

Teen Paranormal Romance

By Lilly Lampe November 20, 2014

Finding artistic inspiration in YA lit.



ROE ETHRIDGE, *LOUISE WITH RED BAG*, 2011, CHROMOGENIC PRINT IN ARTIST FRAME, 69" X 52.5". COLLECTION OF DARYL AND IRWIN SIMON. PHOTO: KIMBERLY BINNS

At the behest of his preteen daughter, Hamza Walker set off one Saturday in search of *Insurgent*, the second book in Veronica Roth's wildly popular Divergent trilogy. The book had been published the day before, and early crowds had snapped up seemingly every copy in Chicago. After a fruitless trip to Powell's, Walker tried Barnes & Noble, only to be turned away. With his daughter's imprecations buzzing in one ear, he stared at the *Insurgent*-less bookshelves, noting their panoply of shockingly similar titles. Then he saw the label on the wall: TEEN PARANORMAL ROMANCE.

Those three disparate words rang through his head: age demographic, supernatural phenomena, Eros. Together, these incongruous terms coalesced into a phrase that felt positively surreal. Walker, a curator, didn't see the absence of the object of his daughter's desire; he saw a ready-made exhibition title.

And so "Teen Paranormal Romance" became a group exhibition of the same name. It was on view this past spring at the University of Chicago's contemporary museum, [The Renaissance Society](#), where Walker has been a curator for twenty years; and it recently opened at the [Atlanta Contemporary Art Center](#). The theme of adolescence runs through the assembled artworks, but the exhibition is generous with meaning; like lodestones for memory, the artworks dislodge the bits and pieces of our adolescent desires and anxieties.



ANNA K. E., *LUCKY WEEKEND*, 2013, WOOD, TILE, ALUMINUM, CLOTHES, PAPER, 236" X 96" X 65". COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SIMONE SUBAL GALLERY. PHOTO: KIMBERLY BINNS



ANNA K. E., *LUCKY WEEKEND*, 2013, WOOD, TILE, ALUMINUM, CLOTHES, PAPER, 236" X 96" X 65". COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SIMONE SUBAL GALLERY. PHOTO: KIMBERLY BINNS

The largest sculptures in the exhibition have a grounding effect, evoking the ubiquitous settings of the American teenage experience. Anna K. E.'s *Lucky Weekend* is a stand-alone wooden wall covered in patterned white tiles; the wall's framework is exposed on the other. The tiled side, which features layers of posters in addition to the patterned tile, is reminiscent of mass-transit public-art pieces: looking at it, one can imagine a pack of teenagers exiting the CTA or MTA en masse, traveling in packs through exit corridors, individuals made anonymous by virtue of the larger group. The other side, in its bareness, appears like the backdrop of a theater, a space tinged by the anticipation and thrill of imminent performance. A line of coats dangling from the exposed frame adds to the behind-the-scenes effect. There's an implied virtue here, a kind of innocence.

The other works undo this naïveté. Kathryn Andrews's *Friends and Lovers*—a large, physically domineering piece comprising an enclosed area of chain-link fence containing two concrete brick walls—teases at dualities. The

fence has no opening or entrance, making it an exclusive space, a cage. A menacing feeling of school-yard hierarchies is heightened by the concrete walls, which create ominous hidden spaces. The inner face of each wall is painted with the head of a cartoonish black bear, somewhere between Grateful Dead and Berenstain. The bears leer at each other as if caught in a standoff—is their symmetry meant to critique a viewer who might look into a school yard (or prison yard, for that matter) and see sameness, generalizing the inhabitants within? Or does it imply the folly of spending too much time looking for answers in one's own image?



