

**ROY
CAUSSY**

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Art Gallery of Alberta
March 7 - June 14, 2020

i. **“it was always burning since the world’s been turning”¹**

Outside gallery walls pyres are made to be set ablaze during funerary ceremonies. The custom celebrates life while the smoke ushers the spirit of the dead into the sky and on to the afterlife. The pyre has been used by many cultures all over the world in cremation of the dead. Commonly set alight along the Ganges river, the pyre also alludes to water and the balance created when the elements of fire and water align. The funerary pyre that Roy Caussy has created for the exhibition *The King is Dead...* is a response to the baby boomers and is meant as both a compassionate and celebratory lament of the waning power and influence of this generation. As an unusable and certainly unburnable art object, this pyre is a contradiction. Caussy’s static pyres vibrate with latent energy and signal a liminal moment, a threshold, a barrier between what was and what can grow in the space that fire clears. The work itself both looks back to legacies of the baby boomer generation and forward towards what can take root in the void or power vacuum they will leave behind. The pyre signals both death and rebirth.

ii. **“it went hippy, yippie, yuppy”²**

The work of Roy Caussy encourages a careful examination of what has been left in the wake of arguably the most powerful generation to have ever lived. Caussy encourages a thoughtful, even meditative, examination of how a generation of individuals—who once challenged the nuclear family, higher education, military participation and all things “establishment”—became champions of privatization and who now value profits and production at the expense of everything else. Joni Mitchell posits that free-spirited flower children became captains of industry when hippies were converted into consumers.³ The work encourages contemplation of this phenomenon while considering this generation alongside late capitalist neo-liberalism.

To optimize profit, baby boomers have reshaped nearly every aspect of our lives. A formulaic system has been created for everything, from medical care, to standardized testing in education, to the formulaic ways that pop hits are manufactured. Profit driven systems with quantity as their main goal now permeate every aspect of our lives. In the music industry, artists are rarely allowed to develop an artistic point of view, experiment, or chart their own artistic direction. Songs are commodifiable units rather than a personal form of expression.

iii. **“Ok, boomer”**

2018 marked the end of an era for the baby boomers. This was the final year that they had the largest adult population of any living generation. According to the median age of baby boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964 are no longer the most powerful voting bloc.⁴ They still retain majority representation at all levels of government in North America and hold by far the most economic power, but the world is now poised to see that power shift.⁵

iv. **“come on baby light my fire”⁶**

Roy Caussy’s pyre sits in the gallery supported and protected by a shower stall prepared to say goodbye. When will it be ready to be set alight for the baby boomers? Will we have to wait for the total destruction of the economy and the environment? What will the baby boomer generation leave behind as they cling to power? Will the pyre even need to be set ablaze or will it burn along with the rest of civilization as we know it? Will the death of this generation go hand in hand with the death of our world? What will rise from the ashes? Who will light it?

Caussy has created this monument for an imagined child. One who would be so foolish yet so naively hopeful as to light it. This installation speaks to the exhilaration of starting things on fire as a child, or the excitement of creating potions out of shampoo in the bathtub. Caussy’s installation alludes to a domestic space, one of safety and security that allows for reckless experimentation. By offering this pyre to a younger generation, Caussy is literally passing the torch in hopes of empowering youth to envision and create better futures.

v. **“they take him and they teach him and they groom him for life”⁷**

Caussy’s pyre is supported and permeated by ceramic objects. Clay starts as a very pliable but structurally weak material, expose it to fire and it becomes ceramic, a material that can be surprisingly sturdy. Like with the pyres themselves, the fire used in creating ceramics both destroys and creates. Caussy’s aesthetic is self-governed by his personal application of sacred geometry and employs the artist’s own symbolic visual grammar. Layered and interconnected, the myriad meanings of each element contributes to a circular poem that stacks upon itself to add complexity and allow



*Hippie, Yippie, Yuppy (after Joni), Part I, 2019. Paper, gouache, India ink, wood dowel.
Photography by Blaine Campbell.*

nuanced readings of the work. Although each element has meaning for the artist, he hopes that viewers apply a childlike logic in combining the elements to create a dreamlike, almost surrealist, narrative. The individual elements should not be interpreted as opposites or seen as a series of dichotomies but as anecdotes with one another's respective ideologies meant to be read simultaneously in contradiction, conversation and balance.

