

## *Tolerance of Ambiguity*

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commissioned by Latitude 53 for Walter Scott's exhibition *Tolerance of Ambiguity*, May 22–July 25, 2020

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In psychology, a person's "tolerance of ambiguity" refers to their capacity for uncertainty. It's a measure of their comfort with, or even attraction to, situations that involve contradiction, multiplicity or vagueness.<sup>1</sup> This serves as an apt title for a Walter Scott exhibition, and a useful concept for thinking through the nuances of his practice. Scott's work feeds off dualities: reality and fiction, vulnerability and detachment, humour and pain. There's often a material or dimensional "in-between-ness," a push and pull against the paper, plinth, wall or screen. While pieces may appear casual, they're never nonchalant. The work openly struggles around meaning—how to find it, fix it, or feel it—and the precarious supports it depends on.

Even when she's not present, Wendy, Scott's foundational disappearing act, looms large. For nearly a decade she has shadowed Scott's experiences in life and art, but Wendy is not simply an alter ego; she is too reflective and receptive, a straight-white-female familiar.<sup>2</sup> Wendy is Walter, but you can also see yourself in her, and bits of others, with everyone pulled apart and mixed up into other recognizable characters, relationships and scenes. The Wendy comics have an effortless way of laying bare the clichés and conceits of the artworld, serving up subversive critiques alongside self-deprecation. At times, they read like a coping mechanism, a way of standing slightly outside. There's a way that Scott's work splits you, too, so that when you walk into an exhibition like *Tolerance of Ambiguity*, you can see yourself walking into a frame. You experience the show as a series of encounters, unfolding through hooks, plot points, pinch points and uneasy resolutions.

The film *The Pathos of Mandy* (2019), drops into a continuity of the Wendy-verse. Mandy is yet another alter-ego, one that, through a mix of photography, live action and animation, inhabits Scott's physical world, sprawling on his bed and working from his studio. Mandy has developed "the perfect character" to disseminate his point of view, but things sour when his LA agent coolly informs him that, due to a licencing deal, he's prohibited from making animations of his own creation. Spiralling in existential drift, Mandy fights with his boyfriend and whines at his once-artist-now-activist radical lesbian POC friend: "You get to be so many things!"

Lost and wandering, Mandy delves into texts that speak to his alienation, from metafiction to philosophy and psychiatric theory. Lines from Kathy Acker sharply convey the claustrophobia of the self: "You, the thing you called 'you', was a ball turning and turning in the blackness [...] Every time the ball turns over you feel all of your characteristics, your identities, slip around you so you go crazy."<sup>3</sup> In one scene, we catch a glimpse of Scott himself, reflected in the window of a subway car. He's seated across from Mandy, who lies along the bench in irritable resignation. Scott is both creator and observer of this moment, appearing like a blurred apparition in the glass. Harsh overhead light casts shadows over his eyes, giving them an eerie, impenetrable blankness.

In desperation, Mandy creates a new fictional character, "Gwen," who is making art "about the refractive-quality-of-our-unfixed-identities-and-how-we-recede-into-altered-forms-as-a-means-of-deference-and-survival... heh heh." But this stand in is quickly abandoned and the artist's search for authentic self-expression leads him to a life of quilting in social isolation. While Wendy's imperfections are mostly endearing, Scott has described Mandy as an "exploded version of all the really selfish, horrible parts of myself"—an experiment in trying to make the unlikeable likeable.<sup>4</sup> He succeeds, maybe because in forgiving Mandy's arrogance and self-obsession, we can more easily forgive some of our own.

The sculptural installation *The Thing You Called You* (2020) takes a piercing turn of phrase from the Acker quote, writ large in green beads on the back of a black jean jacket draped over a chair. The tail of the Y drips down to the floor, gently pooling before climbing up onto the screen of an overhead projector occupying the seat. Cast onto the wall in a box of light, the curling line creates an abstract doodled form, which Scott likens to a Rorschach-test: a viewer might see a face, a geography, a line that squirms uncomfortably or one that's happy and carefree. The beads themselves are also this test: you might see an effective and striking material choice, or you might see a loaded cultural signifier.

This jacket is one piece of a body in parts, tossed, suspended, and posed around the exhibition. In *The Delayed Reward of Close Looking* (2020), a pair of white jeans is clipped to a hanger on the wall, ripped open to expose self-referential doodles and diaristic reflections: "And what about that thing that happened last year?"... "Why read into the experience?"... "The sustenance of a life made into fiction." Lined papier-mâché feet dangle down, wearing floppy black silicone slides that droop as detaching soles/soul. On the other side of the wall, in a work titled *No Cruelty in the Gaze* (2020), a pair of black, patent leather oxfords are set on a low plinth, standing in like an absentee viewer for the film. Connected by a single bright green lace, the shoes are two sides held together in tension, tripped.

