it breaks up into a set of particular relations, but also how photography allows the viewer to bridge the for-itself of perception with the in-itself of the object. Translated into semiotic terms, the

photograph is not just prop for fundamental antagonisms but, in and of itself, the photograph seems to retain something irreducibly concrete about the objects whose impression it records.

With these observations about the literacy of *Impressions* in their own media history, let's turn back to the photographic impression at their center. In this second sense of impression, that is, "The way that something seems, looks, or feels to a particular person," the reciprocity between that which impresses and what is impressed is precisely what's missing. In the first half of our discussion of this dimension of the impression, we discussed how Higgin's plays with the subjective particularity of the photographic situation. What remains to discuss is the particularity of objects, that is, the range of interpretations that play upon the viewer's isolation from, or misreading of, the object-world. In this sense, the contemporary tendency in the art world to concentrate *either* upon the social construction of photography *or* the autonomous production of material or "ontological" traces constitutes a failure to grasp the divided unity of these historical phenomenon.

In the break-up of the immediate reciprocity between original and copy, mold and duplicate, the subjectivist account of photography divides the photographer and the photo from the original subject, which floats beyond it as the lost object or "thing-in-itself." In this moment of the analysis, the original ladder takes up the position of the original. The language of the "original" requires justification. In this style of analysis, the original is figured as something singular, absolutely impossible to compare or to subsume under any existing category. At the same time, the singularity of the original is taken as a generalizable fact about objects in general, such that the "original" really becomes a particular instance of the universal singularity of each and every object. To expect "singularity" to emerge as a rule forces the concept into contradiction with itself, revealing it as a category or universal that wishes to transcend its status as such. As copies of these "originals," the silicone ladders are imbued with a sentimental pathos on account of their exile from this world of

objects-in-themselves. On the one hand, the silicone ladders offer a glimpse of their original objects and their living contexts. On the other hand, as with the act of taking a photo, the act of fabricating the ladders constitutes a primordial violence that ejects them from the world to which they remain linked as material traces. Higgins acknowledged as much in referring to the silicone ladders as “biproducts of the cleaning process.” In the previous moment, we discussed the ways the LLC facilitated a formal process of social reciprocity between himself and his peers, the contract’s language formalizes the hierarchy between the original and the “biproduct,” the latter serving to commemorate the exchange that led its production. As a monument to an event that has already occurred, silicone ladders are material products of lost or elapsed connection *and* participate in the creation of that loss. In this way, the materiality of the silicone ladders serves as a prop or fetish that allows them to fulfill the social function of the photograph.

Rather than mourn the loss engendered by the photograph, Higgins struggles to transform it, turning the production of the ladders into a self-multiplying collection of traces. For each silicone ladder he fabricated, beneath it, Higgins also laid a drop cloth. Along with the ladders, the drop-cloths serve as an additional medium into which Higgins pursues the photographic impression. The piece titled *DHLLC Leasing Contract (Beller)* is not only a copy of a binding document, but the canvas on which the ladder of the same name was fabricated (Appendix 3). Looking it over, the viewer can still discern the impressions left in silicone by the splayed legs of the original. In between its footprints, a square grid of black and white dappled paint has formed where run-off dripped from the edges of each step above it. Indeed, the canvas better fulfills the “negative” sense of the photographic impression, indicating the empty spaces where paint passed through unimpeded and giving the viewer to enjoy the suggestive partiality of what remains. Cloudy splotches of blue and gray have condensed into numerous palm sized puddles. At odd intervals, colored halos divulge the places where paint cans came to rest. In the bottom right corner, the contract has been printed on

top of the cast away paint (Appendix 3 & 4). No effort has been made to prioritize its presence on the cloth over the other impressions. Rather than guaranteeing the presence of the original ladder, the contract certifies that the other impressions on its surface have an equal right to direct and divert your attention. Rather than subtending the original ladder, its absence allows each trace to play upon and extend the imaginative possibilities that open in its wake. Each trace exists somewhere between the sign and the index, alternatively referring to the material properties of its own substance or directing the viewer to something else on the drop cloth, on the silicone ladder, or its original.

