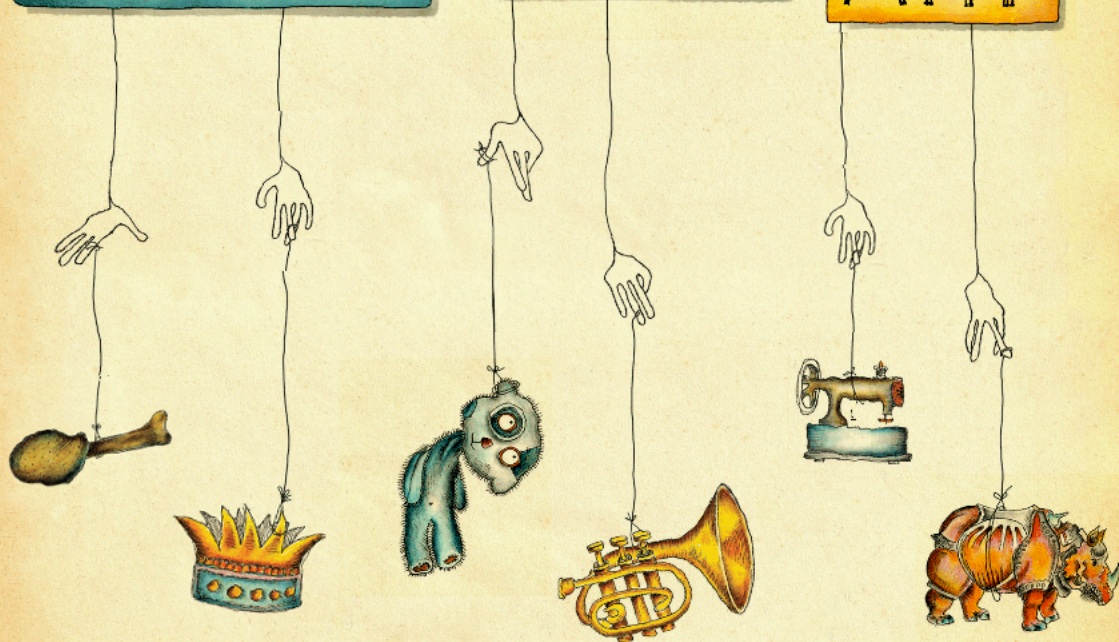


LOCHLANN JAIN

THINGS

THAT

ART



a graphic menagerie of enchanting curiosity

Various Things

MARIA DOLORES MCVARISH

Lochlann Jain's artwork addresses a profound conundrum undergirding all conceptual thought.¹ This conundrum has to do with authority, classification, systems of knowledge, and epistemology, among other things. Of its many and varied facets, the one I would like to focus on in connection with Jain's "things that art" series has to do with the roles of identity (sameness) and difference in conceptual thinking. Specifically, I would like to elucidate some of the aesthetic ways in which Jain raises questions about those roles.

By way of introduction, I will discuss a particular "thing that." It's a tiny drawing of an onion with the word "age" written beneath it. Like many of the word/image pairings in Jain's illustrations, it affects me in a peculiar way. What I don't yet know – and what I'd like to find out – is *how* it comes to affect me in the way it does: what is its aesthetic strategy?

One evening not too long ago, I was perusing a selection of "things that art" cards, trying to identify tropes, techniques, patterns, and other qualities that I might wish to explore in essay form. Like others, I noticed Jain's fondness for word play ("things that sound a bit like hairspray"), recurring motifs

(tongues, knobby hands, ghoulish faces), figures of speech (like “meet your maker”), literalized metaphors (“things for whom the bell tolls”), metonymic displacements (lipstick for lips), and so on. Mildly prudish, I also noticed with amusement the artist’s insistence on including things that are normally considered too gross or private to talk about in polite company.

