

# DECISIONS, DECISIONS, DECISIONS: AMBER BOARDMAN'S CARTOON WORLDS

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In Max Weber's assessment, twentieth-century modern life was confronted by the spread of 'disenchantment' – from the German *Entzauberung*, which literally translates to 'de-magic-ation'. Borrowed from Friedrich Schiller, disenchantment describes the negative effects of scientific reason and bureaucratic regulation, which fail to bring about superior knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. In contrast to Marx, Weber held that modernity could be an 'iron cage' precisely because of its success. This has less to do with class inequality or alienation than with how the processes that allow the human intellect to soar are the same ones that produce meaninglessness; rationalisation dispirits as it uplifts. The specialised self-regulating structures of twentieth-century life were, Weber thought, ill-equipped to handle older human needs for spiritual closure, for taking positions on rhetorical unrationalisable questions of self-worth. Morality, myth and happiness are tempered by the calculability of everything, which may not be a completely bad thing for those whose public duty is to represent heterogeneous moral and political ends. In a pithy iconoclastic tone redolent of Marshall McLuhan, Weber states: 'Today the routines of everyday life challenge religion.'<sup>1</sup>

Flash forward about 100 years or so to a world in which re-enchantment routines are everywhere in an effort to ameliorate the effects of a contemporary moment that is always in the shadow of its update. Of course, in the background of Weber's 1917 assessment, unacknowledged, were the avant-gardes' own attempts to fill the disenchantment vacuum, at about the same time that advertising was making giant leaps forward in the guise of what Edward Bernays called 'public relations'. In other words, the re-enchantment industry is about as old as the disenchantment diagnosis, to the point that it is now difficult to determine if we are perhaps mostly disenchanted by the superabundance of re-enchantment options: the anomalous contemporary practices of what Jane Bennett terms a 'wonder-disabled' world.<sup>2</sup> Skirting Weber's matter-of-factness, Bennett proposed in 2001 that we should reinvest in the wondrousness of matter as a way to

potentialise an ethical orientation that encourages 'a stance of presumptive generosity (i.e., of rendering oneself more open to the surprise of other selves and bodies and more willing and able to enter into productive assemblages with them)'.<sup>3</sup> But this, too, sounds like another hollow re-enchantment option, one which deploys Deleuzian materialities of becoming to avoid moral prescription, despite the fact that such open 'comingling' metaphors really only ever jibe with the left.

How to represent neoliberal disenchantment without opting for frictionless connectivity or one-dimensional cynicism? This is a question repeatedly posed in the work of the Sydney-based artist Amber Boardman, a painter who renders the anguished expectations of our algorithmic times in cartoonish unreality. Born and raised in the United States before relocating to Australia in 2012, Boardman makes figurative paintings attuned to the contemporary splintering of the universal into a multiplicity of differences. Probably every generation of artists after Weber saw themselves as addressing something similar; however, when the backdrop changes, so do the problems. Today, a new cast of concepts are in town: individuated wellness regimes; data-driven politics; non-binary binaries; the anachronism of three-dimensional space; and what Fran Lebowitz (shadowing Slavoj Žižek) ascribes to social media, 'friends without friends'. If, since the 1990s, life has been about the constant reshaping of multiple performed identities, Boardman, in response, suggests that self-malleability can be exhausting.

'Decision Fatigue', Boardman's recent 2021 exhibition at Sydney's Chalk Horse, yielded paintings of supermarkets, dating apps, home renovations, porn thumbnails, clothing racks and dour-looking student portraits. Of course, pop first put this issue of endless consumer decision-making at the forefront of art, in homage to the 1960s neologism 'lifestyle' which spread throughout the world. Today, with even more information at our disposal – and more markets – flâneurial window-shopping is a finger swipe away. Unlike pop, impersonality doesn't really cut it in Boardman's world. That said, neither does outright passion. The apparent

Amber Boardman, *Paint Shelves*, 2020, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 254cm;  
courtesy the artist and Chalk Horse, Sydney



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effortlessness of her paint-handling belies a more complex process in which people and things seem 'discovered' rather than 'represented'. Her great skill is in knowing exactly when to stop a painting, at the point when her figures look most absorbed by their own stuckness, anchored by their viscous discombobulating surrounds.

The numerous grids in 'Decision Fatigue' – in works such as *Classroom*, *Porn Categories*, *Paint Shelves* and *Dating App Algorithm* (all 2020) – are not tributes to industrial or capitalist life but to the scaffold-quality of digital showrooms, the thumbnails that temporarily assist quick selection. Is 'decision fatigue' what Boardman's characters are suffering from in their unstable, antically digital worlds, or is it the artist's own lament? The ultimate irony of making an exhibition like this is that it adds to the consumer landscape of choices: Should I purchase the porn painting, or the one with the faces that remind me of my students? Is the larger painting worth the AU\$12,000 price tag if it may not actually fit in my lounge room? Decrying communicative capitalism, or lampooning the implications of the long tail in the age of Amazon's dominance, are difficult to justify when one's critical response is itself a high-end product. But the sheer texture of Boardman's paint suggests to me that complicity is part of her purview; its pleasures protrude from the picture plane to implicate 'the structure[s] we've imposed on ourselves by our reliance on tech to help us decide what might titillate us'.<sup>4</sup> Like Mark Leckey's 2013 exhibition 'The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things', Boardman's framing of the overabundance of consumer choices also posits critique as a neoliberal pharmakon: a remedy and a powerful poison, the grease of contention that keeps markets haphazardly moving.

