

The Nightmare Before Christmas

Matthew Tully Dugan

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I found myself in Hong Kong at the height of the highly disruptive and violent protests that had begun 6 months earlier in the fall of 2019. I was there to help archive the work of my friend Matthew who had taken his life just a month prior, a tragic and unexpected event that was felt deeply not only by his close friends and family but the art world at large. I was there to work alongside Matthew's mother collecting and documenting the massive archive of works he'd left behind and I knew that emotions would be running high. The state of the uprisings there were also growing increasingly tense with a central area of conflict being just a few blocks from our hotel. Everything felt on edge. When we arrived you could see that the sidewalks had been torn up, bricks removed and stacked up as obstacles in the street to disrupt traffic as they attempted to cause stress to the city's infrastructure. Angry graffiti littered the buildings. The protestors typically moved quickly and at random to various activation sites to avoid the oppositional army of "raptor" police that were on high alert, moving en masse to different locations like a sadistic head-game of political cat and mouse. You never knew if you might end up being caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In China there is an unofficial but hugely celebrated e-commerce holiday for people that are single, on November 11th (11.11). It started as a social event aimed at breaking away from being alone, to celebrate with friends and perhaps find love, but has since been hyper-capitalized by one of China's largest e-commerce conglomerates Alibaba and is now one of the highest grossing days of the year with retailers bringing in more money than Black Friday and Cyber Monday combined. It's the epitomic peak of capitalism and it uses loneliness and discontent as its fuel. As the people of Hong Kong continued to fight against the authoritarian rule of the CCCP their activism continually increased its focus on commercial targets that were being endorsed or otherwise funded by the Chinese government like Starbucks, Yoshinoya and Activision Blizzard. They were tired of being tricked into paying for their own imprisonment, supporting these companies that were directly compromising their freedom, so they started destroying them.

I had been closely following the protests in the weeks leading up to my trip and was nervous as things continued to escalate. I arrived in HK on 11.11 not yet knowing of the holiday. That night a group of protestors broke into the Festival Walk mall and destroyed everything in sight, shattering every pane of glass and eventually lighting fire to a 50 foot tall decorated Christmas tree. The videos were all over social media and the image of that tree on fire singed itself into my memory as a perfect allegory for what was happening there on the surface versus what was happening below it. At night the streets were decorated with lights and feigned Christmas cheer but in the light of day they were battlegrounds strewn with debris, visceral stages where hongkongers shed blood and tears as they fought for their independence and ultimately their happiness. There was nothing but anger frustration fear and sadness in the air despite trying to seem hopeful, and that's how I felt too. Nevertheless the burning tree took its toll, the mall didn't reopen for months. I was excited by the upheaval. It was performative philosophy. High concept political art.

Matthew struggled through a lot but he stayed committed to his work. He would draw and make watercolor paintings every day as his meditation. It brought him peace. He battled against his internal dialogue, his tourettes and his depression, but he found true joy in art and every time I saw him I'd see that joy, he'd be psyched to talk about a new show he'd seen, a new artist he was studying, a new song he'd been playing in the studio non stop and I was always happy to learn from him. His knowledge was vast but accessible. He'd connect the dots for me on how his practice might relate to one of the great masters but he'd speak about it humbly. I loved how seriously he took being an artist and how he romanticized that reality.

I often think about his persistence and how his own drive manifested what he strove to achieve. He never stopped pushing forward and creating new work, honing his skills along the way. The success he began to experience toward the end of his life came perhaps as a double edged sword.

Warhol found success by putting up a mirror and showing society back to itself, making us all the main character. He exposed our vanity and our greed. Our obsession with success and fame. He made those aspirations look fun and exciting but it was all with a tongue in his cheek. The insufferable fallacy of the American Dream was something he articulated with such candor and wit that it was rebranded as humility. Andy might have disavowed the importance of the artist in society but I think he found it romantic too, vocational even, a higher calling.

Success as an artist can have the same depravity as holiday retail. We try to experience the joys of life through consumption, feeding a desire to commemorate reaching our goals, showing our love through acquisition, brandishing the physical fruits of our labor, boasting from the achievement of access, but often having the thing that proves you've made it can leave you feeling empty because the experience of desire is fulfilled. The passion is resolved, the hunt is over and the happiness wanes. The cycle starts over. The repetition creates memories but the memories become shadows and the objects become tarnished. The trophies lose the value we once gave them, even if they retain their monetary worth. The holidays are always duplicitous, they can offer the reality of joy, the time with our loved ones and the suspension of our busy lives to embrace the fantasy and childlike wonder of a fairytale, but it can also highlight the opposite. It can be a time of loneliness, existential introspection and a yearly timestamp that compels us to consider what we accomplished, or failed to accomplish, in the past 12 months, and can lead us to question the direction of our current path.

If we have made our dreams come true, what is there left to dream? If the art is just a means to an end, does the mysticism and fulfillment found in their creation lose its impact? Should art be made just to consume or does it still have the power to transcend? If you walk the tight rope between the two are you being cautious or risky? If we commodify ourselves are we then packaged just to be consumed, reduced to the sum of our accomplishments, our vitality devoured leaving nothing but our dissected bones?

Maybe that's all too theoretical.

Maybe it's just that sometimes we are steeped in the nightmare of life,
and other times,
it's Christmas.

In dedication to MW

Matthew Tully Dugan (b. 1986) is a New York born and based multidisciplinary artist. The artist's interests span celebrity, psychology, pop iconography, privacy, and fanaticism. Dugan often employs promotional, social, and found imagery in a practice motivated by digital media's physical and emotional divide. His paintings, sculptures, installations, texts, and curatorial projects collapse the popular and the subcultural, the collective and the personal, as a means of processing contemporary conditions and their impact on the psyche.

Recent exhibitions include a solo show at 56 Henry, New York, NY (2022) as well as a solo at Loveclub, New York, NY (2021). Group exhibitions include Fragment, New York, NY ('22) 56 Henry, New York, NY ('21), Galerie A.M.180 Prague, Czech Republic / Gern en Regalia, New York, NY ('21) and Ticktack, Antwerp, Belgium ('22). Dugan also runs a curatorial program, Art Death.