The beer can, for Caussy, symbolizes normalized uncomfortable behavior or beliefs passed from one generation to the next. In this instance in particular, stereotypically masculine ideologies passed from father to son and upheld for and ingrained into younger generations. The first bitter sips of beer given from father to son might seem innocuous but is a signifier for the artist of the gradual socialization of boys and men. While these ideologies are first doled out in tiny portions that are initially uncomfortable, "you'll learn to love it" and in turn uphold those ideologies unquestioningly and at all costs.

The Mickey Mouse hat is a souvenir of the aspirational North American childhood. Signifier of capitalism and the cult of the self, the Mickey Mouse hat conveys the artifice of Disneyland and the Mickey Mouse Club. Disneyland was made for baby boomers.⁸ This new sanitized version of reality helped raise this generation on commercialized tourism and an "obsessive concern with efficiency, predictability, calculability and control."⁹ The world fabricated by Disney promotes a simulation that is more desirable than reality itself and where the real and imaginary become confounded.¹⁰ This artificial construction is imbued with restrictive social norms now upheld by the baby boomers that younger generations are working tirelessly to dismantle. As a vessel, the hat contains only the self and is indicative of a generation that lacks community concern and collective accountability and that places greater importance on personal satisfaction than collective good.¹¹

vi. "I'm your Venus, I'm your fire"¹²

Is the Venus perched in her shell a caricature of demure and sexualized femininity to match the images conjured by the beer can? Is she dollar store replica kitsch found alongside knockoff Disney merchandise? Or does she represent the emerging divine feminine? Is she mindless consumerism, replication and simulacra or is she meant to convey the real deal? Is she authentic? In her mythology, she is born of sea foam



Venus Rising, 2020. Cast marble and alabaster resin. Courtesy of the Artist.



La vie est la mère, 2019. Porcelain, wood, felt, cinderblocks. Photo: Kat Valenzuela.



and washed ashore fully grown. Venus has no coming of age, avoids socialization and is presumably free of the ingrained expectations of gender conveyed by the beer can. In a contemporary context, it's impossible not to connect her rising out of the sea to rising sea waters, a signifier of climate change. While one considers what rises from the ashes of a pyre, one too can wonder what will rise from the oceans during and after human caused environmental collapse.

The Canadian prairies were once a vast inland sea. The humans now living on this land walk on what was the bottom of an ocean. The shell from which Venus emerges in her creation myth speaks to a geological time incomprehensible to the perpetually replicable 'now' of the hyperreal Disneyland narrative.¹³ When considering geological time, the current existential crisis brought about by the Anthropocene seems absurd. When one considers what must happen to turn an ocean into a dry prairie, our very existence seems insignificant. The pressing question that remains is what one should do with the meaninglessness of our own existence. Do we destroy everything around us because we don't matter or live with our fleeting reality in the understanding that, although temporally insignificant, "we are stardust"¹⁴ and connected to everything, even if it's not in the way we might think?

vii. "It's the new mother nature taking over"¹⁵ or "I saw old white guys trying to kill mother nature"¹⁶

A hallmark of baby boomer thinking is an inability or unwillingness to see beyond their own lifetimes.¹⁷ The egg conjures notions of futurity, possibility, rebirth, and regeneration. On one hand the egg alludes to an unknown and unwritten future full of optimism and possibility. On the other hand, the egg contains the inevitable, whatever is inside has been predetermined by the actions of a previous generation. This work forces a consideration of longer timelines and of consequences outside of a narrow focus on profit and production. The egg also conjures the fable of the goose that laid the golden egg. Rather than receiving one golden egg a day indefinitely, the farmer cuts open the goose in an attempt to get what he assumes will be a lump of gold. To the farmer's horror there is no gold inside and he is left only with a dead goose. Boomers—rather than being grateful for their good fortune at being born into public prosperity—have not nurtured their goose but rather fully privatized it; hoarding the golden eggs while diverting maintenance and environmental costs into a future they'll never see.