I was perusing, as I say, in this analytic mood when I came across a card entitled “things that could describe this onion.” Each of its eight text/image pairings was rendered in oniony colors and looked like it took a little more water than it needed, as a fresh onion often does. Virtually unconsciously, obeying a lifetime of inculcation of Western reading conventions, my eye started in the top left corner and began its left → right, top → bottom sweep. Jain had facilitated this inclination on my part; the top left drawing under the card’s title brought me into the series through an eye-catching, clockwise-fanning detail entitled “skin tone.” Prompted by its outreaching lines as much as by what I now understood to be “skin tones” in the *next* frame, I shifted right, to an image of two tiny islands in the ocean, very close to one another, occupied by enormous half-onions tipping toward each other. The label said: “juice, juicier.” ... Um ... what? I relented in my analytic sweep to consider these words. I understood their utility as “things that could describe this onion” (“juice, juicier” = comparative). But what do they mean as a caption for an image of onion halves on desert islands? From here, confounded, my eye dropped directly down. I’d been trying, somewhat unthinkingly, to “read” (apprehend) the series, but that “juice, juicier” drawing threw me off. Now my eye wanted to travel on its own terms and found a kindred color palette in an image below.

And that is how I stumbled on the text/image pairing that affected me in a peculiar way. Beneath “juice, juicier,” I found a thumbnail rendering labeled “age.” Here, the aforementioned onion – the one that could be described – sat on a large wooden chair facing a wall-mounted mirror. I stopped short, laughing out loud, but also feeling a tender tug. In the drawing, the onion totally ignores a small, onion-sized door connecting its seemingly windowless domicile to somewhere else (presumably, life outside). A calendar-sized ... um, calendar? ... or framed photograph? ... hangs on the same wall as the door and is equally ignored by the onion. The onion, it seems, only has eyes for its reflection in the mirror, for the slow-motion drama of its own aging process. (Wait, do onions have eyes, like potatoes?) By the time I happened on this card, that onion may have been gazing like this for days, months, possibly years. It was a lonely scene, funny and sad at the same time.

It bears mentioning again that my analytic impetus had, by this time, been thwarted by two giant, juicy onion halves marooned somewhere in the South Pacific. Without that steam shovel in front of me, I was more prone, more vulnerable, more *alive* to the eccentricity of the drawing I now beheld. I was looking at a lonely senior onion whose spouse and friends had probably all died. And if death hadn't yet entered my thoughts consciously, Jain had bolstered this association in the text/image pairing immediately to the right: a section view of an onion growing deep underground, labeled “feet under” – as in, *six* “feet under.”

I should have continued skimming through the cards, but I preferred instead to revel in my tender feelings for this senior onion. Indeed, the image dogged my thoughts all week. “Ha ha!” I kept half-thinking, more than a little confused; “that’s so sad!” – meaning, somehow, that the aged onion had

managed to elicit in me a sense of both exhilarating hilarity and depression. Then I went back and looked at the drawing immediately to the left of “age” on the onion card, labeled “tears elicited.” It shows, in the foreground, a person weeping over a cutting board with sliced onions. One of their hands, awash in tears, holds the chopping knife; the other raises a handkerchief to staunch the torrent. Jain is throwing me a rope here; I don’t have to do all of the work to reconcile my feelings about the senior onion. Thanks to the inclusion of “tears elicited” within the “things that could describe this onion,” I’m reminded that onions make people cry all the time. Everybody knows that, so by extension, I’m part of “everybody,” which can be reassuring when you’re wondering about your fondness for a dying onion. On the other hand, onions don’t often make everybody laugh. But here, too, Jain has thoughtfully stepped in, offering a way for me to stretch my understanding of what “onion” *does* or *means*, beyond its status as a vegetable, to include the contexts in which we normally engage with onions: in the same tiny thumbnail drawing of the weeping onion chopper, bounding toward the old onion-lost-in-memories next door, is a very jovial person sporting goggles. This character jumps – ta-da! – into (and almost beyond) the space behind the weeping chopper, grinning at but unseen by them.

