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PERCEPTION OF CUTENESS AND BEAUTY

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

Upbringing and psychological make-up inspire individual norms for beauty and cuteness. The mannerist approach in my work is a product of the figural liberties found in cartooning, illustration and art history. By altering facial and bodily features, I relate the proportions of an infant to cuteness and innocence. However, I tailor the photographs to empower the subjects all the while mirroring trends in contemporary pop culture.

I’m interested in themes of everyday life, vitality and emotion placed in obscure, imaginary or exaggerated venues. I fictionalize subjects of my reality to compel viewers to identify with and fancy emotions, circumstances, moods and relationships. The intent is to amplify, yet be truer to their existence and idiosyncrasies through figural adaptations.
for my fantastic, awe-inspiring and oh-so-loving family
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INTRODUCTION

An open-ended assignment led me to portray very happy and overexaggerated figures. The intention was to express the magnitude of my emotional state during favorite pastimes; when surrounded by loved ones. I staged a photo-shoot with the forethought to digitally composite the models within a surreal environment. While working on that task, instinct led me to manipulate my photographs in order to exaggerate the emotions of these cute figures.

The diverse reactions to the resulting body of work took me by surprise. I considered the figures to be funny and cute, whereas many viewers perceived eerie, unearthly and disturbing beings. This stimulated an interest of the perception of cuteness and beauty. With a new awareness of the common interpretations, the attached reasoning for standards of cuteness and beauty could be analyzed. Furthermore, I strove to define and become conscious of my own principles.

Figure 1: Face Painting from Wally World Series, 2006
Figure 2: Butterfly Ride, Water Ride and Flower Swing from Wally World Series, 2006

Figure 3: NelCha and LaKay from Wally World Series, 2006
CUTENESS

Psychology and Science of Cuteness

Children, in comparison to adults, have larger heads in proportion to their bodies. Their eyes are larger in proportion to their heads and low-lying. Foreheads protrude as their chins recede to smaller jaws. Other physical traits considered to be infantile include small noses and soft, feeble, round bodies. These physical characteristics along with less aggressive behavior define qualities of cuteness.

Infant-like personality traits such as those which depict innocence, vulnerability, oblivion, playfulness, and curiosity, are commonly considered cute as well. Seeing that adolescents, and infants in particular have an indisputable need to be taken care of, mannerisms they often portray invoke reaction from adults. Scientific studies have shown that both physical and behavioral infantile features give adults the urge to nurture. It's reasonable to believe those innate responses are required for any species to survive.

American Popular Culture and Foreign Parallels

In 1978, Stephen Jay Gould wrote the scientific essay “A Biological Homage to Mickey Mouse,” to examine a connection between the science of cuteness and America’s most famous icon. Along with the less offensive mannerisms since his ill-behaved introduction, Mickey’s features have steadily evolved to become more infant-like. His head and eyes have grown relatively larger with each redrawing decade after decade. Mickey’s ears have moved further back, making his forehead more prominent. Disney’s illustrators lowered his pants line and tailored a baggier fit to give him shorter, pudgier legs like toddlers. They’ve thickened his arms, given him joints and made his narrow snout rounder. Gould suggests that the perceived cuteness of the now more infantile Mickey was intended to increase his popularity with nurturing adults; adults who tend to show strong feelings of affection towards babyish features. (Gould).
Cuteness and loveliness is often the epitome of the central figure in a cartoon. In strong comparison is the villain, femme fatale, or other antagonist who opposes the main character. These cartoon characters tend to exhibit a more adult appearance with body features that include a taller, thinner frame. Their facial features may emphasize defined cheekbones or a larger jaw.

Large eyes and other motifs of cuteness are prevalent in foreign cultures as well. Manga and Anime are popular comics and animations in Japan that came into existence shortly after World War II, but has long been cultivated by Japanese art from centuries earlier. The onset attributes of Manga were particularly influenced by post-war imports of American comics and animated films. Most relevant among them were Betty Boop, a large-headed, big-eyed character with a special feminine charm, and Walt Disney’s Bambi. Osamu Tezuka, best know for his Astro Boy anime series, saw Bambi’s childlike proportions ideal for conveying emotions. (Avella, 111).

