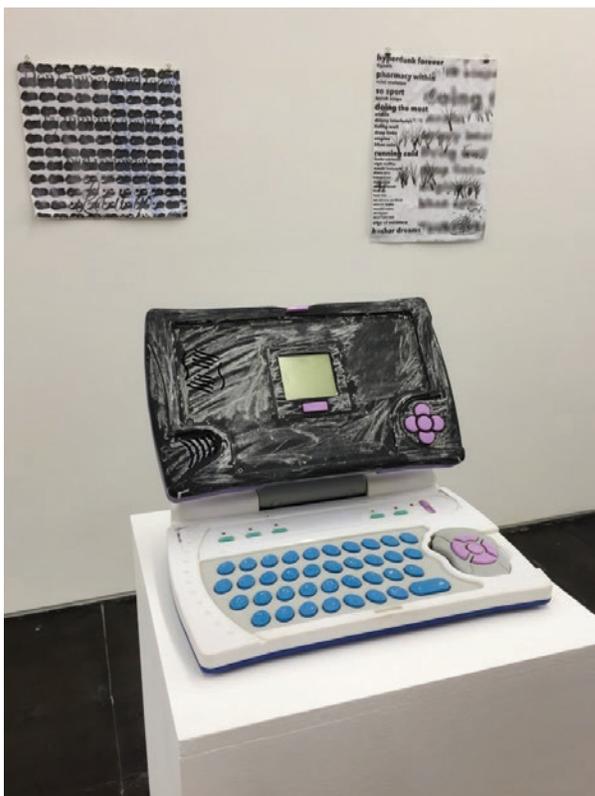




# do easy art

**“Wrong Window” by Devin Kenny at Aran Cravey Gallery, Los Angeles**

By Yanyan Huang, February 22



Devin Kenny’s “Wrong Window” presents nuances of everyday violence that underlie present-day social interactions and the intentions behind them, good or bad. He simultaneously embraces and rejects institutionalized and systemized tropes, including “social media” applications and intermediary devices, consumer technology, education, corporate culture, and everyday interactions.



**“Swipe right on ‘em all and let G-d sort ‘em out”** is a short video underscored by a tranquilizing loop of an upbeat and generic Muzak composition paired with an equally repetitive video diary of everyday activities that are comfortingly familiar but ultimately unfulfilling: swiping on Tinder, counting dollar bills at the ATM, rubbing the smooth surface of a found pebble, or a “worry stone”. As it loops endlessly, one realizes that days are made up of such enormous amounts of inanities and errands. Days add up to years, and years add up to a lifetime of banality. What was a placid daily activity account becomes either horrifying or calming, based on each individual viewer’s degree of knowledge regarding eastern religious philosophy.

**“Prominently Displayed”** is a series of text work divided into two categories: nonsensical internet word mashups similar to automatic writing without the necessary language key, and mindlessly positive phrases, saccharine while poisonous, like so many things that are marketed to us daily. Phrases we recognize as an everyday repackaging of misery: “Life is too short to wake up in the morning with regrets. So love the people who treat you right. Forgive the ones who don’t. And believe everything happens for a reason.” “Life is too short to argue and fight. Count your blessings. Love the friends and family that are always there. Smile more often. Make the most of everyday”. If taken at face value, these phrases of advice might have been tenderly and carefully stitched onto cross-stitch pillows and quilts and framed in the heyday of arts and crafts and home economics classes. In 2015 however, we don’t know how to make use of such saccharine positivity and generally regard all messages with a suspicious mind, whether positive or negative. “Are you for real?” or “lol jk” can follow any statement to immediately distance the speaker from his speech-act, like a built-in safety cushion. Eager to not offend, people speak half-heartedly in half-jokes in every area of social interaction that was once guided by principles of sincerity. But if everything is funny, nothing is funny. If nothing is serious, what are we left with?

**“LANyards”** is a music video featuring the artist’s own composition and showing educated, multicultural, young bright employees who fit the mold of the 2015 technology/advertising/marketing/design creative mold, cooperating and thriving in generically “cool” loft-space offices with an open plan and bright, natural light. The set calls to mind offices of venture capitalist-funded Silicon valley backed tech companies: apps, services, programs. We see people discussing, making plans, laying down strategies – for what purpose we never learn. But corporate positivity is palpable and alluring as ever. Surely they must be working for the benefit of the consumer today, for all of humanity today. Viewers would love to be there at that control room, being “on the ground floor”, being part of the “decision making process”, “being a part of it all”, joining in on the (unnamed and as-of-yet purposeless) positivity and excitement.