*Hippie, Yippie, Yuppy (after Joni), Part II, 2019. Paper, gouache, India ink, wood dowel.
Photography by Blaine Campbell.*



Fatherhood is a Joke!, 2019. Porcelain, dried grass, wood, cinderblocks. Photography by Blaine Campbell.

Endnotes

- 1 Billy Joel, "We Didn't Start The Fire," recorded July 1989, track 2 on *Storm Front*, Columbia, released September 27, 1989.
- 2 Lindsay Moon. Jian Ghomeshi Interviews Joni Mitchell, CBC Music, June 4, 2013. <https://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=2985>
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Richard Fry "Millennials projects to overtake baby boomers as America's largest generation," March 1, 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/01/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers/>
- 5 Bruce Cannon Gibney, *A Generation of Sociopaths: How the Baby Boomers Betrayed America*, (New York: Hachette Books, 2017), xvi.
- 6 The Doors, "Light My Fire," recorded August 1966, track 6 on *The Doors*, Elektra, released January 4, 1967.
- 7 Bob Dylan, "License to Kill," recorded April-May 1983, track 4 on *Infidels*, Columbia, released October 27, 1983.
- 8 Gary Cross and John K. Walton. *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 167.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Jean Baudrillard. "The Hyper-realism of Simulation" in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. ed. Harrison and Wood (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 1018.
- 11 Gibney, *A Generation of Sociopaths*. (New York: Hachette Books, 2017), 53.
- 12 Shocking Blue, "Venus," single, Pink Elephant, released July 1969.
- 13 Baudrillard. "The Hyper-realism of Simulation." (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 1018.
- 14 Joni Mitchell "Woodstock," recorded 1969-1970, track 11 on *Ladies of the Canyon*, Reprise, released April 1970.
- 15 The Guess Who, "No Sugar Tonight/New Mother Nature," recorded 1969, track 4 on *American Woman*, RCA Victor, released January 1970.
- 16 Neil Young with Crazy Horse, "She Showed Me Love," recorded 2019, track 2 on *Colorado*, Reprise, released October 25, 2019.
- 17 Gibney, *A Generation of Sociopaths*. (New York: Hachette Books, 2017), xxx.

ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY ROY CAUSSY

Roy Caussy was born in Hamilton, Ontario, and is currently based out of Medicine Hat. His work often revolves around serendipity, intuition and associations, with research interests in: WWII and the emergence of a youth demographic and youth marketing; diasporas and cycles; and the tension between our egos and our interconnectedness. Caussy has participated in exhibitions and residencies across North America, including the *2017 Alberta Biennial*. In 2019, Caussy mounted his exhibition, *Only the Losers*, at Stride Gallery (Calgary, Alberta), and is a participating artist in the Art Gallery of Alberta's 2020 TREX Program.

WRITER'S BIOGRAPHY LINDSEY SHARMAN

Lindsey V. Sharman is Curator at the Art Gallery of Alberta. She has studied Art History and Curating in Canada, England, Switzerland and Austria, earning degrees from the University of Saskatchewan and the University of the Arts, Zurich. From 2012-2018 she was the first curator of the Founders' Gallery at the Military Museums in Calgary, an academic appointment through the University of Calgary. Her primary area of research is politically and socially engaged art practice. Curatorial projects of note include *TRENCH*, a durational performance by Adrian Stimson; *Felled Trees*, an exhibition deconstructing national identity at Canada House, London; *Gassed Redux* by Adad Hannah; and the nationally touring retrospective *The Writing on the Wall: Works of Dr. Joane Cardinal Schubert*.

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