While materiality was also active in the previous moment of the analysis, it's here that the concept achieves its concrete realization. Materiality describes not only the being but the "becoming" of materials, it denotes what is lively within objects and what within them is recalcitrant to human interests or understanding. By virtue of their own materiality (perhaps their "silicone-icity") Higgins' ladders can collect what is both non-human and more-than-human from their originals. Materiality names a collection of qualities that, in being noticed, only testify to what within the object can never be seen, described, or understood. But don't the silicone ladders have the same claim to thingliness as their originals? Indeed, while the silicone versions cannot fully reproduce the singularity of their originals, by virtue of their own lively rubberiness, they achieve a level of vitality analogous to their aluminum parents. While appearing to guarantee some connection between the copy and original, material trace and cognitive referent, viewer and original, this analogy testifies to the self-imposed exile of the subject from the world. Thus, the productive roles of copy and original are inverted. The "impression" generates another world, the fantasy of a more essential object world that, in truth, only has its essence and actuality in the copy. This fantasy of the sovereign object, the in-itself, is pernicious precisely because it cannot be falsified. Devotees of this fantasy might be ventriloquized in the following way, "Rest assured dear viewer, the silicone ladders are richer, more complicated objects than you'll ever know! After a midnight tryst with their

originals, they've returned pregnant with mysteries that only the most ascetic among us could even begin to misunderstand. While we may believe we see the ladders, our perception is tragically overdetermined by power relations and sadistic projections; we cannot possibly realize how blind we really are!" Only able to see their own seeing, the subject is doubly blind before the infinite diversity of objects that must be out there. Neither is the subject able to see the object world for what it must be, nor can they determine the exact nature of their error.

In this moment of the particular "impression," the absolute reciprocity of form-giving and form-receiving is broken down into the inequality between the divine mystery of the substance that receives the form and the un-self-consciousness of the artist, through a combination of blindness and insight, gradually reveals the mystery of the material. In this account, Being gradually discloses itself through the artist's contact with the materials used in their practice. In the self-serious sense of the "impression," the authority of the silicone ladder stems from its proximity not only to the dust of the artist's studio, but also to scene of creation itself. Like the implicit God of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, the artist's creation is not *ex nihilo*, but consists of the emergent, creative properties of matter in flux. From the initial silence of the object, it's the artist who eventually becomes mute before the divinity imminent within paint, clay, or film.

In this second moment of the *Impressions*, Higgins seems to invite viewers to worship objects as things that live on our behalf. On closer inspection, however, the ladders are revealed not to be religious idols but parodic objects. The goal of this parody is not to humiliate the passion for objects, but to critique the ways that frustration with the subjectivism of critique leads artists, thinkers, and scholars imagine and invest disproportionate faith in the object-world by conceiving of it as beyond contradiction. To take Higgins for a materialist would be a mistake. Saddling up to *Beller*, its carapace does not convey the smooth metallic confidence of the original ladder, but limp and

leathery (Appendix 2). While the surface of the silicon ladders are imbued with bits of label torn from the original ladders, Higgins embellishes the surfaces of the ladder with such warped lettering that one cannot make out the original message.

By splitting what is tragically for-humans from what seems irreproachable because independent of us, the objectivist approach to art making escapes from the particularity of subjectivity only to encounter it, alienated, in its personification of the more-than-human. Rather than encountering what is Other or incongruous in the impression, the silicon ladders become romantic traces of a lost or battered original that cannot be repaired or recovered. In this way, Higgins critiques the logical continuity between the subjectivist critique of photography with the objectivist fantasies about the object-world they glimpse through it. Both overemphasize either subjective *or* objective particularity of the photographic impression, while quarantining its contradictions in the opposing term.

Rather than throw viewers into a world whose authenticity they lack the eyes to see, Higgins' ladders impersonate the values of the photographic impression. They *feign* access to the imagined object world, one whose richness is imagined to be the direct inverse of the banality of our own. Whether by offering us a recital of the voyeuristic relationship between photographer and photographed or presenting the silicone ladders as impressions exiled in the act of creation, Higgins mediates the signature dynamics of photography through sculpture. Once its signature gestures have reappeared in Higgins' sculptures, it is no longer possible to ground photography's ontological pretense in the camera's social function or in the materiality of its apparatus. Nor must the viewer remain satisfied with the antinomy between absolute subjectivity or absolute objectivity in which the art world has been so mired. Once more, the pun on *Impressions* is illuminated. Higgins "gives an impression of" or *gives us a caricature of* the process of making impressions (whether reciprocal and

particular). The full picture of this pun not only introduces our final analytic moment, but it shows us the contradiction at the center of Higgins' practice. He commits himself to aesthetic practices premised on fidelity toward an object or convention *and* uses that commitment to find the comic element in the desires, gestures and ideas that underwrite those practices.

c. impression – an attempt at copying another person's manner and speech, etc., especially in order to make people laugh⁶

