

Ruben Bull-Milne
and Joseph Gentry
ME N' U

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Addendum to ME N' U
Nicholas Xuereb

It will warm the reader's lonely heart to learn that the artists Joseph Gentry and Ruben Bull-Milne are good friends.

A friend, generally, is someone who likes the same music and books and jokes that you like, while hating the things that you like to hate. A friend can also be someone who doesn't like the same things you like but does so in a charming way. What happens, for example, if two friends disagree on their preferred type of peanut butter, the first friend preferring crunchy, the second smooth? Or what if a third friend dislikes peanut butter altogether? What do you do when your other friend tells you she's allergic? You compromise, of course. You say, "O friends, let's forget all this about peanut butter and have some marmalade instead!"

A friend is someone who makes you think you're smarter than everyone else.

A friend is someone you wish would leave you alone sometimes.

A friend is still your friend even when you really hate them. Today, friendship, like everything else, is different from what it was before. Now friends can laugh at jokes together that are so far inside not even the jokers get why they're funny. The friends just laugh and laugh and send the joke to all their other friends, who also don't get the joke but still think it's pretty damn funny. The blame or praise for this change should be directed at the dizzying rise of Internet culture, which has turned the loss of the original in the twentieth century from tragedy into comedy. The twenty-first century is witness to new forms of online communication that celebrate this loss, which is also the loss of authorship, and animates an image of the absurd more bottomless than what even old Camus could see from behind his big boulder. What this has done to those red-and-blue strips of cellophane called reality/the Real is to colour them both purple: a fresh bruise on the arm of truth with a capital T.

But back to friends.

Friendship is the territory of amicable disagreement.

Therefore friendship is the opposite of violence—the territory of inimical disagreement.

Remember: it probably doesn't matter that much if your only friend is pretending, but it might matter a great deal if all your friends are pretending.

The main point: friendship is the larval stage of collaboration. The first project you and your new friend will likely collaborate on together is the project of making conversation. You'll ask them how they're going and what they're up to, how their day has been and how's their family. Pretty soon you and your friend will be making your own jokes and games. Maybe one day you'll make a cake together. Then you will surely be friends. If, eventually, you and your friend decide to collaborate on an art project, you may find yourselves saying something like: "If this is what collaboration looks like, I'll have no part in it!" This is where true friends discover the virtue of compromise. Because as much as the collab-

orative act is a joyous one it also involves a violation of private space. Keeping this intrusion civil requires serious levels of fidelity to the vision of the other, which is another way of saying that collaboration, like friendship, is a matter of choice and making choices. If art has an operative value it might be this bridging of the gap between me and you, the nearest thing to shucking the existential machinery of living in the first-person. Art is ultimately a waste of time but it is one of the few wastes of time that remain paradoxically worthwhile. Another, naturally, is friendship. Where art reclaims the material waste of culture, friendship claims the spiritual. The artists are grateful to have wasted their time in both pursuits and wish to do so again sometime in the future.

u take the photo today b/c u can

The works in ME N' U have been made between mates Joe Gentry and Ruben Bull-Milne. The artworks in the show are the results of a process of abstraction, a corruption or cannibalization of the 'original' image. Each time an image is shared, the artist alters it in some way before passing it back. The working of an image takes many forms, from digital effects to physical transmutations from 2D to 3D and vice versa. From their origin, then, if such a site can be mapped, the images do not know where they will end up, or how they will appear. The transformations that occur can be arbitrary, based on a gut feeling, on what'll be the most fun. These are products that reflect back on origins, but whose enjoyment is in their randomly generated journeys away from such a mythic point in time and space.

Sliding around the Internet, Gentry and Bull-Milne savor the thrill of an unmappable image-bank where distinctions of high and low are tired clichés and the whole lot is ripe for the picking. That is not to say that they are untethered hedonists, or gleeful appropriators of cultural icons. Perhaps better put, their practice here reflects on the young artist's place in a digital era where image production is comparatively cheap and so a view worth reproducing can be a childish drawing of a pot plant— simply because it is something. Large part of our attraction to the 'look' of the Internet is no doubt due to the way it makes everything available, already there. Abundance is a pleasure. Gentry and Bull-Milne make a case for the breakdown of hierarchies of taste, claiming that even cheap digital effects can create the 'look' of contemporary art, or that art can find uses for the most widely available mediums and techniques.

Take a bored digital scrawl as a kind of cookie cutter to break up the steamy image of a bathroom. The lightness of foam, its luxurious connotations and its conventional role to conceal a naked body, lead us into a sexual space. How did we get here? Stepping back from the image, we are taken away from this trope of the image economy into the territory of midcentury American paint-

ing's exploration of colour and tonal variation. The image gives a mood from its formal qualities, refers to some things (*Pantene*) then backs down from its assertion. It avoids the haughty confidence of high modernism as much as the too-easy assuredness of the stock photograph, which names its content. It lacks the completion claimed by these two poles amidst which the artists find themselves. What's neat is the traces of process, inclusions and exclusions— the index of their friendship.

But if they are enjoyable to look at, what is being called beautiful? a yellow brick wall? fragments of generic font? a tiny hat? Online detritus and stock imagery are warped beyond recognition, re-presented as slabs of colour, false – or totally sincere – strokes of deep interiority ('I chose this because I like it'). The changes made are barely planned, barely justified. Or could it be they are emotionally charged? I did this— what do u think? The works reflect on the way meaning accrues upon or to an object when it is passed between so many people recontextualising it, commenting on it, tearing it apart, bringing it to life. They seem to ask, What would such an over-shared object look like if it could remain scarred by all or some of the hands that touched it? Why is it beautiful?

Gentry and Bull-Milne are critical but happy 'digital natives'. If they are weary of anything, it is that nostalgia for a world where imagery less saturated our lives – where a photograph's unique aura was based on the privilege of the one who wielded the expensive equipment needed to produce it – is at least as cheap and insubstantial a position as the stuff from which our digital image bank is made. I, for one, am glad I get to look at this beautiful, silly stuff, and that the artists are our mates.

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