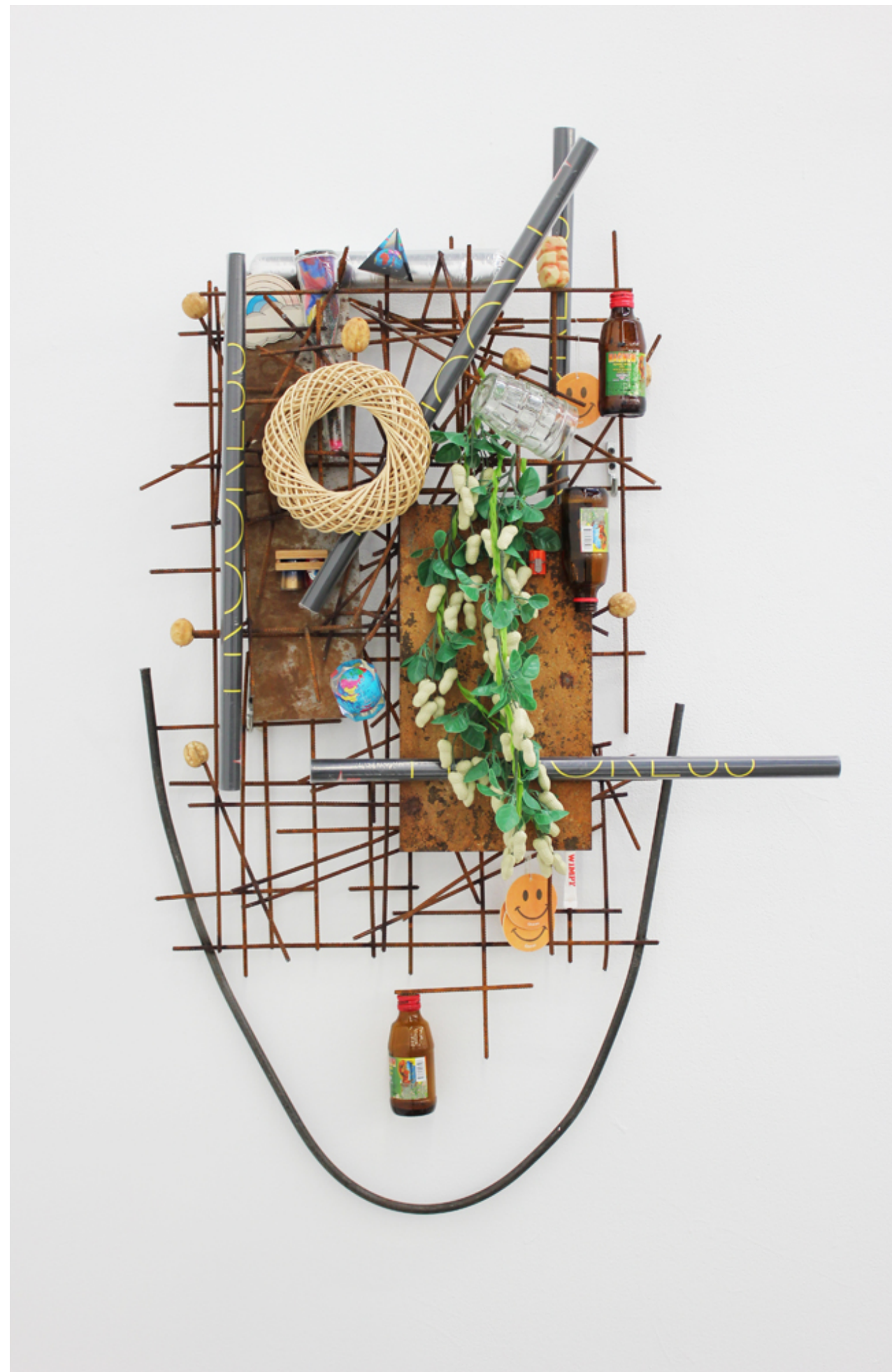
GUYTON\WALKER, CANSTRIPE_MINT_MATTRESS, QUEENZEBRA_DESAT_MATTRESS, STRIPE_TURTLE_22_MATTRESS, CANABSTRACT_PUMPKINSPICE_MATTRESS, 2013, MATTRESS, 80" X 60" X 8". COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS AND GREENE NAFTALI GALLERY, NEW YORK. PHOTO: KIMBERLY BINNS

Bare mattresses from a series by Guyton\Walker are strewn across the entrance to the exhibition—the remnants of yesterday's sleepover. Sounds from Ed Atkins's video *Even Pricks* blare throughout the space, adding to the abandoned-party effect. The video has the sparkle and dynamism of a Gillette commercial, but it picks at psychological anxieties. An upward thumb deflates like a balloon; the center of a bed turns ashen and collapses.