Before embarking on the last analytical moment of Higgins' second series, it's worth defining what is meant by the comic impression. This is the sense people mean when they warn you, "Michael's doing his best impression of Alan Rickman from *Die Hard*." The impression is funny to the extent to which it exaggerates some aspect of the original (in this case, the desire for indexicality) and uncanny or disorienting. Something qualifies as "alien" or alienated" when one encounters its signal feature as dislocated from the object it usually adheres to. This final analytic moment plays upon the tension between the familiar and the uncanny, the earnest and the caricatural, the tragic and the comic. These antinomies do not involve the ladders are external props but are *internal* to them. In the previous analytic moments, the subjective and the objective aspects of the ladder were dissociated into two opposing extremes. Here, by contrast, the ladders have re-emerged through humor as a contradiction that is both internal to their form and to their relationship with equally contradictory characters such as the artist and the viewer. To distinguish this moment of the *Impressions*, from the other definition enumerated so far, I call this moment "earnest caricature." Despite the tendency of certain forms of humor to attack the very infrastructure of shared reference, earnest caricature in no way detracts from Higgins' interest in the social ramifications of his artwork. Rather, the earnest caricature remains a variety of impression,

⁶ "impression, N. (Copy)" *Cambridge Dictionary*. Online.

albeit one that retreats from the earlier interest in the trace in order to crack jokes about the social production of artworks. Having already given his best impression of dominant paradigms in the artworld, Higgins corrects his focus, shifting our attention to labor, alienation, and the comedy of the struggle to create; as will become clear, each ladder is the emblem of the last term.

What do I mean by emblem? As emblems, the ladders are not a private expression of exhaustion, but reflective of a more general condition, one that describes how the desire to make is pulled down by the toll of that desire. This shared state of duress directs us away from earlier attempts to read each ladder as a copy of some singular object, pointing instead toward a unifying quality common to each of them. Despite the plural in the title *Impressions*, this plurality does not describe a diversity of original ladders but the serialized attempts to register something common to each of them. Each ladder buckles. Each ladder mirrors the dejected regard of its siblings. In *Impression of the Artist's Ladder as a Shadow of its Former Self*, the ladder-form collapses entirely, assuming the appearance of muddy ruts, although these grooves have not been pressed into the earth so much as amassed, melted off an original through the application of repetitive force or intense heat (Appendix 6). What caused this burn-out? The reply can only be inferred from the family resemblance between members of the series, a resemblance that is not only dictated by method but by a common, *expressive* quality.

Although maligned in twentieth century literary and aesthetic criticism, the notion of “expression” is crucial to Higgins’ work in *Impressions*. Expression refers to the translation of disorganized desires and affects into a medium where they assume an intelligible order they might otherwise lack. Critics influenced by post-structuralism and the critique of the subject have attacked expression as an undertheorized cliché, one that assumes the uncomplicated continuity of inner life into an external observable form. On the contrary, I argue that expression is an act of mediation.

Mediation is a creative process of transposition, one that doesn't betray the "original" experience so much as lend its imminent contradictions a new arena in which to confront one another. The "expressive" or "emblematic" character of the silicone ladder does not represent a misleading continuity between inner and outer. Rather, what is emblematic or expressive in Higgins' work is the result of the creative labor of mediation, one that allows the artist to confront their relation to labor from within that relation *and as an alien appearance*, something confronted externally.

The *Impressions* no longer appear like death-masks of their originals but as laughing objects returned through the fog of alienation. Corresponding to this dialectical left-turn, the first sense of "impression" *qua* trace is inverted into another sense of the word: caricature. The flimsy fleshiness of the ladders tends toward such an extreme that they become ridiculous. The ladders re-appear as a comic grotesque or a visual lament of their maker and of making. As possessed objects, cursed and totemic, they recall the commodities from Marx's essay "Estranged Labour," from which any number of passages could function as wall text for the *Impressions*. Take, for instance:

The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien. (emphasis in the original 108)

At the level of content, the ladders "express" what is familiar to everyone that struggles to carve out a living in the culture industry: making art requires one to sell the products of one's creative labor. Because the artist relates to himself as both capitalist and commodity at once, the ladders share in this self-alienation. Higgins' ladders, however, are at once the assertion of this fact and its caricature. Higgins turns the fact of alienation at the center of cultural labor into a joke: the ladders are the

very thing from which they are suffering. Thus, alienation is not just a critique of the political economy of exploitation. Marxian alienation may be the psychic and social content of the ladders, but in Higgins' work, it's also the formal principle that allows the ladders to play on the pathos of that exploitation for laughs. Higgins leverages this first aspect of alienation in order to demonstrate something both more *and* less personal about what it means to create "expressive" work.

