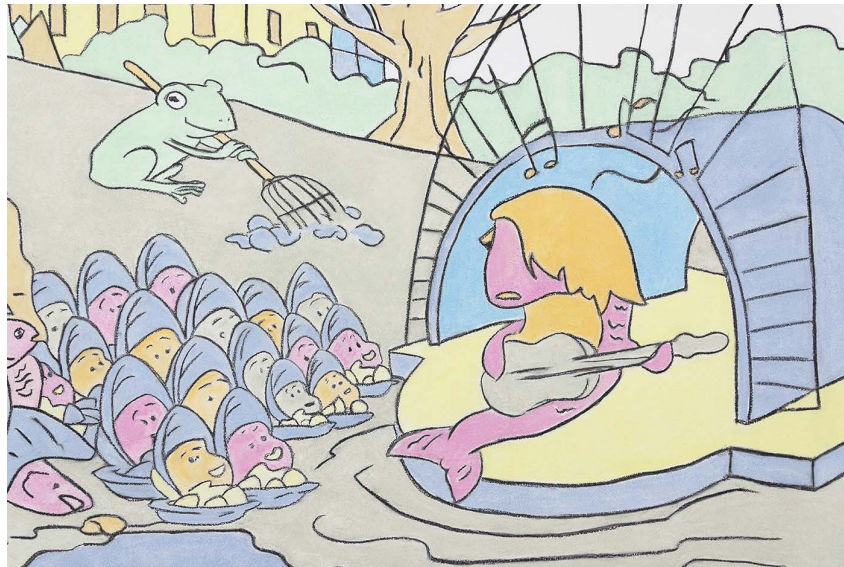


X—TRA

Of Boomers and Bass



Dena Yago, *Big Fish Eat Little Fish (detail)*, 2020. Chalk, charcoal, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Bodega, New York.

*For the Re:Research column, artist Dena Yago takes us into the as-seen-on-TV murk of Boomer pathos that spawned her latest exhibition, *Dry Season*, on view at Bodega, New York, from September 12 to October 24, 2020.*

Somewhere among my adolescent memories of George W. Bush—lodged between him choking on a pretzel and falling off of a Segway—is an image of him standing in his living room in Crawford, Texas, during the Florida election recount with Big Mouth Billy Bass mounted on the wall behind him. I imagine him parading former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott and House Speaker Dennis Hastert before the animatronic fish, triggering its rendition of “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” while millions of Americans sat in a state of suspended animation as the nation descended further into an ever-widening gyre of chaos.

Since 1998, the animatronic bass has accrued a layered, river scum-like patina of cultural signification. Superficially, it is nostalgic kitsch—a novelty item intended to communicate everything and nothing simultaneously. At its rubbery surface, the object feels most at home in a wood-paneled American pastoral: an uncle’s fishing lodge, a father’s workshop. These trophy fish hang in declaratively patriarchal spaces—spaces where men can be men, where dads can crack a beer and loosen their ties, where uncles can do whatever it is that uncles do behind closed doors. The fish is rumored to have graced the walls of Bush’s Oval Office. Bill Clinton gifted one to spurned presidential hopeful Al Gore. Big Mouth Billy Bass has become a transactional object among Boomer men both powerful and pedestrian. The fish’s unexpected animism elicited chuckles nationwide, and that was enough. Meanwhile, embedded in the object’s production and material signification was the imminent collapse of Boomer hegemony (which we have unfortunately not yet reached) and yet another nail in the coffin of American industrialism (designed in the USA, manufactured in China).

Dena Yago, X-TRA, December 7, 2019

Knowing this, why wouldn't one of the most nefarious and inept American presidents—who followed Rumsfeldian vagaries into unending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have, as of 2020, resulted in shy of three hundred thousand deaths—find peace in a novelty fish that, like a big-box store Lazarus, reanimates again and again to sing neoliberal mantras such as Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry, Be Happy," or Al Green's cleansing, baptismal tune, "Take Me to the River." With all that blood on your hands, Billy Bass may be the only figure telling you to chill out and seek redemption as you continue hurtling a nation towards financial, environmental, and ethical catastrophe.

