

COASTAL SIGNS

*A life lived on the surface results in a kind of internal death and a flattening out of all experience.*¹

Anna Backman Rogers, Sofia Coppola: *The Politics of Visual Pleasure* (New York: Berghahn Books 2019), 104.

Prada, Spring Summer 1991

A cultural trace from the year of your birth feels poignant. A book, song, or artwork from the time you entered the world can conjure a sense of legacy and influence. This proximity to source can feel like a material origin, your interaction with it more genuine, especially as it circulates digitally, reused and reimagined.

Prada, Spring Summer 1991 (Adjusted to Fit) (2021) depicts a model mid-step, walking down a runway. She wears a brown PVC coat, black mini shorts and leather loafers: Prada from the year, and season, of the artist's birth. It is a near replica of photographic documentation of the 1991 runway collection but Wagstaff's painterly intervention, alters the image's aspect ratio to fit it to the canvas' size.

The term 'adjusted to fit' alludes to the use of photo editing technologies to compress or stretch an image to fit a predetermined format. As a painterly effect, Wagstaff's technique reminds me of trying on clothes in front of a bad changing-room mirror, the image warping and reflective surface lying.

The source of the painting's original image is infinitely possible. The practice of referencing and archiving the sartorial past is its own online culture. Images ripped from their original context circulate digitally, slowly losing sight of their original referent. We expect fashion to change and evolve with time, but fashion constantly borrows, looks back, imagines a future with residues from the past.

Miu Miu, Spring Summer 1999

Miu Miu Shoe (Adjusted to Fit) (2021) shows a foot enclosed in a Mary-Jane Velcro strap shoe. The particular shoe is from the Miu Miu Spring Summer 1999 runway collection. This collection presented a utilitarian style: stiff cotton, buckle belts, models with side parts, invisible zips and grassy suedes. The shoes in the collection were of particular note; the bubble sole, rounded rubber toe and heel.

Wagstaff has rotated the image 90° anticlockwise and rendered it in paint. I feel as though I am privy to an editing session in Photoshop; image rotation, skew, perspective warp and transform. Applying the language of Photoshop tools to painting feels appropriate for an artist who taught themselves the techniques of figurative painting from watching instructional YouTube videos.

Sofia Coppola, Juergen Teller,

Marc Jacobs Perfume, Spring Summer 2001

Photographer Ilya Lipkin's essay, *ILYA LIPKIN ON THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ALT-REAL* examines fashion photography's tendency towards realism in the 90s. This stripped back approach played out in a preference for natural light over studio, and the use of non-professional models. Lipkin critiques the idea that a photographic directness correlates to a more genuine engagement with reality. Rather he calls this a "realness effect", an orchestration in its own right, trading in vulnerability and personal intimacy.² Ilya Lipkin, "ILYA LIPKIN ON THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ALT-REAL.", *Texte Zur Kunst*, January 2017.

This realness effect is typified in the 1998 – 2009 collaboration between fashion designer Marc Jacobs and the photographer Juergen Teller. Encountering this campaign in the early 2000s, it struck me as audaciously low-fi. In one well-known image Sofia Coppola leans on the edge of an infinity pool, Teller's legs floating in frame. It appears to be a casual 'point and shoot' type moment. Coppola's appearance, un-styled and relaxed, tells us that the shoot was an organic process of friendship. The formal image itself is washed out and muted, the result of using a flash in daylight. Teller's selection of analogue photographic processes, 35mm film and a rangefinder camera translating to a quality of intimacy in image.

The ad exists at the centre of a trifecta of association and clout, between Coppola (the indie film-director), Jacobs (the fashion designer) and Teller the photographer. Instead of foregrounding a garment or product the ad connotes a world of exclusivity and elitism.

This type of image, which at the time subverted the high-brow economy of the fashionable image, has now been reproduced to oblivion. It's original effect, lost, now exists as a replicated surface or style only. As Lipkin further states:

*Today, the indexical imprint for a new kind of document is style itself, served up by fashion as content.*³ Lipkin.