As discussed above, if we take artistic labor to consist of mediation, mediation requires an act of self-alienation whereby the tender and the raw, the historical and social absurdity of the artist's life assume material shape through the process of making. In the silicon ladders, Higgins emphasizes the alienation internal to the act of creative mediation. The knowledge gleaned from alienation must need appear as *comic* because the artist can't help but encounter the Otherness internal to their own position as something confronting them from outside. Put another way, alienation is the process by which we appear to ourselves in the comedy of our error. While the world serves as MC in our own perpetual roast, by the same token, we serve as the mediating figure by which others (whether silicon ladders, lovers or perfect strangers) encounter the unacknowledged in their logical posture toward things.

Let's take another look at *Shin* (Appendix 5). Where first the ladder exhibited a pathetic vulnerability to a sadistic viewer, it now seems to be a dynamic internal to the ladder-form itself, a kind of joke played at its own expense. As has been emphasized at various moments in the analysis, the comic finds the absurd without dissolving into it. The absurdity of the silicone ladders is parasitic on their pathos. One can only laugh for so long, before their absurdity sours into frustration with the fruitless labor they represent, turns depressive, when finally, relapsing into a state of catatonic exhaustion, the ladders return as goofy emblems of that exhaustion. As viewers, it is difficult to consider them from both sides of their contradiction at once: the silicone ladders seem *either* like sentimental objects *or* parodies of the struggle to create a self-standing work. But that

contradiction is not less effective for being experienced temporally, as one moment after another. It's this instability of comic self-negation that provides the engine for the conceptual restlessness of the previous analytic moments, but also which undermines any interpretation that does not recognize the primacy of comic contradiction. The ladders are not self-identical entities or artifacts of a coherent world of "Being," otherwise they could not (like their maker) persist in a form that sets them at odds with themselves, in a state of self-antagonism. Yet this antagonism represents an achievement. Over the course of *Impressions*, Higgins provoked, imitated and exercised the temptation to locate the value of artistic labor in 1. the immediate and unproblematic intimacy between artist and world, 2. the morbid fixation upon social abjection or subjective desire, or 3. the wishful fantasy of an object-world free from human limitations and contradictions. Vindicating self-negation as the mode of existence proper to art, our analysis of *Impressions* has endeavored to capture Higgins' struggle to create objects that do not just endure but thrive on comic self-negation.

By way of conclusion, it merits conceding that in my discussion of alienation I've constrained myself to discussing the uncanniness of the ladders, once familiar objects whose return disorients and destabilizes. In this disorientation, the object first proves itself to be the equal of the viewer. Even still, these uncanny aspects of alienation in no way exhaust the philosophical scope of the concept, nor the mystery of the objects in which it plays a central part. Alienation does not just describe the artist's creative act, it also describes what one feels when one bumps up against the negativity proper to the autonomy of a distinct entity. Only by withstanding our attempts to destroy it does the artwork proclaim its autonomy, proving itself as that which requires no protection, but which, through our attempts at its dismantling, teaches us of our ignorance. In this way, the humor essential to *Impressions* preserves the earnest desire for reciprocity articulated in its first analytic moment, at once negated and preserved, in the artistic labor of creative alienation. Having returned, changed but unblemished, through the thousand petty slights to which it is heir, the artwork

proclaims its emancipation from the artist and the critic. It's this miracle that renews the silicone ladders as objects of secular devotion, as one of those *Things Done for Love*.

III. *The Dentless Portraits*

On account of the strenuous dialectical play of the *Impressions*, Higgins' next series, *The Dentless Portraits*, creates the opportunity to explore the conceptual fallout of the previous one. In this series, Higgins repaints presidential portraits in glitter. As with the series of puns that structure the previous series, Higgins clues his viewers into the central conceit through his titles. *The Dentless Portraits* consists of reproductions of the portraits of American presidents without their presidents, hence they are "dentless." The titles of individual works indicate the specific absences that structure each work. To take an example at random, let's consider () (43) (Appendix 9). The first pair of parentheses holds a single space for the missing president, the second pair of parentheses enumerates the presidential number. While the most obvious conceit of *The Dentless Portraits*, the absence that goes unmarked in the titles is the absence of oil painting, the medium in which the overwhelming majority of portraits were consecrated. In *The Dentless Portraits*, Higgins again interrogates the cogency of the concept of medium. Just as Higgins worked to dissociate photography from a material practice into a generic set of socially recognizable questions, principles, and thematic concerns, *The Dentless Portraits* represent the attempt to capture and satirize the signature gestures within the history of oil painting. Higgins uses the history of presidential portraits as the arena for the ongoing *agon* or competition between oil and glitter.