Japanese culture and art have been demonstrating a strong alliance to youth and all things cute ever since. Kawaii, the Japanese word for cute can be found everywhere from the ruffled doll dresses, to national government icons. The term kawaii is most commonly associated with fashion, toys and collectables like Sanrio’s Hello Kitty. However, the expression is also parallel with the affection shown towards a child, the innocent or the helpless. Therefore, kawaii characters are often terrifically small, soft and plumply round. They may lack limbs, fingers, toes and even mouths to increase the sense of vulnerability. Their large heads usually carry an expression of shock, peace or sleepiness.

Figure 4: Kawaii inspired Plushie by Susuten
Recently, artistic expressions of an Icelandic interpretation of cuteness has been classified as ‘krútt’. It extends beyond the ‘cozy’ and ‘cuddly’ preconceptions from the knitted clothes, child-like drawings on album covers, elves and other fairy tale characters often present in the work of artists, musicians and fashion designers. With great resistance to the label krútt, these artists’ work can also be understood as clever and frequently a critique of consumerism of the highly influential American culture. In regard to Iceland’s “t-shirt wearing, iPod-listening” generation, David Sokol of Print Magazine believes “krútt’s allegiance to youth suggests anxiety about falling prey to McDonald’s homogeneity.”

The Making of a Brat

Market researchers in the doll industry have gone to great lengths in research to decipher what physiognomically appeals to adults and children as cute and friendly. (Gould, 2). Whether it be a sweet and cuddly baby doll or the edgier, fashionably sassy Bratz, dolls have been a reflection of the latter-day trends and standards of beauty.

As a child, I was never a Barbie fan. I was a “hairdresser” and Barbie’s head was entirely too small to style. However, I am very familiar with this beautifully misproportioned icon. With Bratz’s recent takeover of the fashion doll market, I’ve become interested in Barbie’s evolution since 1959.

The original cat-shaped eye Barbie switched to a heavy eyeliner in the sixties and then to the sunbathing, straight-haired Malibu Barbie of the seventies. “Ethnic” Barbies were introduced in the eighties, she flaunted wavy, big hair in the early nineties and was made-over to have a more athletic physique in 2000. (Pisani). Barbie, her face and body have consistently been a reflection of present-time standards of beauty.

But have these standards changed again? The sales of Barbie have steadily fallen in the United States since the debut of Bratz. (Flaccus). The saucy Bratz dolls were introduced by MGA Entertainment in 2001. I first began to recognize these dolls in possession of my younger, female kin. Shortly after, they
were requesting the entire Bratz line of stuffed-animal cats, life-sized heads (for hairstyling, make-up and manicures) and Bratz Babyz for Christmas. Their trendy clothes, brightly colored make-up, decked out accessories, and shoes added an urban and sassy appeal to these Barbie categorized dolls.

An incomplete sketch I did in my notebook that inspired me to do the more realistically rendered digital painting titled "Dulce & Linda" in 2007

Figure 5: Sketch

Their large, stylized eyes, accented by heightened cheekbones and sultry lips instantly reminded me of the characters I’ve been constantly doodling since elementary school. Early on in my current body of work, I found it easiest to analogize to the Bratz’s features when describing my aesthetics to a friend. The verbal comparison was rarely needed to fans of the popular dolls in the presence of my work.

The correlation to Bratz proportions has frequently been alluded to my digital painting titled “Dulce & Linda”. The title roughly translates to “sweet and pretty” or “pretty candy” in Spanish. This piece was modeled after one of my best friends who happens to be a fashionista named Linda. I dressed her with flowing locks, flower petals and a pose that exudes both self-confidence and innocence. I was interested in emphasizing mannerisms peculiar to her, yet recognizable enough for multitudes of contemporary viewers to identify with.
I believe oversized heads, feet, and eyes reflect a rising social trend and cultural perception which embraces “cutesy-bred” fashionistas; generations of Americans and foreigners alike who have been nurtured on Saturday morning cartoons, eighties and nineties fashion trends, and cheeky attitudes as seen on reality television. I acknowledge the probability that I and the art I create is possibly a product and reaction to this upbringing.