Let us review: on the left, we have the grin/weeper; in the middle, the emphatically poignant granny onion; and on the right, the onion (six) “feet under.” It took me several viewings and a fair amount of writing to make the connections between these drawings conscious. Doubtless, there’s much more to appreciate in this card, but I think I have enough to begin addressing the question of how “things that art” work on me, aesthetically, and what this has to do with conceptual thinking.

My first assertion in this essay was that “Lochlann Jain’s artwork addresses a profound conundrum undergirding all conceptual thought.” In order to support this, I will begin with a bit of theory related to what I believe “concepts” (i.e., components of conceptual thought) *do*. First and foremost, I would submit, concepts *contain*. They gather and represent things that relate to or resemble one another in specific ways. The concept “things lips do,” for example, contains, according to Jain: “purse, smack (talk), stick, lick, service, fat, kiss (lock), pucker (pout), whistle, [and] chap.” It is very convenient to be able to use “things lips do” as shorthand if I want to think or speak about that topic without having to continually run through particular examples. At a very basic level, concepts help organize the ways we know the world; they aggregate and distill collections of linked items, then reduce those collections to singularities, thereby making normal mental activities like thinking, planning, and remembering – not to mention communicating – possible. Not only do our minds depend on our ability to conceptualize, but we likewise cannot function in society without concepts.

At the same time, however, concepts *constrain*. Just as they aggregate and collect things, so too do concepts put things “in their place,” functioning as master terms that force the things they encompass to become subordinate. Normally, the differences between items that fall under one concept must be overlooked, excluded, or denied, and there are practical reasons for this (as noted above). Everything that distinguishes the individuals included in concepts like *we*, *us*, or *our*, for example, would seem to threaten the terms’ utility for communication and thought. Yet as “we” all know, inclusion within a *we/us/our* group always comes at the price of my (or your) originality. Put another way, every concept is constructed over real differences between its component

terms, and these differences are suppressed in the name of that concept's identity (singularity). This, in a very general sense, is the profound conundrum undergirding all conceptual thought.

In "things that art," the very premise of identity – that top-down coherence that alone sustains concepts – loses valence.² The irregularities, improprieties, and transgressions within each card work both with and against each other, destabilizing the presuppositions of conventional concepts and countering the impetus that encourages us to take them for granted. Jain pointedly acknowledges, tests, and embraces the differences that inevitably reside within concepts (or categories). Indeed, we can hardly make sense of these collections without recognizing the parts that threaten to undo them. And we can't appreciate the *art of things that* unless we are willing to include ourselves in what Gilles Deleuze might call the alterity of ideas in Jain's explorations (meaning the occurrence of differences within the combinations and series that constitute "things that art").

Let me elaborate on this notion of including oneself in the alterity of the idea by way of that age/onion "thing" described above. Age is a "thing that could describe this onion," certainly, and if you wanted to use it, you'd expect to talk about when the onion was harvested, whether it had been refrigerated, its water and sugar levels, whether mold is evident, and so on. In other words, you'd expect to use the onion's age to describe the onion, as the card's title suggests. Instead, however, Jain uses an onion to describe age: the attendant image shows someone or something (an onion) looking in a mirror. Now, this might be how one thinks about *oneself* aging – losing mobility and cognition, withdrawing from the hustle of an ever-changing world, growing inward,

reflecting (so to speak) back on old times, et cetera – but it's not usually how one thinks about describing one of the characteristics of *an onion*. So, in order to fully appreciate and understand the connection between the concept ("things that could describe this onion") and one of its "things" (age), the viewer must identify with the onion, to some extent, thereby including him/her/ themselves "in the alterity of the Idea."³

This kind of conceptual chiasmus lies at the beating heart of "things that art." A chiasmus is the crisscrossing of a symmetrical verbal structure in which two parallel linguistic forms overlay and then invert one another. In a *conceptual* chiasmus, ideas or concepts normally configured in parallel (the relation of one concept to another, the relation of one subordinate term to another) are similarly overlaid and inverted, thereby collapsing any hierarchical distinctions between them. In Jain's work, this occurs between the supposedly subordinate "thing" and its ostensibly master concept at the concept-to-concept level (in the image of the dying onion, which is the master concept, onion or age?). This, I feel, is one way that Jain's art begins to redress the (in)difference of conceptual thought – and as it does, it has a peculiar aesthetic effect (on me, at least).