In his rendition of George W. Bush's portrait, () (43), Higgins sieves the law-like shapes into ever finer formations that approximate detail without fully departing from the exact abstractions he achieved in the early entries to the series (Appendix 9). Along the back-wall of the presidential chamber, the gold of the carpet has oxidized into a tarnished path, along which chevrons of green

are channeled through a beaded corridor of blue and white. Above this path, Higgins has domino'd the border of the molding, sealing within each a fine peppering of red and turquoise stars. Conducting the viewer's gaze from right to left, this band of patterning both suggests the juncture between floor and ceiling while, by the same gesture, threatening such a distinction. The carpet abuts the shadowed form of a chair with a royal blue cushion that rhymes with the chair-back that juts up into the foreground. Using a white glitter with great economy, Higgins apes the caramel sheen of varnished maple, using the luster of the highlights to deepen the dusky border of the chair, in effect, generating three-dimensional volume at one place within painting. Thus, the viewer's eyes are forced to recognize the continuity between the curvature of the woodwork and the planarity of the background. Higgins maintains this comparison through strategic gilding. In the lower left corner of the painting, the blue cushion bellies, wearing layer upon layer of scabby gold leaf upon its slightly convex middle, while at its opposite right edge, the golden objects that populate the bookshelf resemble pixelated icons. As a mass-produced product, glitter forces the highlights and shadows into a certain range. Unlike oil, glitter cannot be blended so much as aggregated into a certain ratio of particles, it presses shapes that would otherwise be background details into the foreground. In certain spots the painting flattens into a single scenic plane, like that of a Persian rug. Making little effort to reconcile volume and planarity, () (43) strives to meet the demand for verisimilitude from oil painting —only to disappoint that demand with equal virtuosity in glitter. Higgins' interest is not exclusively in medium, but also in the generic anachronisms that have become so closely associated with oil-painting as to become part of its rhetorical appeal.

In his renditions of the earliest presidential portraits, the absence of the president allows Higgins to investigate the visual language of neoclassicism. In this way, formerly ornamental contrivances pass from mere set dressing into the dominant subjects of the work. For instance, in () (1) (*Rainbow*) Higgins turns Washington's office, a neo-classical nowhere complete with an enclosed

gallery of columns, into an American fantasia (Appendix 7). In the original portrait of George Washington, a crimson curtain billows out through one of the openings in the columned chamber where the president stands, his arm aloft in a gesture of humble entreaty (Appendix 8). Behind him, beyond the edge of the column, a rainbow smiles. Pulling the viewer's eye upwards, the rainbows' yellow-gold bands relieve the curtain of its primary burden: balancing the distribution of shadows. For carmine rivulet, the curtain folds another, duskier red into its crook. The crimson of the curtain blends with the velvet chair at Washington's rear and finds its completion in the red tablecloth, which, parting, discloses the gilded finery carved into its support: the bald eagle, icon of the young nation. With Washington removed, the visual language of presidential *dignitas* is transfigured. The stable saturation prized in oil paint becomes feverish in glitter. All that was solid turns viscous and crusts over. Formerly concealed behind the president, the column at Washington's back is revealed to have a salt flat for a plinth. Heavier still, the velvet tablecloth that carved the painting has begun to crumple under its own molten weight. All around its base, the floral pattern of the rug has liquified into sticky droplets of ruby and sapphire.

These changes of state (physical, painterly, or presidential) owe their magnetism not merely to the absorptive properties of Elmer's Glue, but also to the elastic properties of genre. Where in the previous series, genre operated as a historical alternative to pseudo-concrete notion of "medium," here genre serves as a vehicle for Higgins to explore continuity between social and aesthetic modes of expectation. In *() (1) (Rainbow)*, the viewer encounters a piece that is too dazzling to have passed out of memory, but whose striking familiarity does not amount at first to recognition. All too ready to sink back into sparkly luxury one recalls but cannot place, the viewer is invited to enjoy seeing without thinking. By reproducing all the trappings of a familiar genre (the neoclassical portrait) without its subject, Higgins interpolates viewers into an expectative posture without disclosing the precise convention that commands their attention. Thus, *The Dentless Portraits*

reproaches the obscurantist preference in figurative painting for allegory as a mode of social critique. No need for phatic allusions that whisper, “Is this thing on?” “Are you laughing yet?” to pretend cognoscenti. Rather, *() (1) (Rainbow)* becomes conversational with its audience before calling attention to the genre upon which that familiarity rests.