However, I don’t use altered proportions as a tool to turn the human figure into a commercial object. This is one of the reasons I have elected to solely use family and close friends as subjects. Because of my deep affection towards them, I cannot display them as a commodity. Instead, I believe proportions that relate to cuteness act as an informal commonality for people of all backgrounds. As human beings, we have innate connections to infantile proportions. I hope this connection allows viewers to see past any initial uncanny perception. Instead, I intend to reveal amplified depictions. Images that are truer to the idiosyncrasies of these adults and children alike. Distinctive and peculiar characteristics that are present everywhere.
My Interpretation of Cuteness

The artwork I create emerges from both innate and cultural influences. Along with the common associations of cuteness I’ve referenced thus far, my definition extends to round bellies protruding during lax poses, fuller cheeks that are perfect for pinching, and random, yet distinctive beauty marks, moles or scars. As I observe day-to-day peculiarities of people around me, I continually add to my memory bank of cuteness; the moments that remind me of someone’s blushing cheeks or single raised brow. A point in time marked by a dimple, mischievous smirk, or shiny nose; sensitive and red. Remnants of childhood flaunted by triumphant smiles with missing teeth or braces with colorful rubber bands. The “grown” look I admired as a little girl in a beauty salon; big, intricate hairdos, well-styled attire, and full lips, colored or glossed and contorted with sass. My experiences shape how I express cuteness in my artwork..

On the other hand, universal interpretations of cuteness also implicate vulnerability. If looking “cute” means to emulate the features of an infant, there should also be a need for physical and emotional protection from a nurturing adult. My characters have features considered “cute” or infantile. Their oversized heads and eyes are clichés for cuteness. However, I intend for the overall renderings of my subjects to be empowering. This may be the cause for such diverse feedback to my work. Many have considered my images “eerie” or “uncanny,” and others as “adorable” or “funny”.

I’m interested in exploring common symbolisms of cuteness by working to redefine them. To revisit Kawaii for example, vulnerability is depicted by traits that enhance the look of helplessness. Consequently, characters may be mute, as seen in Hello Kitty’s nonexistent mouth; leaving her incapable of speech and symbolically without the power to articulate. With her growing popularity, the makers of Hello Kitty have recently deprived her of a body all together. In contrast, my work often displays cheerful ear-to-ear smiles, screaming or frank attitudes. Attitudes that are expressed by today’s youth assertively. My thick-skinned characters lack vulnerability with their all-too-mature snaking of the neck, rolling of the eyes, “chipping” and scornful hand gestures. They have capable, even
oversized hands and feet and they flash lively poses and bearing smiles; in contrast to the mouthless faces, stumpy, swollen limbs or a complete absence of limbs, fingers and toes that would be prevalent in vulnerable characters.

Figure 7: Squint Sync and Zippy Gaiety from A Mia Series, 2007-8
Figure 8: Red, Blue and Green, 2007, Multimedia
Those seemingly susceptible to danger are safeguarded by an escorting loved one. In a diptych I’ve titled “Strong Ties”, the hair of a watchful mother comforts and protects a sleeping child. In three of the four paintings for “A Mia Series”, the baby girl is accompanied by an older brother, uncle and father. In “Tot of Wrath”, the screaming child is incredibly strong-willed although she is by herself in the camera frame. In “Aw...sSpit”, a crawling toddler is equipped with speed and slobber in a pounce-like pose. In another, that same toddler plays in the corner as he’s looked after by his older kin. Common implications of cuteness are present in some features of my work as a whole. However, the common associations for vulnerability do not apply.
Figure 10: Tot of Wrath, 2007-8 from A Mia Series

Figure 11: Aw...Spit, 2009
Figure 12: *Twisted*, 2008

Figure 13: *Befuddled*, 2008
BEAUTY

Beauty Historically in Art

Evolving ideals of beauty have been defined by symmetry and proportion throughout the course of history. From ancient statues of Venus, representations of Queen Nefertiti, Medieval paintings of the Madonna to present-day fashion models, beauty in the human figure can be quantified cross-culturally and through centuries with great likeness in terms of symmetry. Studies have shown that those considered to be beautiful have been the most symmetrically balanced among their peers; meaning that the left half of the face and body is a nearly mirrored image of the right half.

