Chris Sharp, ‘Camp + Dandyism = Neo-Camp?’, Kaleidoscope, March 2013

**PART A**

In the taut and subtly mannered work of a group of young artists,

**CAMP + DANDYISM**

the notions of dandyism and Victorianism come into play

= **NEO-CAMP?**

as clues to the origin of the domestication of camp.
Words by
Chris Sharp
Soft, pure and uninflected colors. Lavender, yellow, baby blue. Peaceful interiors and the decorative accoutrements that populate them. Everything sharply delineated against unified grounds. Distinguishable. Whole. Complete unto itself. Despite the sense that palpable integers abound, an air of euphemism lingers over it all, which is perhaps why the serenity found here feels less like the byproduct of wholesome living than a beguiling ruse, a highly stylized wish fulfillment, or, say, the complete and total domestication of camp.

What I have just evoked applies, in differing degrees, to the work of a group of young artists working today. It just so happens that all of these artists are men and they all either work in or are linked to major western art capitals. (Neither fact can, of course, be taken for granted.) Whatever the sexual orientation of these artists might be, their work is conspicuously of the order of what is generally perceived to be a gay cultural heritage, camp. I am thinking of the flagrantly homoerotic, neo-classic-ish paintings and bronze sculptures of the English, London-based Daniel Sinsel; the discreetly homoerotic, hand towel assemblages of the English, New York-based Paul Lee; the hyper-sleek cabinet sculptures of the Israeli, LA-based Elad Lassry; Australian, LA-based Ricky Sollow's small, faux-cardboard, decorative bronze sculptures, full of French curves; the women's undergarment assemblages of Mexican, Mexico City-based Martin Soto Climent; the recent paintings of serene, idealized, middle-class domestic interiors by the American, New York-based Mathew Cerletty; and finally, the dark, Martini-addled, mid-century style graphic design prints and narrative scenarios of the New York-based, American artist Matthew Brannon. While there are perhaps just as many differences as there are similarities among these heterogeneous bodies of work, it cannot be denied that they share a distinctly plastic sensibility: a propensity toward whole colors; an intimacy of scale; a shamelessly manufactured sense of facture and, at times, finish. For all its would-be sensuality, there is virtually nothing natural about this work. It tends to be subtly mannered, taut and perfectly mastered, closer in symbolic filiation to the preternatural precision of Ingres' drawings than, say, the explosive aesthetic incontinence of Gustave Moreau (both of whom are distant and not-so-distant forerunners, incidentally, of camp sensibility).

How do we account for this? What is it? Where does it come from? In an attempt to solve this mystery, I found myself dutifully, if a little predictably, turning back to Susan Sontag's justly celebrated "Notes on Camp" (1964). I was immediately struck by how simultaneously irrelevant and relevant it was to the work in question. In many cases, the essence of her claims could have been simply reversed, or turned inside out. For instance, and perhaps most importantly, consider her characterization of camp as "Dandyism in the age of mass culture": "The old style dandy hated vulgarity. The new-style dandy, the lover of camp, appreciates vulgarity." In the case of the work in question, vulgarity seems to have yielded to a marked preciosity, while nevertheless maintaining its link to the everyday (e.g., Paul Lee's towels, Sinsel's chocolate bars, Soto Climent's high heels, etc.); this shift gestures not so much toward a reversal, as a perfect fusion of camp and dandyism. This fusion can account for the discrepancies that arise when comparing the work of these artists to other parts of her text. For example, when she writes, "The essence of camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration," the infidelity, through comparative understatement, to the latter could be attributed to the resurgence of dandyism, despite this new work's affinity for the artificial. Similarly, a re-emphasis of beauty on the part of these artists could be said to complicate the following statement: "...the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization..." Again, an arguably seamless fusion of the camp and dandy sensibility seems to be at stake here. Meanwhile, other statements can be simply cut and pasted, intact: "Camp taste has an affinity for certain arts rather than others. Clothes, furniture, all elements of visual décor..." And not forgetting: "To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respects to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical." Soon thereafter: "Camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of 'style' over 'content,' 'aesthetics' over 'morality,' of irony over tragedy." And crucially: "Camp taste is by its nature possible only in affluent societies, in societies or circles capable of experiencing the psychopathology of affluence." (Emphasis mine.) If this last, highly fraught claim, which Sontag cavalierly disdains to gloss, does not exactly explain the privileged nature of the artists in question (primarily white men), it manages, at least in part, to situate it. That said, just such a psychopathology of affluence can be described in-
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the materialistic and detail obsessive fetishism that drives a lot of this work. From, say, the slick, seamless surfaces of Lassry’s sculptures to the patrician opulence of Daniel Sinseil’s fluidly draped fabrics, a kind of subtly perverse tendency toward cathexis seems to run throughout all of it.

So what then are we dealing with here? Neo-camp? Is it that simple? Can it be reduced to a kind of retrogressive formula, in which camp appeals to its origins in dandyism? In other words: Camp + Dandyism = Neo-Camp? Perhaps in part, but if not why, then how?