My more recent interest in Big Mouth Billy Bass was piqued while watching the millennium-cresting HBO series *The Sopranos* twenty years after its premiere. At multiple points in the show, Tony Soprano is gifted, and subsequently haunted by, the singing fish. First, Billy is left on Tony's desk by an underling, where it prompts a nightmarish vision of Pussy, a friend whom he left to "sleep with the fishes," brought back to life in the form of a talking fish. Tony later uses Billy Bass as a weapon to beat up a bartender who mistakes the cursed object for harmless decor. His daughter, Meadow, unaware of the trauma it brings her father, gives Tony a Billy Bass for Christmas, setting off a dissociative state in the family patriarch. The fish appears once again during an exchange between the older Boomer Paulie Walnuts and his young Gen X protégé, Christopher Moltisanti. After a threatening "snitches get stitches"-style warning, Christopher sees Paulie reach in the back of his car and fears that he is pulling a gun. Instead, Paulie pulls out a Billy Bass and states, "My godson got me this. They're all over the place." After pressing the button, Christopher looks on in horror as the fish sings the lyrics to "YMCA": "Young man, there's no need to feel down / I said, young man, pick yourself off the ground / There's no need to be unhappy." Both characters proceed to nervously and maniacally laugh as the threat of violence diffuses. In each of these episodes, Big Mouth Billy Bass serves as a vessel for Boomer pathos. It triggers memories of past violence and the potentiality of future violence. It becomes quite literally weaponized. It is the object through which trauma and violence, whether it be real or imagined, is passed intergenerationally from one man to another. Like many novelty items, Big Mouth Billy Bass is something to give the Boomer men in your life when there is nothing left to say.



Dena Yago, *Trawler* (detail), 2020. Audio, wood, enamel, Big Mouth Billy Bass, 30 x 27 1/2 x 5 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Bodega, New York.

Dena Yago, X-TRA, December 7, 2019

I began writing the monologues for *Dry Season* in May of this year. Any frustration or antagonism in the text exists because of my own anger at how the coronavirus was being mismanaged, and how systemic racism and a state of policing remain widely unchanged in the US—in part, it seems, due to Boomers’ incapability to see beyond their own self-interest. To clarify, Boomerism is not solely a demographic but rather a state of mind. One that fails to recognize its own privilege, that can only view the world through the lens of its own material conditions, that mistakes the anecdotal for the objective and the experience of one for the experience of many. Because of a fundamental breakdown of intergenerational understanding, *Big Mouth Billy Bass* seemed to be the optimal conduit for a family constellation therapy session among characters that stand in as generational archetypes.



Left to Right: Dena Yago, *Pitcher*, 2020, audio, wood, enamel, *Big Mouth Billy Bass*, 48 x 24 x 5 1/2 in.; Chum, 2020, audio, wood, enamel, *Big Mouth Billy Bass*, 48 x 24 x 5 1/2 in.; *Pleader*, 2020, audio, wood, enamel, *Big Mouth Billy Bass*, 48 x 24 x 5 1/2 in. Installation view, *Dry Season*, Bodega, New York, September 12–October 24, 2020.

With a vague knowledge of what is needed to mod a readymade animatronic, plus the volume of YouTube videos and Reddit threads on the subject, it seemed feasible to reanimate the Billy Bass toward my specific ends. During my early research I learned of Billy Bass choirs angelically singing Handel’s *Messiah*, the Bee Gees, and the Talking Heads. There are Alexa-enabled bass telling you about the weather in Samuel L. Jackson’s voice and delivering lines from *Rush Hour 3*. And then there are many snuff films where Billy Bass meets its tragic end. Knowing that this was possible, I reached out to embedded systems engineer Sam Wolk. After de-skinning and disassembling the fish, we learned that there are three motors: head, body, and tail.

The fact that the fish originally turned its head at a nearly ninety degree angle off of the faux-wooden plaque is a key reason that Joe Pellettieri, Billy’s inventor, believes the fish was such a success. “It really goes back to that head turn,” he told MEL Magazine. “If it was just a wiggling fish on a plaque, we might

Dena Yago, X-TRA, December 7, 2019

have sold some, but it would have been long forgotten.” The originally programmed movement of the fish’s body jerked off of the backboard with such violent force that you could hear a large thump whenever it returned to its still position. The violent erectness with which the flaccid trophy fish performed led me to believe that this full-body movement was seen as so appealing by its creator due to a latent anxiety, intuited or perceived, surrounding erectile dysfunction and decreased virility among Boomer men. All of these fathers and uncles were inviting their colleagues, family, and friends to walk by and gawk at an animatronic semi.