At one point in his tailspin, Mandy read's psychologist R.D. Laing's book *The Divided Self* (1960). Laing put forward the concept of "ontological security" to describe a stable and coherent narrative of selfhood. Ontological *insecurity* arises when one's inner "self" doesn't align with one's outer "personality." How might these states of being apply to artworks? The jacket, the pants, the shoes, they start to feel less like things to be worn and more like shells to crawl inside.

In the small drawing *Seventh Act of Writing* (2019), a giant hand pulls back a curtain to reveal a boozing human/cockroach, laying on a bare mattress under a broken window. It appears as a dream-like Kafka riff, a bodily manifestation of the agonies and absurdities of the creative process. This discomfort extends into the most directly self-representational piece in the exhibition, *Neon Work (Print)* (2020), a complex of spatial orders. A drawn self-portrait is photographed from above on a bed, with the artist's stockinged feet in the lower half of the frame. The socks and sheets take on a sculptural quality, as if they're cast concrete and carved marble, or actually sinking into the surface of the gallery wall itself. "Stick around long enough and you'll eventually make a neon work," the drawn self writes, with an image of Scott's very own neon piece collaged onto the page; it's a call-out on delusions of originality, the inevitability of fashionable forms. There's a discernible frustration in these fractured planes and layers of removal, like none of these mediums can ever get it just right.

The works brought together in *Tolerance of Ambiguity* demonstrate the particularly self-conscious way Scott's work operates, be it a sculpture or drawing or installation—you can feel them feeling seen. At the same time, you become acutely aware of how you *look*, or more so how you *read* (a person, an image, a statement, a gesture). And how these acts of reading—and being read—direct the constant navigation of the self through the world. As Scott writes, "It takes a lifetime to extract from our bodies the stories we tell ourselves from the stories we've been told about who we are."<sup>5</sup> The trappings of metaperception—the endless feedback loops—are like a house of mirrors, a maze of distortions, a space that can feel at once infinitely large and suffocating tight. We're all trying to get to things that might only be reflections, invariably bonking our faces against the glass.

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<sup>1</sup> This concept was first developed by psychologist Else Frenkel-Brunswik in the late 1940s, in her research linking ambiguity intolerance to authoritarian personality. In 1965, Stephen Bochner developed a set of nine primary attributes of the ambiguity-intolerant: Need for categorization; Need for certainty; Inability to allow good and bad traits to exist in the same person; Acceptance of attitude statements representing a white-black view of life; A preference for familiar over unfamiliar; Rejection of the unusual or different; Resistance to reversal of fluctuating stimuli; Early selection and maintenance of one solution in an ambiguous situation; Premature closure. (Bochner, S. "Defining Intolerance of Ambiguity," *The Psychological Record*, volume 15, 1965: 393–400). I include these attributes in full here as they are an interesting foil for thinking through the specific ways in which Scott's work requires the inverse.

<sup>2</sup> Scott gave insight to this in an interview: "In a way, Wendy slips through the radar like a Trojan horse, into the consciousness, because she has a default, blank, white-girl identity. That could almost be a political tactic from a Mohawk perspective, if you wanted to go there, in that, afterward, after you've laid the groundwork, you're able to slip in more direct references to an Indigenous experience that can grow in this garden you've already cultivated, by using or understanding what possibility and what privilege can allow. It's a double-edged sword of creating a space using what's available and then afterward slipping in thornier, more important, political, racial and identity-based narratives. And at the same time parodying that that's what's happening." Quoted from David Balzer, "Walter Scott on Life in the Wendy-verse," *Canadian Art* online, April 1, 2015. [canadianart.ca/interviews/walter-scott-on-life-on-the-wendy-verse/](http://canadianart.ca/interviews/walter-scott-on-life-on-the-wendy-verse/)

<sup>3</sup> The excerpt is from Kathy Acker's novel *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984).

<sup>4</sup> Walter Scott, "The Pathos of Mandy," *Canadian Art* online, January 9, 2020. [canadianart.ca/interviews/the-pathos-of-mandy/](http://canadianart.ca/interviews/the-pathos-of-mandy/)

<sup>5</sup> Walter Scott, exhibition text for *Tolerance of Ambiguity* at Latitude 53, [latitude53.org](http://latitude53.org).