The smaller, wall-mounted sculptures in "Teen Paranormal Romance" appear like altarpieces to the burnout life. In the works of Jack Lavender, energy-drink bottles, dried limes, air fresheners, and other tchotchkes dangle from grid-like assemblages of steel bars. Two used pizza boxes studded with pushpins and grease hang in the gallery, as if their artist, Chris Bradley, is thumbing his nose at convention with dorm-room trash. But these pizza boxes have been painstakingly crafted out of cast bronze and aluminum, with trompe-l'oeil grease stains rendered in paint. Even the pushpins, which are situated like red eyes, are handmade.



CHRIS BRADLEY, *GREASE FACE*, 2011, ALUMINUM, CAST BRONZE, SPRAY PAINT, ADHESIVE HUBCAP RING, MASONITE, SCREW, COLOR PENCIL, 24" X 22.5" X 3.25". COLLECTION OF NANCY AND DAVID FREJ, CHICAGO.



JACK LAVENDER, *HANNAH*, 2012, DRIED LIMES, MAGNUM TONIC WINE BOTTLE, POSTERS, RESIN OBJECT, PLASTIC PEANUTS, OCEAN SCENT AIR FRESHENER, FIRE SEALANT, BEER GLASS, WIMPY SUGAR PACKET, NOVELTY MAGNETS, SAND IN A BOTTLE, PLASTIC ROCK, ENERGY-DRINK BOTTLE, WICKER OBJECT, STEEL, 51.25" X 31.5" X 9.5". COLLECTION OF DR. MICHAEL I. JACOBS. PHOTO: KIMBERLY BINNS



JILL FRANK, *BONG (SHAWN)*, 2014, C-PRINT, 50" X 40". COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. PHOTO: KIMBERLY BINNS

In its second incarnation, “Teen Paranormal Romance” added a work by the photographer Jill Frank, whose image of a young man taking down a beer bong corresponds with the other photograph in this show: Roe Ethridge’s *Louise with Red Bag*. These pictures present the only recognizable human figures in the exhibition. Louise, blonde and fair, stands in a photography studio wearing a one-piece swimsuit featuring an image of a plane flanked by palm trees heading towards sunset. She affects a model’s insouciance, but her gaze betrays her discomfort. In Frank’s *Bong (Shawn)*, our beer-swilling protagonist stands heroically, one arm raised as if in salute, the other presenting the nozzle of the beer bong to his face. This pose raises his shirt to reveal a vulnerable slice of pale navel. Louise and Shawn are presented as fragile archetypes of youth—the lovely girl hoping for supermodel stardom, the fratty coed engaged in a masculine display of endurance with presumably regretful consequences—but they also transcend the archetypes. Paired, they’re like face cards excised from a deck, Louise the self-conscious queen of hearts and Shawn the suicide king.

“Teen Paranormal Romance” conjures a desire to fabricate stories, to search for meaning with the plainness of an adolescent: in his or her own face, in a startling coincidence, in an unexpectedly lovely sight, in the smile of a stranger. This desire is hardly limited to youth, of course, but it begins in that uncertain time, when signs are misread as answers to questions you don’t even understand yet. No wonder we seek comfort in the paranormal; there’s something more knowable about creatures we’ve invented, even if they’re fantastical. But don’t look for vampires or werewolves here; you’ll still have to go to the bookstore for that.

“Teen Paranormal Romance” is on view at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center from October 25, 2014 through January 17, 2015. It will travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, where it will be on view from April 19 through July 5, 2015.

Lilly Lampe is a writer and art critic based in Atlanta, Georgia, and New York City. Her writing has appeared in Art in America, ArtAsiaPacific, Art Papers, Artforum.com, Modern Painters, and the Village Voice, among others. She currently teaches art history at Georgia State University.