As with the transition from the first moment of the *Impressions* to the second, the very immediacy of *The Dentless Portraits* leads the viewer to question the experience of sensuous intoxication from within, leading their attention from what appears to the mediated, historical conditions of its appearing. For Higgins, the portrait genre is the mediating term by which the viewer relates their pleasure in glittery decadence to the historical structures (nationhood, state power, patriarchy) that provide the non-sensuous ground for that experience. Neither is this gesture is something new in the art world, nor in the history of the critique of ideology, nor still in the cultural history of American protestant. Few feel they need to be warned that “seeing is believing,” and thus deceptive. Certain of our perspicacity, the skeptical performance of this critique fails on two accounts: 1. because the ideological lure (here represented by the visual ecstasy of these pieces) is rarely voluptuous enough to induce any real sense of cognitive dissonance in the viewer, or 2. because the “truth” is considered to be the reality lying behind or beyond the sensuous.

For when the viewer, gathering up their intellectual bearings, deduces the missing president and from the residual details by which the original painter thought to dignify them, the beauty of *The Dentless Portraits* does not disappear. Rather, in restoring the glamor to these generically overdetermined images, Higgins also restores our capacity to perceive the temptation to give into their ideological appeal *as a temptation*. In our previous discussion of Higgins’ early saturation in mass culture and the utopian impulse born within it, I argued that Higgins remains alert to the way cultural or aesthetic objects always address the viewer at the level of the unconscious through a fantasy, wish, or desire. If readers recall Kronengold’s assertion that genres “make us care” about

aesthetic details, Higgins recasts Kronengold's point in a way that is at once more and less suspicious (1). Using the viewer's own perspective against them, Higgins demonstrates that genres show us what to want and how to want it. By removing the libidinal target towards which genres show us to reach, we come back to ourselves in the reaching. The ecstatic beauty of the glitter paintings appeals to viewers in a way that forces them to experience that desirous content of ideological appeals from the first person. It cannot be understood as a deception unless, in being deceived, we recognize why it is that we desire deception. By revarnishing the sensuous appeal of the presidential portraits, Higgins reminds us that the truth of ideology can only be reconstructed by imaging why one might want to accept the cluster of nationalistic desires on offer; only at that point does critique become possible through an act of memory. By recalling the genre of the piece, we recognize the term that relates us to the desires which are generic in each piece, but also to the history of those desires. Through *The Dentless Portraits*, Higgins reminds us that, rather than reenact that history as our present, we can choose to remember it —along with the names of our most hated presidents.

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Appendix

1. *Wet Tomato*
2. *Beller*
3. *Beller – Drop Cloth*
4. *Beller – Drop Cloth - Detail*
5. *Shin*
6. *Impression of the Artist's Ladder as a Shadow of its Former Self*
7. *() (1) (Rainbow)*
8. *Washington's Presidential Portrait*
9. *() (43)*
10. *George Bush's Presidential Portrait*



1. Higgins, Dakota. *Wet Tomato*. 2018.
<https://macclippard.tumblr.com/post/177560214088/wet-tomato>



2. Higgins, Dakota. *Beller*. 2022, Private collection.



3. Higgins, Dakota. *DHLLC Leasing Contract (Beller)*. 2022, Private Collection.

DHLLC
EQUIPMENT RENTAL AGREEMENT

Hello! Thank you for considering the services of Dakota Higgins' Ladder Laundering Company ("DHLLC"), where we support the tool most responsible for supporting you! This contract will outline the terms and conditions of our rental agreement, in which you ("Lessor") will loan your Ladder ("Ladder") to DHLLC ("Lessee") for the purpose of its cleaning. We hope you enjoy our services, and to see you again soon!

