

MAY

A woman with dark hair and purple eye makeup is looking down. She is surrounded by a collage of torn paper, fabric, and other materials. The word "MAY" is printed in large, bold, black letters at the top. Below it, "N°15 06/2016" is printed. In the bottom left corner, there is a barcode and some text.

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Finely Crafted Stool

George Egerton-Warburton

Mathieu Malouf, "Toilet"
Jenny's, Los Angeles
March 19-April 30, 2016

On the 9th of January this year, @jennykaraoke posted an image to Instagram of a freshly built wooden construction fence facing Sunset Boulevard in Silverlake. "Can't wait for Whole Foods or Ace Hotel Silverlake to open next door to my gallery #fuckyou." Gentrification in Silverlake is not a recent phenomenon, but one unfurling exponentially. As rents surge in New York, galleries and artists have moved farther into Brooklyn and finally on to Los Angeles, for the promise of cheaper rent and warmer weather. Sections of the predominantly Latino neighborhood Boyle Heights is starting to resemble Chelsea. Recently settled gallerists and artists (including those at Jenny's and also myself) perform the art world's well-documented labor of accepting resources of an impure provenance, including cheap real estate, in exchange for producing content that is not in pure opposition, but alternative at least to that which is recognizably evil. All this adds up to the negative effect of making a neighborhood seem attractive to property developers. Henceforth neighborhoods are turned, made accessible, and secured. Residents of Boyle Heights suffer an increase in rent, and the elastic distance that the creative proletariat forge for yuppies is synonymous with a new fixed distance that hardens for a class of residents who are pushed further out of the city or deeper into poverty. Gentrification's promise of better living is identical to colonialism's promise of modernity—only delivered via free WiFi—and always deferred. Like the attacks made in the name of constituents ambivalent to the architecture of enmity, this is no longer just a class war.

And so it's timely that *Toilet (Lower East Side)*, a sculpture of an outhouse based on Bernard Tschumi's infamous Blue Condominium on New York's Lower East Side, sets the stage as you walk into Mathieu Malouf's second exhibition at Jenny's, "Toilet." "Toilet" is a show about two entities, the Blue Condo and Dimes, a bespoke LA-style café that has also recently opened in the Lower East Side (LES), that in turn contributes to the problem, now exhibited in Los Angeles. Contorting geography by presenting a show about New York in Los Angeles, is the first in a series of spatial cues: *Toilet (Lower East Side)* is an "outhouse" presented indoors, and its blue windows eschew its fundamental purpose of providing privacy. A glory hole, cut into one wall of the outhouse, redefines the space as penetrable, and depending on how you look at it, sullied or exciting. As an elaborate device for viewing as well as direct pleasure, teasing both physical and social boundaries, *Toilet (Lower East Side)* could comfortably fit

one person, whereas the Blue Condo itself is infamously prominent due to its height, contrasting with low-rise brick tenements that are characteristic of the LES. Aquarium-like condos tower above the neighborhood, protecting inhabitants from whatever occurs on street level. The necessity for high-density living quarters to combat urban sprawl is overshadowed by its constructed visibility as inhabitants literally look down on the rest of the neighborhood. The seat of the drop toilet is covered with the same melamine that adorns the tabletops of Dimes. In seven paintings tightly hung around the outhouse, Malouf depicts the figure of the Grinch both as a gentrifying resident of the Blue Condominium and as a patron of Dimes.

Cafés like Dimes are often set in converted factories and warehouses—an irony that works on multiple levels. Whilst these small businesses purport themselves as spaces for leisure, mindfulness, and indulgence, it is the same spaces that often double as “coffices” and the site for the dematerialized and ambiguous modes of social labor that bloomed following the decline of industry in post-1970s capitalism. Further to this, cafés are often rolled-out first as testing-grounds for changing neighborhoods, bringing new foot-traffic during business hours. Malouf’s *Dimes*, a pointillist painting of the café’s interior, shimmers as green Grinches tuck into coffee, macrobiotic bowls, and a ubiquitous Mac laptop. The white walls are blotched with grey—either shadows or mottled atmosphere. There are smiles in the Grinches’ faces, and all the pointillist pokes attest to some kind of electricity in the air. The speckled effect makes the painting work as a field, except for the broader brushstrokes that define the melamine tabletop as the center of interest. Lines carving up the composition identify the space as the type of architecture that is branded as artisanal, with architectural quirks that may remain from a past life asserting the authenticity of working-class experience. The colors are mixed with black, making the painting a bit muddy and amateurish, avoiding any hint of lip service to a type of glossy interior design characterized by white walls that bounce natural light around. In Malouf’s rendition, the melding of leisure with work is revealed in the unvarying form of the Grinches. *Dimes* mechanizes the social life and digestive processes of the Grinches within the newly secured LES—as if to say, their only function is to turn food into shit.

Another painting, *Big Toilet*, features a toilet overlapped by a boundary map of the LES. If conventional mappings of territory are contorted by extraterritorial zones—as they exist in embassies, airports, and detention centers—cafés are embassies for gentrification, bringing a sharpened focus and subsequent order to a city’s edgier neighborhoods.