The fish in Dry Season are all mounted to wood panels, mimicking the fish- and speaker-mounting system on the original plaque. The hollowness of the panels greatly helped the audio amplification, but also amplified the violent thud every time the fish returned to resting. In order to avoid this, Sam and I decided to tailor the mouth, body, and tail movements of each fish to its particular personality. This was also necessary because I had sourced original Gemmy-produced Big Mouth Billy Bass, and wanted to protect their longevity by using softer movements. With a microprocessor and wireless radio system animating and cueing each fish, Sam was able to wirelessly synchronize them. We designated a “leader” fish, which then sent signals to each subsequent fish when it was their turn to speak. The scripts were all written as individual monologues, and there are minimal points of direct address among the fish. They speak in the royal “you,” “us,” and “them.” It intentionally seems incidental that their statements ever feel responsive to one another’s, even though, at the level of their program, they are communicating directly. The ham-fisted comparison is that this is not so dissimilar to contemporary public discourse as it plays out on top of highly synchronized, intentional algorithms that are architected to determine a specific outcome in favor of the platform over the user, no matter how discordant or destructive the conversation happening on top of it is.

After watching many Billy Bass both glitch out and function with uncanny seamlessness, I have a plan for the body doubles amassed in my studio. I hope that one day, be it the day that American cities divest from their police forces and invest in community-based alternatives, or the US truly commits to healthcare for all, or Amazon workers are able to unionize, I can synchronize all of their batteries dying simultaneously as a kind of twenty-one gun salute to a croaking Boomer ethos.

X—

Dena Yago is an artist and writer living in New York. She is a founding member of the trend-forecasting group K-HOLE.

The New York Times



Dena Yago's "Sleeping Spinner" in felt. Courtesy of the artist and Bodega

DENA YAGO

Through April 2. Bodega, 167 Rivington Street, Manhattan; bodega-us.org.

For "The Lusting Breed," at Bodega on the Lower East Side, Dena Yago colored five large sheets of store-bought felt with a homemade purplish-black dye. She cut and scored them with more or less recognizable shapes borrowed from two Courbet paintings — one of a woman sifting wheat, another of a woman asleep at a spinning wheel — and from three scenes of more contemporary labor, including one of people prospecting for vintage finds in a Salvation Army bin. She worked with an artisanal dyer to add accents of orange, green and ash gray. She asked the artist Brittany Mroczek to embroider a few yellow lines on "The Influencer." And then she pegged up the results like animal hides.

Neither attacking the notion of "women's work" nor mining its craft-based, collaborative potential to revitalize art practice is a new idea, though both are still needed. But what makes this work so striking is how powerfully it brings out the ambiguous violence of all image-making, Ms. Yago's as much as Courbet's. The felt sheets start as rectangles, but the cutouts leave them distorted and fragile, as if the only way to mark a surface were to partly destroy it. The orange dye looks like blooms of rust, and the green like mold. And the bottom edge of "The Grain Sifters," under a long slit, hangs open like a grimacing lip.

WILL HEINRICH

March 16, 2017

CRITIC'S GUIDE - 28 FEB 2017

Critic's Guide: New York

Ahead of the spring fairs opening in the city this week, a guide to the best shows to see around town

BY ORIT GAT



Dena Yago, *The Grain Sifters*, 2017, pressed wool, natural dyes, steel, 73 x 85 x 6 in. Courtesy: the artist and Bodega, New York

Dena Yago

Bodega

25 February – 2 April

The five tableaus that comprise Dena Yago's 'The Lusting Breed' are made of pressed wool felt, a material chosen for its association with femininity, but here displayed protruding the space in a far-from gentle way. Hanging from metal rods, the felt squares are cut through with scenes taken from both art history and contemporary life, which critically look at the image of women's labour, displayed as craft (hence the felt) or affective emotional work. It's a timely subject at a moment when women's rights and bodies are back to be disputed by male politicians. Yago, whose work spans different mediums, subjects, and affiliations, presents an exhibition with a political stake that uses recognition as a way of alienating the viewer from the work. These hanging objects are droopy and dark, and they tap into that uncomfortable moment when an image or a scene rings familiar, demanding the viewer look again and judge whether all is as true or normal as it seems.