- I. Lessor (Last, First: Beller, Ed) agrees to loan their Ladder to Lessee (DHLLC) for a period of 2 weeks (to be renegotiated after 1 [one] week's time) for a total sum of \$0.00 (zero dollars and zero cents).
- II. DHLLC agrees to clean Lessor's Ladder within the above agreed-upon allotted time by subjecting it to DHLLC's unique cleaning process, whereby excess dirt and grime (etc.) will be removed from the surface of Lessor's Ladder without negatively impacting the form or function of Lessor's Ladder, or Lessor's money back.
- III. Upon the sale ("Sale") of any byproducts resulting from DHLLC's unique cleaning process, DHLLC agrees to reimburse Lessor for their lease of Ladder by a rate of 0% (not to exceed 10%) of the gross receipts of Sale received by DHLLC, within 4 (four) weeks of receipt by DHLLC.
- IV. In the event of its loss, theft, or destruction, DHLLC guarantees to replace Lessor's Ladder with a Ladder of equal or greater value.
- V. DHLLC agrees to service Lessor for FREE (that is, for a rate of zero dollars and zero cents) and guarantees a happy ending.*

Lessor's Signature: _____ Date: 5/11/23

Print Name: Edward Beller

Lessee's Signature: _____ Date: 5/12/23

Print Name: Dakota Higgins

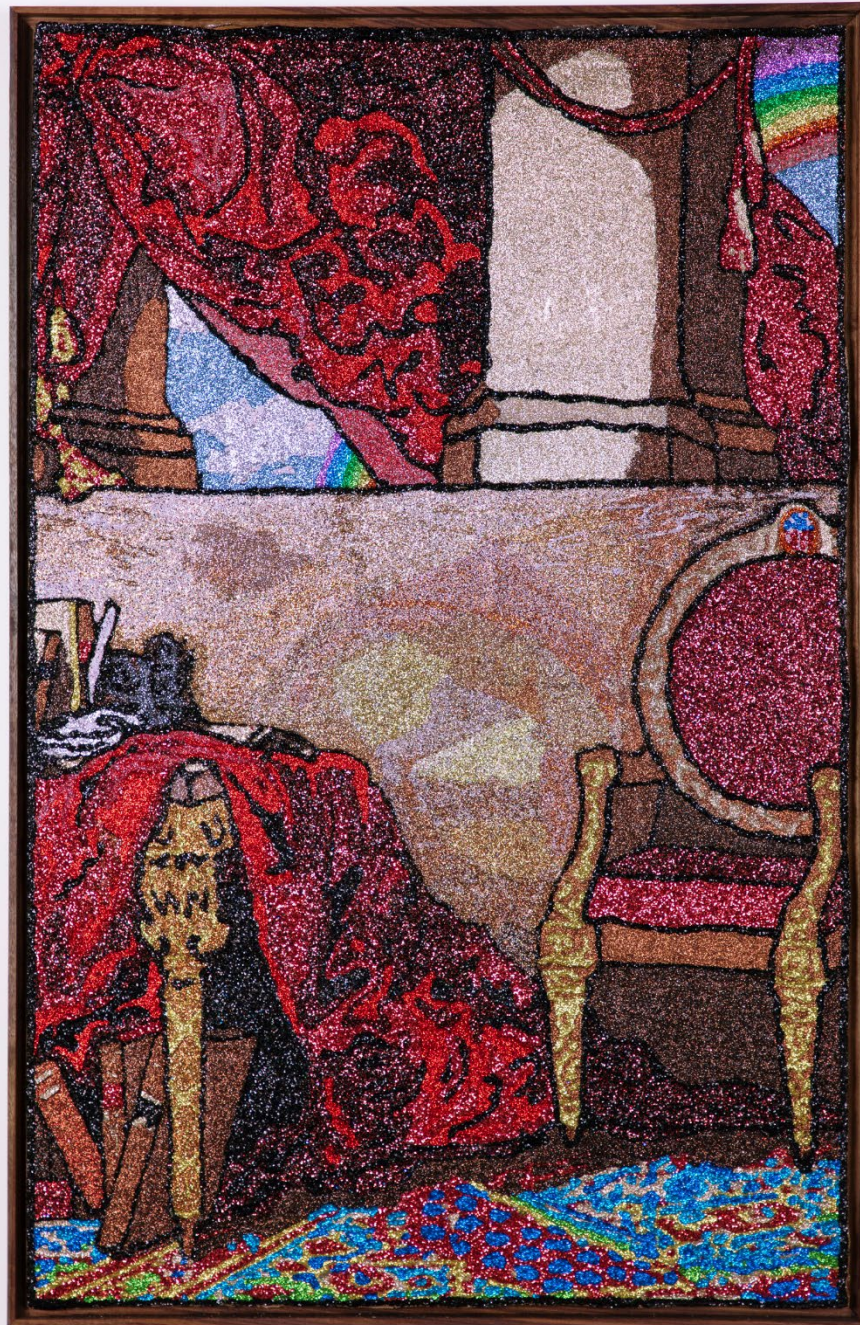
*Disclaimer: DHLLC waives responsibility for the well-being (emotional or otherwise) of Lessor, though will work within reason and to the best of its abilities to make good on the promises set forth by this contract.