First of all, both camp and dandyism are ultimately Victorian, an adjective so simultaneously buttoned-up and bloated that it is continually on the brink of bursting. At once repressive and puritanical, the adjective and the era to which it refers can also be characterized as an emblem and an age of euphemism. Sublimation, both willful and unwillful, becomes the order of the day. Not only was it responsible, as Foucault claims in *The History of Sexuality*, for manufacturing our current conception of sexual identity and the “discursive formation” of homosexuality as a human category, but it also, consequently, bears within it a halcyon notion of purity so specious and fabricated that it essentially precludes any possibility of purity. Everything about the Victorian era, from its epigrammatic wit to the creation of fake grottos, seems contrived, constructed, artificial. (It is no small coincidence that the novel, which is the ultimate imposition of linear narrative form onto the comparative chaos of reality, was forged in and by this era.) It is an era that, in short, was fundamentally artful, which is to say, artistic. Little is left to chance or casually allowed to happen — everything is created and highly controlled. This being the case, Victorianism realized, at least to a certain degree, if only unconsciously, one of the avant-garde’s most fervent ideals *avant la lettre*: the fusion between artfulness and life. This perhaps accounts for Wilde’s condemnation of nature and naturalism in favor of artifice in his celebrated “The Decay of Lying” (1891), which could be considered both the distillation of the Victorian era’s cultural mores as well as their death knell. By identifying and seeking to reverse a process, he seems to have only midwifed it along. Granted, the cultural disenfranchisement of Victorianism and its aftermath was not destined to happen overnight. Its decline and fall would be stretched out over several decades. The importance of Freud here, of course, cannot be discounted. But it was French structuralism and its scrupulous decoding of culture, as well as its promulgation by American intellectuals, that administered an admittedly elaborate coup de grace. (Curiously, Sontag herself, who, like Wilde, is a transitional figure, can be seen, with her invocation of an “erotics of interpretation,” as one of the last true Victorians.) After structuralism, codes and the euphemisms that accompanied them were no longer tolerated, or, rather, if they were tolerated, it was precisely by virtue of the volumes of criticism their intolerability was liable to engender. Seen through structuralism’s lens, culture became little more than a collectively sanctioned act of concealment, of self-reflexive subfugue. It would be going a bit too far to refer to structuralism as a cultural witch hunt, but such a characterization would not be entirely inappropriate.

Dandyism and camp play important, albeit different roles in the perpetuation of the codification of culture. Interestingly, while Sontag perceives the dandy as the aristocrat of culture, a protector of high culture vis-à-vis the cultural enfranchisement of the bourgeoisie, Benjamin, in his essay, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” (1937), identifies the origin of the dandy in the English stock exchange. According to Benjamin, that ethos which Baudelaire sought and ultimately failed to embody, issued from the brokers’ sudden shifts of fortune on the trading floor and the cool-blooded dissimulation of their impact. Thus are the affectations of the dandy equivalent to that of poker face — as if he, the dandy, were magisterially unaffected by the vulgar vicissitudes of the world. Camp is perhaps even less affected by those vicissitudes, but more importantly, is a fully coded — and therefore Victorian — cultural phenomenon, carrying out its legacy in an ironically self-aware, pseudo-sublimated fashion. Acknowledging the necessity of post-Victorian de-sublimation, it also recognizes the importance of sublimation, and the codes by which it operates, in the formation and perpetuation of culture. After all, if we learned anything from structuralism, it is that culture is essentially a coded affair. And yet, the question we have been obliged to ask in our long, increasingly discursive, post-post-structural hangover is: can we have culture without codes? And the sublimation that accompanies them? I would argue — along with, I suspect, the artists discussed throughout this article — emphatically, no. (What is more, the so-called threat of the centrifugal dissolution of art into pure discourse conceivably justifies a reactionary, or better yet, protective, seemingly
superficial, centripetal dandified stance). But, by the same token, it is impossible to pretend that structuralism never happened. This is why neo-camp becomes such a compelling alternative and serviceable post-homosexual mode and metaphor for art, in the sense that Victorianism can now be seen as a metaphor for art—it unmoors camp from its provenance in homosexual culture, while nevertheless exploiting its bond to artifice and artificiality. Indeed, this is primarily why so much of this work seems so ambiguously ironic: not due to ambivalence, but to a certain tendency toward creating deliberate compounds of sublimation and de-sublimation (e.g., Daniel Sinse’s highly suggestive depictions of flutes, Martin Soto Climent’s cross-dressing sculptures, or Matthew Brannon’s wryly interpretable send-ups of mid-century advertising). Both pre- and post-structuralist, these works seek to affirm a fully self-aware “erotics of interpretation.”

1 Daniel Sinse, Untitled, 2011
   Courtesy of Office Baroque, Antwerp, Sadie Coles HQ, London and the artist
2 Daniel Sinse, Untitled, 2011
   Courtesy of Office Baroque, Antwerp, Sadie Coles HQ, London and the artist
3 Daniel Sinse, Untitled, 2009
   Courtesy of Office Baroque, Antwerp, Sadie Coles HQ, London and the artist
4 Paul Lee, Towel Panel Corner (Orange, Pink), 2010
   Courtesy of Maccarone, New York
5 Ricky Swallow, Magnifying Glass with Pipe, 2011, Courtesy of Marc Foxx, Los Angeles, and Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London
   Courtesy of Maccarone, New York
6 Ricky Swallow, Hat Clock/Open Study, 2011
   Courtesy of Marc Foxx, Los Angeles, and Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London
7 Untitled (Red Cabinet), 2011
   Photography by Stefan Altenburger, Photography, Collection Thomas and Cristina Bechtler, Switzerland
   Courtesy of Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich
8 Elad Lassry, Untitled (Zebrawood Rack), 2011
   Photography by Fredrik Nilsen, Courtesy of White Cube, London and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles © Elad Lassry
9 Mathew Cerletty, Ring, 2011
   Courtesy of Office Baroque, Antwerp, Algis Greenspon, New York and the artist
    Courtesy of T293, Naples/Rome
12 Matthew Brannon, Early Retirement, 2011
   Photography by Cathy Carver, Courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York
13 Matthew Brannon, Previous Owners, 2011
   Photography by Cathy Carver, Courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

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