Self-care has been a consistent theme in Boardman's work, especially early on, building a repertoire of imagery that spans yoga classes, pedicures, tanning salons, glamour photography, hikes and home organising regimes. In the 2017 work *Princess Hair Middle Aged Gravity*, a naked de-sexualised female torso in a yoga studio takes centre stage with no discernible head; just golden curly hair sprawling across a stiff pink leg, an abstract painting in the background. A sugar-coated version of the strained and spotlighted bodies of Francis Bacon or Maria Lassnig, the work would make great company with Dana Schutz's *Breastfeeding* (2015) and

Tala Madani's *Cave Interior (Ancestors)* (2019), both of which are in the Art Gallery of New South Wales collection. Whereas Schutz's characters are always zany busy and Madani's are afflicted with a spiritual glow, Boardman's are more gawky and ungainly – archetypes of the stupidly aware. Her crowd scenes in particular (such as *Multipurpose Crowd* from 2019, and *Civil Planning* and *Classroom*, both from 2020) convey something of the stolid quality of Philip Guston's furtive personas, even if eschewing the boys-club mentality of the neo-expressionists he ultimately inspired. More garish than Guston, Boardman nonetheless brings a similarly intimate particularity to what is a melancholic and mysterious sociopolitical ethos. As satire, the works hold onto something undecodable in their messages: the tragicomic spirit of pretension beaming in from Planet Boardman.

Surprisingly for someone so in love with the materiality of paint, Boardman has a background in animation, working in the United States for Adult Swim, a late-night comedy programming block on the Cartoon Network cable TV station. One of her past gigs involved the movie version of the cartoon series *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (2000–15), whose inside jokes and grotesque humour have been described by one commentator in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's take on the Rabelaisian carnival, a metaphor for cultural practices that, with the public's permission, joyfully destruct, lampoon and symbolically overturn the values of the status quo.<sup>5</sup> For Peter Sloterdijk: 'Class societies can scarcely survive without the institution of the inverted world and the crazy day.'<sup>6</sup> In this case, it is the crazy adult inversion of a children's cartoon channel which has produced the likes of Eric Andre and Tim & Eric – scatologically fixated jesters who blend the macabre with the slapstick, the hokey with the esoteric, mocking all coherence and convention. Boardman retains something of the dysmorphia of the Adult Swim world: the squidgy figures in *Home Perm Panic* (2016) and *Sausage Queen* (2015) are not so far removed from the *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* character Meatwad, whose impressive unintelligence is matched only by his ability to mould his body into various shapes and forms (especially igloos and hot dogs). As with an older generation of painters such as Sue Williams and Nicola Tyson (who are both now in their sixties), Boardman's work brings a sense of the pliable animated female body to the legacy of neo-expressionism – contorted, pressured, prodded,



Amber Boardman, *Porn Categories*, 2020, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 121.9cm;  
courtesy the artist and Chalk Horse, Sydney



Amber Boardman, *CrossFit Crowd*, 2019, oil on polyester, 182.9 x 213.4cm;  
courtesy the artist and Chalk Horse, Sydney



twisted, stretched, mistreated and self-pampered beyond all reason.

Whether a symptom of, or solution to, contemporary disenchantment, Boardman freely mixes private and public, leisure and work motifs to generate distinctly relatable cartoon worlds of neoliberal 'care of the self' rituals. The term 'care of the self' comes from the later writings of Michel Foucault, who, echoing Weber's concern for the lived experience of rationalisation, conveyed a vision of neoliberalism as an economic and governmental power that essentially structures people to govern themselves. Art in this scenario gets attached to a broader aesthetics of existence, which in the Nietzschean sense of 'aesthetics' requires the ceaseless 'transvaluation of all values' – creative ways to resolve apparently conflicting forces.<sup>7</sup> For Foucault, our physical and mental selves should be continually tended to, refined, challenged and reconciled in the name of an ethics that is no longer considered as obedient to a code of rules. He wanted to revive an earlier pre-modern question of how to make 'one's life into an object for a sort of knowledge, for a *techné* – for an art'.<sup>8</sup> In other words: decisions, decisions, decisions ...

1. Max Weber, 'Science as a vocation' (1917), in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Routledge, London and New York, 1991, p. 145.
2. Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 57.
3. *ibid.*, p. 131.
4. Amber Boardman quoted in Stuart Horodner, 'Interview with Amber Boardman', *Decision Fatigue*, exhibition catalogue, Chalk Horse, Sydney, 2021, n.p.: see [www.amberboardman.com/exhibitions](http://www.amberboardman.com/exhibitions), accessed 1 February 2021.
5. Angela Farmer, 'Cartoon Network's Adult Swim and *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* as Rabelaisian carnival', *Studies in American Humor*, vol. 3, no. 17, 2008, pp. 49–66.
6. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans Michael Eldred, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, p. 117.
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson and trans Carol Diethe, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 103.
8. Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, Pantheon Books, New York, 1984, p. 362.

Amber Boardman's 'Decision Fatigue' was on display at Chalk Horse, Sydney, from 28 January until 27 February 2021.



Amber Boardman, *Be Your Own Plastic Surgeon*, 2018, oil on polyester, 71.1 x 91.4cm; courtesy the artist and Chalk Horse, Sydney