In traditional concepts of beauty, there is less homogeneity in terms of proportion. Marcus Vitruvius, a first century Roman architect, created one of the earliest known writings that expressed “correct” bodily proportions as fractions. Vitruvius stated that the head should be one-eighth of the total body length, the torso should be one-fourth, and so on. (Eco, 74). These proportions are still accepted in contemporary figure drawing.

\[ \text{Vitruvian Man, a “perfectly” proportioned man by Leonardo da Vinci derived from Vitruvius’s writings on geometry and human proportions.} \]

By the High Renaissance, a historical art period spanning from the 1450s to the 1520s, artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael began to practice a more mathematical approach
to beauty. Artists of the time developed techniques to render light and perspective more realistically. Furthermore, they strove to portray the human figure naturalistically with precise proportions and perfect symmetry. Those practices are now deemed as Classical ideals of proportion because they resulted from the art and writings of Ancient Greece and Rome.

“The neck, say they, in beautiful bodies, should measure with the calf of the leg; it should likewise be twice the circumference of the wrist...You may assign any proportion you please to every part of the human body; and I undertake that a painter shall religiously observe them all, and notwithstanding produce, if he pleases, a very ugly figure. The same painter shall considerably deviate from these proportions, and produce a very beautiful one.” Edmund Burke

The course of art history has shown an ongoing search for mathematical justifications of beauty. The use of the Golden Ratio, for example dates as far back as 490 B.C. Plato believed that artworks using this proportion where aesthetically pleasing. The Golden Ratio, (the ratio of the whole to the larger part is equal to the ratio of the larger part to the smaller part) also known as Divine Proportion, can be seen in art from the ancient Greek “Bust of Apollo”, to graphic designers’ present-day use of its derivative, “Rule of Thirds”. Comparably, mediaeval artists favored dividing the face into seven equal horizontal sections. The hair, as in Botticelli’s “The Birth of Venus” would be one-seventh of the entire length of the face. Then the forehead-to-brow and eye-to-nose spaces would be two-sevenths each, and so on (Bruce, 131).

The High Renaissance marked a successful adherence to the Classical standards of beauty as defined by ancient Greece and Rome. It revolved heavily on mastering realism, perspective and imitating the harmonies of nature. Mannerism, the following art period, was both influenced by, and a reaction to the restrained proportions and naturalist approach to High Renaissance art making. As opposed to those realistic and mathematical depictions of beauty, Mannerists opted to stylize the figure in a
subjective way. Many artists deliberately diverted from the “rules” of Classical proportion and linear perspective. In fact, they gravitated towards the fantastic, exaggerated, exotic and often bizarre.

Mannerism differed from High Renaissance by its elongated figures and unconventional lack of symmetry in the composition.

Figure 15: The Madonna with the Long Neck by Parmigianino, 1525

Mannerists took many liberties in portraying the human figure and environmental spaces. For instance, the elongated figures and asymmetrical composition of Parmigianino’s “The Madonna with the Long Neck” was out of harmony and proportion as previously defined by Classicism. Whether with elongated proportions, disjointed figures, stylized poses, or a lack of perspective, artists sought anti-classical means for emotional effect.
Symme-Perfect Series

I’ve addressed the issues of Classicism in an ongoing portrait series titled “Symme Perfect”. The name both embodies symmetry, and implies a lack thereof. When pronounced aloud, the title may sound like “semi perfect” which alludes to the original, natural faces and expressions that are incapable of perfect symmetry. The lack of symmetry is obvious in some and more subtle in others. In the original portrait of the person, the viewer may be incapable of making fine distinctions between the left and right sides of the face. I create two perfectly symmetrical faces from one portrait to make the differences physically distinguishable. The resulting two faces, one of the left side mirrored and the other of the right side, are consequently different. Only “beauty” marks, scars and a central axis point remain in a fixed location. Liberties have been taken with the facial proportions in a Mannerist fashion. Yet, each face has been remodeled to Classical symmetry.