Secure neighborhoods are typically where young, economically mobile families move, eager to make incursions into the property market. Four paintings depict these new residents in the form of a white nuclear family, steeped in melancholy: *Work Family Friends* is a portrait of a mother loosely based on Miranda July’s face; blue eyes emerge from a black background like little pools. Words, “trust, love, respect etc.,” are floating around her face, removed from their context in any number of mumblecore films. Layered washes of paint and



Mathieu Malouf,
*Toilet (Lower
East Side)*, 2016,
detail

Tschumi's windows soaked in nightfall in the background clumsily add up to an idea of transparency, an "honest" looking face. *Sad Barista* depicts a father figure resembling Ryan Gosling. His elegiac blue eyes are offset by the Grinches from *Dimes*, here in various modalities of masturbation and world-decimation. In the background, the windows from the Blue Condo resemble the flannelette shirt of a barista. In *Welcome Home*, a baby in a womb is airbrushed over a hard-edge background of Tschumi's windows. The title is spelt out around the baby: "W-E-L-C-O-M-E H-O-M-E-;)", equating the Blue Condo with the secure space of the womb. In an untitled painting of the family's pet dog, Blue Condo,



Mathieu Malouf,
"Toilet", Jenny's,
Los Angeles,
exhibition view

set within an erect penis, interrupts its throat as if it were a shrill, piercing bark, edging toward ejaculation. Exacting colors and little whips of the brush punctuate a beige stretcher with fur. Perhaps disoriented, the dog is cross-eyed. In each painting, the grid of Blue Condo's windows repeats itself as the cold new order.

An earlier version of the Statue of Liberty was originally intended by its designer Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi to be positioned at the entrance of the Suez Canal and titled *Egypt (or Progress) Carrying the Light to Asia* (1867), signifying a colonized Egypt acting as the gateway of enlightenment to the Orient. In its American incarnation, as a beacon for immigration and symbol of freedom, it disguised the reality of a colonial invasion, institutionalized slavery, and now, equally insidious forms of structural racism. In *Toilet*, a painting of the Statue of Liberty with a Grinch face emerges in a kale-green *chiaroscuro*. It's a grinchy Trojan horse: the Statue of Liberty, like Dimes serving farm-to-table delicacies in its airy white delicatessen, or the Blue Condo boasting foundations of sustainably sourced and energy efficient materials, represented, for a moment, the image of "progressiveness." It illuminates a metonym in who is seen—with the paintings of the white nuclear family asserting the absence of minorities displaced by gentrification in the LES. In October 2002, Palestinian artist, Nabil Anani erected a mock "statue of liberty" on the roof of Yasser Arafat's ruined compound in Ramallah. The torch was upside down. It was a response to a year of intense incursions into the West bank that occurred in a space of invisibility,



Mathieu Malouf,
Dimes, 2016,
Oil on canvas
60 x 72 inches

due to the carefully constructed space of visibility surrounding the spectacular terror of 9/11. It's a tiring and repetitive exercise to relate everything that occurs in New York back to 9/11, however, despite lacking any real evidence that tied the attacks to a specific territory, it's exactly what Tel Aviv and the White House did to justify the attacks in the West Bank, and more broadly their behavior internationally from 2001-2013. Blue Condominium was built in the first third of what we now know as the "War on Terror," less than two miles from the World Trade Center. In its visibility and proximity to conflict, it exemplifies the kind of "McOccupation" that was occurring internationally as the US commanded 750 privatized and state-funded military bases. In both cases, territory has been staked out in the blind spot created by a moment of trauma prolonged by the media, in a disaster-fueled mapmaking exercise. Vision, partial and provisional, is always culturally performed and produced.

Hyper self-awareness and indulgent self-loathing is not listed as a material on the room sheet, but it lingers, like a WiFi signal. Malouf posits contemporary irony as a saving grace within the tumorous boundaries of capital. Operating within a spectrum of inevitability, with no alternative other than to criticize the status quo, is a reliable aesthetic strategy, albeit an endgame. The cul-de-sac of confusion is somehow more appealing than the fascist potentials of utopia. All the dabbing of paint in "Toilet" constructs a moment of hopelessness, and a dirge-like lament for the pointlessness of pointillism. One of the more frightening

recognitions of the show is that patterns of the present are no different to the past. The symbols of progress in cosmopolitan lifestyles, and how they are continuously reproduced, are inherently laden with a machinaean belief in good versus evil that results in war. The Statue of Liberty-cum-grinch reminds us that forebears of progress also determine what progress is and where it ends. Elegance in "Toilet" is delivered via the humanism of Malouf's asserted vulnerabilities—the muddiness in palette and muddy areas in the argument. A genuine tenderness emerges in each grinch's smile.

Inside the outhouse, someone has lost control of their bladder on the faux-copper floor, suffering perhaps of "café fatigue."¹ One can only assume that it erupted of equal parts excitement, delirium, and uncontrollable consumption. The copper floor itself references a series of paintings Malouf made in 2013, in which a seductive copper sheen coated mushrooms. It was a direct taunt to a type of pumped-out seriality of painting that has flooded the art market in recent years, best exemplified by artists such as Jacob Kassay. In *Toilet (Lower East Side)* the body acts as a pump, whereas the production is the quality of a finely crafted artisanal stool.

1. Exhibition title of a recent solo exhibition by Australian painter Helen Johnson at Sutton Gallery.

Wolfpack

Julia Moritz

Crystal Moselle, *The Wolfpack*, 2015

A pack of wolves ain't a school of fish ain't a flock of birds. A strange flower of zoological taxonomy, different species of groups go by different names and different concepts of sociability. The almost civilized: dolphins come in schools, overachiever mammals outsmarting the land. A pack: the lowest of the low, cramped together, packaged, unclear destination, utmost group cohesion. While watching *The Wolfpack*, the movie, it is educative to reflect upon some of those groups, names and concepts from as grand as the family of man and education as such, to as precarious as the nexus of infancy and institution. For neither can the general mechanisms of subject formation be of exclusive concern to those who think, create and connect with audiences (such as public programmers, like myself), nor can the peculiar notion of pedagogy be limited to the labor of looking after another; it is better understood and practiced (curating included) as a looking for, a looking for an other, and other ways of othering too.