Lands' End

by Jody Graf

BODEGA | JANUARY 11 – FEBRUARY 15, 2015

Lands' End, a six-person group exhibition at Bodega, borrows its title from that impressively average American clothing company of the same name. A brief historical oddity: the company's name is itself a misspelled reference to the western-most point in England, Land's End. With a shift of one apostrophe—an almost unmentionably minor mistake—we move from the precipice of the wild to a land of “no iron” slacks. This slippage between symbolic extremes pervades the exhibition, organized by artist Dena Yago, in which a “frontier” imaginary, largely an allusion to the American west (the press release features an image of a rusting wagon wheel), is casually compounded with narratives of an intimate, and often urban, domesticity.

Take, for example, the conflicting references that greet the viewer upon entry: a rusting metal bowl holding a single rattlesnake tail by Yago rests alongside three photographs by Patrick Armstrong that coldly depict building number signs of the type you might find outside a corporate park. The signs Armstrong captures in fact designate the East River Cooperative, a building complex originally built as affordable housing and located on the edge of Manhattan, not far from the gallery. Two lush photographs by Josephine Pryde layer images of cacti with MRI scans of human fetuses, illustrating a literal meeting of symbolic opposites without fully dissolving either—the womb and the cactus being, respectively, paradigmatic tropes of domesticity and exotic terrain. In the context of this exhibition, each piece reminds us how one kind of frontier might find itself gradually shifted to the geographic, or metaphorical center.

In other works, materials ripe with symbolic charge are reconstituted into more ambiguous compositions that, while complicating, extend the initial duality between familiar and foreign. In Zoe Latta's “Suckle Diversion” (2014), a horsetail spills from an awkwardly poignant felt cone carrying a range of bodily connotations. A wall-mounted sculpture by Mia Goyette abstracts the conventional windowbox into a simple metal support for a thin slab of resin. Suspended within the resin, leftovers of the day-to-day—cigarette butts, dead leaves, discarded necklaces, and, surprisingly, a cast finger—are transformed into a condensed, pleasingly gritty landscape.

Perhaps the most unexpected inclusion are two inkjet prints by Alisa Baremboym (both 2009), which, painted over in acrylic, depict scarecrow-like figures against bucolic landscapes. Any sentimental attachment to the rural they might conjure is quickly undercut by the banal clothing draping their forms and multiple plastic shopping bags they each carry. Quite different from the work Baremboym currently exhibits, these works offer an interesting look back at her earlier efforts.

Suspended above the floorbound works, three interconnected sculptures by Yago hang from the ceiling to form an extended metal chain



Patrick Armstrong, “East River Cooperative (453, 455, 457 FDR Drive),” (2014). Inkjet print, 16.25 × 20”.
Courtesy of Bodega



Josephine Pryde, “It's Not My Body I,” (2011). Glicée print, 24 × 35.5”.
Courtesy of Bodega.

from which dangle an assortment of objects ranging from antique glass bottles and rusting tools of indiscernible utility to a miniature red bean bun made of foam. In literally stringing together kawaii ornaments (Japanese tokens of “cuteness”) with souvenirs of the “rustic,” Yago materializes such invitingly clichéd dichotomies as the “tame” vs. the “rugged.” These juxtapositions double as points of critical entry into the force of the aesthetic to render the foreign familiar, effectively condensing the show’s larger thematic. Put slightly differently, they suggest the possibility of the frontier finding itself transformed into a new pastoral.

The pastoral reemerges as an explicit reference in the opening paragraphs of a short text accompanying the exhibition. Yago writes of a contemporary pastoral that, having entered the urban imagination in the form of a fetish for the rustic (she cites recent trends in restaurant décor), marks the very lack of a viable frontier. The frontier, then, must establish itself where it can—doubling back in the form of the pastoral, which is to say, the aesthetic, into already charted territory. The effort to re-inscribe difference within the known not only offers an interesting perspective on the operation of kitsch, but also returns us squarely to the heart of the domestic.

The domestic comprises the text’s remaining themes, with short segments authored in the first-person by Armstrong, Goyette, and Latta, as well as Yago. Each offers short musings on the apartments they have shared together in a variety of cosmopolitan centers, such as Berlin and Los Angeles. The tone—nostalgic, verging on the cathartic—tethers the show’s often-abstract thematic content to a nexus of highly personal relationships and experiences. This particular brand of sincerity mirrors that of the exhibition as a whole, in which critique is catalyzed not through distance, but via a careful injection of subjective experience performed without recourse to any definite authenticity. In a moment that is supposedly post-ironic but clearly isn’t, the topography of this elusive tone stands as one of the exhibition’s distinguishing, and most refreshing features.



Lands’ End, installation view. Courtesy of Bodega.