Since this body of work was considerably influenced by historical references, I wanted to juxtapose the context by addressing it in a contemporary fashion. So I sent requests to my top friends on MySpace, an online social network. Each received the following directions:

1. Hold the camera out in front you with the lens and flash facing you (not the mirror).

2. Through the mirror, you should be able to see yourself in the screen of the camera.

3. Smile, smirk, grill...whatever you feel like at the time.
   Do what you do when you look in the mirror.
Here, the series is presented in diptych format. The bold faces can also be viewed in traditional stereoscopic photography, in which the two symmetrical faces blend as one, and project in three-dimensional proportions.

Figure 16: Symme’Perfect Series 2008
Digital cameras and taking pictures of oneself in the mirror are parts of an ever growing digital culture. By stepping away from the camera, I’ve entrusted the role of photographer to the model. This adds an element of self-perception in each piece, and in many ways makes each image a self-portrait. I included the last step, “do what you do when you look in the mirror” with that intention in mind. Whenever I look in the mirror, I change my expression to something I feel is more attractive. I raise a brow, squint my eyes, lower my shoulders, and slightly smirk...sometimes.

I requested that each person send me a single photograph they would like me to use. The photograph each person sends to me is in their mind the best representation of them at that moment. With the instant gratification of a digital camera, a photo can immediately be seen and discarded if unpleasing. It may take one person twenty shots to capture a satisfactory image, while another may be happy with the first one. To this day, I haven’t received the photographs from friends who feel they have yet to take “a good one”.

**Emphasis of Features**

Recent scientific studies have attempted to link facial beauty to averageness. The research shows that more average faces have increased perceived attractiveness. Perhaps this is due to the lack of distinctive traits such as sharp contours, or irregularities like surface blemishes. In this sense, averaging is synonymous with idealizing beauty.

Averageness also relates to attributes in a figure alluding to their health. Health of the eyes for example, may be perceived differently for their clearness, glossiness, or the presence of red veins and dark circles beneath them. Likewise, the teeth, skin and just about every part of a figure may be evaluated beyond the measurement of health and into physiognomy; the pseudoscience of judging a person’s character from their facial features. In my artwork, I intend for viewers to empathize with the figures rather than stereotype them. It is important for me to capture moments of varying emotion that every human being can relate to. By conveying idiosyncratic details of universal emotions, I give
clues to the personality of the subjects. My method includes both accentuating the features peculiar to a person as well as lessening distractions that take away from them.

My artwork, and the Symme‘Perfect Series in particular, correlates to the ideas of averageness because I apply retouching techniques to the photograph. This may include minor manipulations like concealing blemishes on the skin, deep lines, and discolorations. It may even entail a higher degree of alteration such as smoothing out contours for a more youthful appearance. However, I consider what is most distinctive about that person in effort to accentuate it. With that in mind, I may remove one scar, while making another larger. I’d possibly blur visible pores, yet make freckles more red. This act of exaggerating distinctive features in a figure can be related to caricature.

In essence, caricatures exaggerate, oversimplify or even distort the identifiable features of a person or thing. Caricatures are most commonly made with the intention to demoralize a figure, often political in nature, or to show a comical aspect. They expose and exaggerate physical traits in order to arrive at a deeper meaning. However, the success of one lies in perceptibility. Even slight caricatures of a person can be more recognizable than the actual photograph.
The concept of caricature can extend into other areas of art such as illustrations like those by Norman Rockwell and unknown graffiti artists, or in fictional literature with allegories like *Animal Farm*. What a caricature-like illustration says about the subject is most fascinating to me. I’m also interested in the information a telling posture, stride, hand gesture or tilt of the head can contain that a raw portrait may not detail.
Figure 19: Propose, 2007

Figure 20: Pop Tart, 2007
INFLUENCES

Graphic Design and Photography Background

I studied graphic design at Florida A&M University in the School of Journalism and Graphic Communications. The graphic design program was very distant from the Fine Art Department and foundation training. Instead, the graphic design program emphasized darkroom photography and traditional cut-and-paste prepress techniques. We learned how it was done before computers so that we could apply those principles with modern-day technologies while having an understanding of the past. Balancing color with a projector in a darkroom makes color correction in Adobe Photoshop seem relatively easy. Many of the professors promoted full frame photography and revealing the negative’s edges, “Kodak” type and holes. I recall the saying, “cropping should be done through the lens of the camera, not in the darkroom.”