Another way that Jain responds to the profound conundrum of conceptual thought is through radical, experimental inclusion. In "things that are weapons," the concept *weapon* represents a range of things that have in common a certain instrumentality for hurting or killing. AK-47s, cannons, and poison darts have each been conceived as weapons at different times, in various circumstances. But if we include something in the *weapon* concept that's normally intended for another use – say, cars, for driving – a lot can happen. First and foremost, automobiles are instantly reduced to their capacities to hurt or

kill. But the inclusion of cars ripples with more subtle effects and implications as well. Who is hurting or killing whom with this car/weapon? Who – in the chain of car stakeholders, which includes manufacturers, traffic engineers, regulators, and drivers, among others – is responsible for the harm cars bring to the environment, to pedestrians, or to other drivers? This is a topic – a set of questions – that Jain has thought about before.⁴ The inclusion of the thing, *car*, within the concept *weapon* changes how we think about cars and forces us to extend “thingness” to its contexts and uses as well; if a car *is* a weapon, it must meet all of the criteria for/as weaponry. By the same token, if the concept *weapon* is to include cars, its criteria will have to be extended to things that aren’t necessarily intended for harming or killing. And if that’s the case, then the clarity and utility of the concept itself grows weaker. Can *anything* be weaponized? Is *intent to harm or kill* necessarily a criterion for weapons?

Our practical need for the integrity and clarity of concepts – and particularly for the integrity and clarity of those concepts-in-common that language and culture consist of – forces us to make choices: is that new or deviant “thing” that threatens the identity of the concept *in* or *out*? Can the concept be stretched or adjusted to accommodate its difference/divergence from a fuller range of “things” it covers? If so, is the concept bolstered or impaired by that accommodation? And not just in one’s personal opinion, but in practice, as currency for exchange with others?

When concepts outright fail, it is because they show themselves to be incapable of managing the differences exhibited by the full range of their supposedly subordinate terms, *except* by means of excluding, denying, or opposing them. Embracing what the concept typically denies (and/or altering the

hierarchy between a concept and its constituent things) can radicalize power relationships that extend from all of the mental and social structures involved in common concepts. This, I believe, is an esthetic effect of Jain's radical, experimental inclusions.

Because Jain's subject matter is the stuff of culture (language, shared ideas and experiences) both of these techniques – conceptual chiasmus and radical, experimental inclusivity – target subjectivity and, to varying degrees in consequence, the viewer's feelings. "Things that art" can be funny, sober, disturbing, sad, frustrating, and gleeful – sometimes all at once. Indeed, the game is not so much to identify each word/image pairing's outlier(s) as it is to undertake the conscious, often partly *verbal* work of appreciating the ways that each coupling poses its own problems for the titular concept. And that's a beautiful, delightful, and intriguing "thing."

Notes

- 1 For the purposes of this essay, I use the word "concept" as an analog for "category," hoping to obviate the need for too much vocabulary.
- 2 **identity**: *n.* one-ness, unity, cohesion, sameness.
- 3 "[T]he difference is internal to the Idea; it unfolds as pure movement, creative of a dynamic space and time which correspond to the Idea. The first repetition is repetition of the Same, explained by the identity of the concept or representation; the second includes difference, and includes itself in the alterity of the Idea, in the heterogeneity of an 'a-presentation'. One is negative, occurring by default in the concept; the other affirmative, occurring by excess in the Idea." Gilles Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 24.
- 4 Lochlann Jain, "'Dangerous Instrumentality': The Bystander as Subject in Automobility," *Cultural Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (2004):61–94.

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