Strobe Lines, 2021 / The Fifth Element, 1997

Strobe Lines (2021) plays with fashion's trace in a different way. Shirts that appear to have been dipped in gasoline are hardened, flattened and stuck on a black canvas. Flattening is emphasised, a process endemic of fashion's ability to seduce and masquerade on surface level.

The painting has a material quality of an archaeology site. It reminds me of the flying cars with dirtied surfaces in Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997). *Strobe Lines* reads as if dirt and debris has been chipped and brushed away to reveal a fashion memento sealed away on canvas in the year 2022. I always find it hard to fathom dirt or soil in depictions of the future, but these are things that allow a future to be believable and feel tangible.

The visible degradation on the surface of Bruce Willis' taxi in *The Fifth Element* is echoed in the quality of its grainy film stock.⁴ Bruce Willis plays Korben Dallas, a cab driver who tries to secure four mystical stones and a mysterious fifth element that alone can defeat a cosmic evil force during an apocalyptic war. Like Teller's choice to work with 35mm analogue processes, there is a luxury to the realness codified in films' visible grit and the grain. The use of dated photographic technologies attempts to transcend the superficial façade of the new; to appear more raw, more real and aligned with an alternative or avant-garde.

Bogus Ray Ban advertisement, 2018

Selection is a powerful tool for an image maker. In this way photographic theory is useful when considering Wagstaff's selection of images in *Smooth Signs*. Within the confines of a viewfinder the photographer possesses the control to edit, isolate or exclude; to create the story they wish.

Vilém Flusser likened this process to playing chess. The chess player pursues new possibilities and new moves within the game. The chess player plays with chess pieces, the photographer plays with the camera to discover new possibilities in its constraints.⁵ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 27.

This power of selection is evident in *Smooth Signs* but Wagstaff plays with the hierarchy of artmaking, translating his image selection through the process of figurative painting. This material translation gives the circulated image new status by freezing it within an art economy.

The *Ray Ban Hack* paintings register a disruption to this logic of image selection. *Rbsog* (2021) depicts an image of sunglasses, overlaid with text: 'Ray Ban,' 'one day only' and '90% Off!' Any person who uses social media will recognise this as a data phishing scam. In 2018 these images proliferated on social media platforms; when a user was hacked and their followers spammed with similar, fake advertisements for discounted Ray Bans.

The inclusion of this series in the exhibition signifies a non-directional process of image selection one where economic purpose clearly plays out in place of taste.

EMV chip, 2011

Credit Card Chip (Adjusted to Fit) (2021) depicts the recognisable detail of a bank card. Wagstaff has painted an EMV chip; the embedded microprocessor encoded with an electronic signature unique to an individual's debit or credit card. Concealed in a cavity behind the gold and green geometric lines visible in the work, the chip works by creating a one of a kind code that authorises a purchase safeguarding the user from fraud. Unlike the viral Ray Ban image, this data is designed not to be replicated.

Representing both the 'real' value system of money and the way it is encoded through data, *Credit Card Chip (Adjusted to Fit)* operates as a key for reading the way Wagstaff plays with systems of currency via painting. The inclusion of this work creates a tension with the other works in *Smooth Signs* which depict fashion, trends, phishing scams, and subculture facades. These works are concerned with the surface, their value encoded in signs. By turning the currency of the digital and cultural image into paintings, Wagstaff translates ephemeral practice and value into commodity in the gallery space.

Artforum, November 1991

In *Artforum* November 1991, Flusser wrote on the transient nature of books. It amazes me that in 1991 he speculated that the coming 'computer age' would see the demise of print media; with books turning to ash as we ourselves will. The miracle of the material, he writes, is temporary:

the attempt to defy nature, to defy death, is in the long run doomed to failure in everything we do, in books as in paintings, music, architecture, science, and technology. All these energies will in time be devoured by time, by entropy, and will be forgotten.

Does Wagstaff's material translation preserve his ripped images? Or once photographed, will his paintings return their images back to digital circulation and currency.