Figure 21: Reflecting, 2004, At Play 1, 2004 and Nana’s Hands 1, 2003

Photography has been a very meditative process for me. I have photographed everything from downtown cityscapes to my costume-wearing friends in a giant doll box I built in my living room. I chased butterflies in gardens and then spent hours in the darkroom developing. When I finished the required photography classes, I focused on capturing nature, special events, family and friends. My eye turned from all things interesting to those that were most momentous and meaningful. Working on these series didn’t feel labored over like assignments often do. With the creative freedom available outside the classroom, I further altered my darkroom photographs with digital techniques.
The neighboring journalism department functioned as another influence. I’ve had a strong interest in editorial design because of the opportunity for illustrating an idea or story. Each article acts as a stimulus to evoke creativity and allows me to illustrate or embellish existing photography to fit a particular concept. Starting in my sophomore year, I worked as a staff designer for the on-campus magazine. A turning point in my thinking occurred while I was creating a photo-illustration for a story titled “We Wear the Mask.” I aimed to realistically render a human mask for an article about people who assume the character or appearance of someone else. The ability to create surreal imagery that paradoxically retains photo-realism is ultimately what attracted me to digital imaging.
Photo-illustration created for an editorial article in Journey Magazine: Culture Shock Issue, 2005

Figure 23: *We Wear the Mask*

Figure 24: *Fairies Series, 2006*
It wasn’t until I became art director of the campus magazine that the discussion of the ethics of retouching photography came into play. Conservative journalist viewpoints condemning any modification to a photograph caused dissension between the design and journalism students. Every whiter tooth, digitally removed blemish, or enhanced tonal range could trigger a moral debate. Although the magazine covered a variety of views from hard news to fashion spreads, many of the editors believed in a classic newspaper approach in which it is never ethical to edit journalistic photography.

I’ve continued this discussion of ethics in the Electronic Imaging course I’m currently teaching. We examine extreme retouching practices that portray thinner models and consider the designers’ responsibility to a young viewer’s self-esteem. With a tongue-in-cheek attitude, I teach the apparent “beauty” techniques of slightly enlarging the eyes, enhancing bone structure, straightening teeth and smoothing wrinkles — these and countless other alterations that can commonly be observed in ad campaigns and throughout magazines.
A concept lifestyles magazine I created in 2005. It emphasized fashion and beauty as it concerns young women. Figure 26: **yuv** Magazine Cover Design

Graphic designers have an ethical responsibility in the evolution of visual culture. However, they must still tailor their creative freedom and adapt to the journalists’ prime concerns of factual integrity and cultural sensitivity; or in some cases, a lack thereof. As an artist, I sought expression beyond editorial limitations. In my current work, the opportunities for altering images are limitless. I use retouching techniques often criticized by the journalism community, not for the purpose of deception, but as creative license to direct the viewer’s attention. I remove all things I think will prevent the viewer from giving full attention to the significant elements. In like manner, I amplify the characteristics that are important or indicative of my beliefs.
**Quaintness**

I've always had a fascination for images from the past, the stories they imply and all things charmingly old-fashioned. As part of my graphic design training, I restored old family photographs by removing fading, scratches, dust and moisture damage. Although the restoration of these images improved the quality, it also dulled the sense of nostalgia and quaintness from them. I have an ongoing ‘Vintage Series’ of photographic images that still allude to matters of cuteness, beauty and character. Additionally, the charming “imperfections” are maintained and enhanced as embellishments.

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*Left:* Scan of the original 100+ year old photograph. *Middle:* Restoration I did in 2006. *Right:* “Sent Scent.” Original photograph used this time with emphasis on elements of aging, such as scratches and water damage.

**Figure 27:** Original Vintage Photograph, Restoration and Sent Scent, 2009
Figure 28: The Doorway, 2008

Figure 29: Sweet E., 2008 and (ute T., 2008
CONCLUSION

By embracing the control that digital tools afford me, I adapt facial and figural features to unnatural proportions influenced by the psychology of cuteness. In many instances, the manipulations challenge standards of beauty as defined by art history. The images are tailored to empower the subjects all the while mirroring trends in contemporary pop culture.

Figure 30: Irked, 2009
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