5. Higgins, Dakota. *Shin*. 2022, Private Collection.



6. Higgins, Dakota. *Impression of the Artist's Ladder as a Shadow of its Former Self*. 2022, Private Collection.



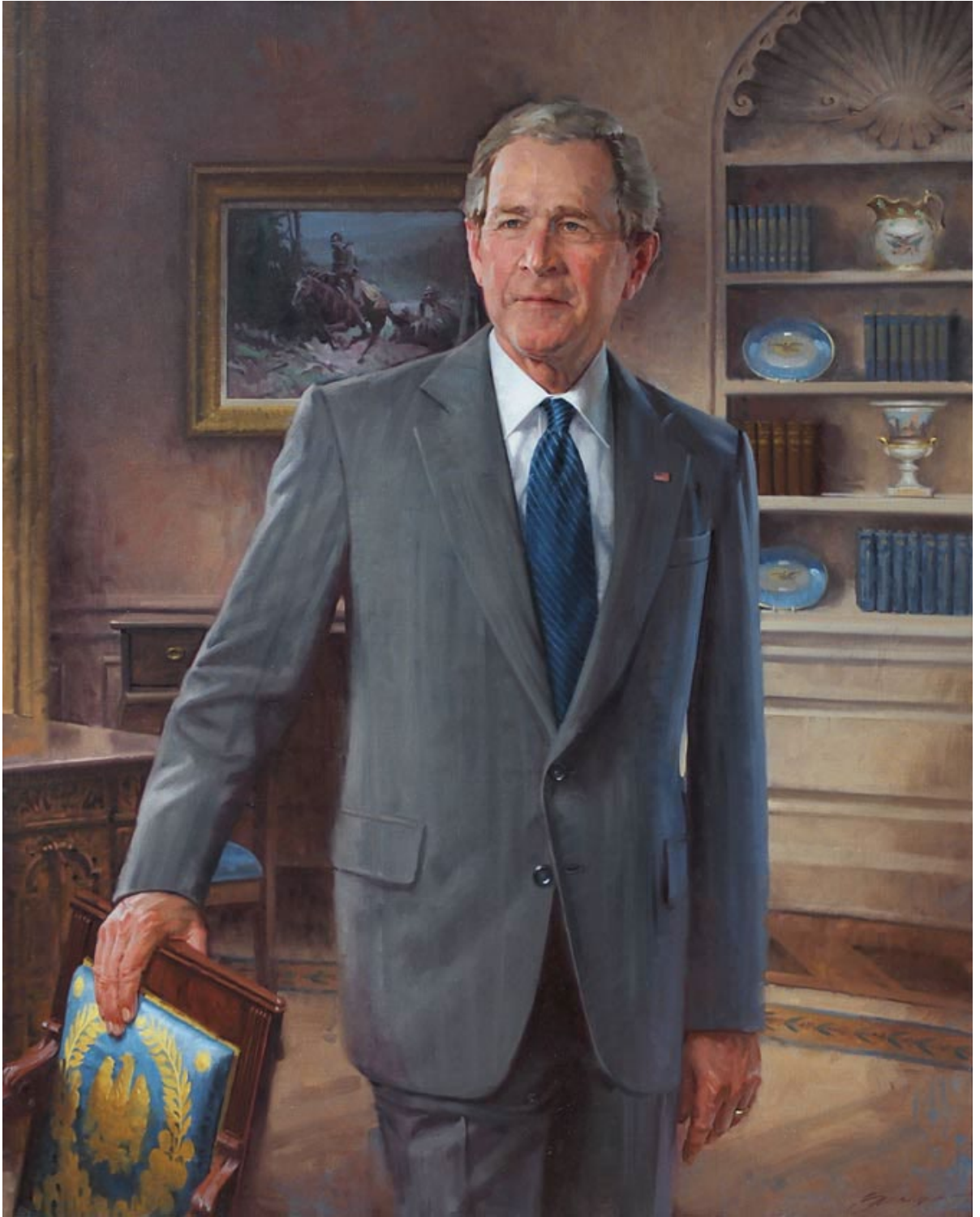
7. Higgins, Dakota. () (1) (*Rainbow*). 2023. Private Collection.



8. Stuart, Gilbert. *George Washington. (Lansdowne Portrait)*. 1796, *National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institute*. https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.2001.13



9. Higgins, Dakota. () (43). 2024. Private Collection.



10. Sanden, John Howard. *George W. Bush*. 2011. *White House Collection*.