Two commonplace consumer product sculptures are displayed on pedestals: **“VHS Mop”**, a magic eraser-type of contraption repurposing an outdated artifact of technology that once had enormous use, has one end covered with a dry-erase board eraser material. Dry erase boards themselves are becoming obsolete as computers and powerpoint presentations have already replaced archaic instruments and habits of communication: writing, erasing, watching, rewinding, taping over, fast-forwarding. With the rise of DVDs and internet streaming services, the downfall and bankruptcy of VHS-lending giant Blockbuster shows the speed and violence with which new technology can destroy previously useful ideas, as well as the ever-present pressure to jump aboard perpetually newer ships.

**“Worksheets”**, a 90’s white and purple child’s laptop/“fun learning device” sits on the other pedestal, its functions long abandoned, usefulness long forgotten. The space around the minuscule screen has been covered with chalkboard paint and scribbled on with chalk. Overlaying a once-cutting-edge, now obsolete technological instructional device with a fast-disappearing traditional method of institutional instruction imparts upon the viewer twinges of nostalgia for a childhood full of tactile experiences. Rare is the childhood memory that doesn’t include blackboards, chalk that broke easily into pieces, drawing on asphalt, chalk powder left on fingers and palms. We’re left with a forlorn sense that tradition sometimes trumps innovation, that simplicity sometimes trumps complex technology. Not too long ago, people relied on little more than their imagination and books to keep themselves entertained and curious. Having long abandoned this self-generating practice of self-inspiration, we endlessly consume and discard hugely profitable created needs in a cycle too well-worn to imagine alternatives.

**“Untitled (hourglass widget)”** features a custom wooden table covered with a collection of pieces of wood scavenged from the workshop where Kenny works part-time in New York. They have been carefully shaped into human-sized shapes, resembling wooden blocks a child might play with. One side of each is dyed with an industrial color commonly found in consumer food products, especially in candies and cereals for kids: Red 40, Yellow 5, Blue 1, Blue 2, etc. Such dyes are used extensively in M&Ms and in cereals marketed to children and have been widely known to cause neurological disorders and behavioral problems. Before the mass commercialization of foods in the 50s, food manufacturers used to use natural plant and vegetable compounds to color their products. With increased production and lowered standards of safety common in production-line food processing, petroleum-based dyes were introduced as a cheaper alternative. Like anything else we are pressured to desire and buy and consume, it’s actively harming our brains, bodies, and generally trying to kill us. (American Journal of Psychiatry, 135:987-988, 1978, A Crossover Study Of Artificial Food



Coloring In A Hyperkinetic Child).

A spotless museum-quality display table shows several groupings of “widgets” under clear glass. **“Uniform Code Switch B”** shows a clear PVC kid-sized backpack stuffed with a yellow toy gun in a meticulously displayed museum-quality glass table. The table itself acts a barrier to the objects, making the viewer look at them in a purely aesthetic or art-theoretical manner. It sits next to wifi symbol stickers, **“Turn pro next year”**, bubbled industrial acrylic **“Selfie masks”**, stone props from the **“Hold onto your memory”** video, brass strips that imitate VIP wristbands and hospital bracelets **“Access”**, and a temporary tattoo, **“Prince’s side-eye”**. The assembled objects seem to be a starter kit of political subversion, a joke of a protest against the powers that be seeped in despair – the last rebellion cry of the hopeless – “This is what you expect from me, so I’ll give it to you – but just know that I know that you know that I know, and we can continue this dance of gains and reversals, appeasement and hostility ad infinitum.

“Right around the corner” is a laminated newspaper article of kids in Chicago making predictions for the 21st century. It shows the artist as a precocious sixth grader, expressing a hope for stricter laws and an intercontinental government in the future, or the world could be faced with the problem of “an android robbing the bank”. Seven years after the global financial meltdown caused by high-frequency speculative trading and global offshore tax evasion gone haywire, precisely what the young artist wanted all those years ago could have saved us from the current extended recession. These wishes that have not yet come to pass hang on a wall adjacent to the artist’s present: a present where his imagined not-so-distant future has not really measured up to his hopes, but more likely, has grossly failed to even live up to his worst fears, and continues to disappoint him – history managing to rudely cut across time and recall civil rights and human rights advancements. The idea that time brings progress is a sad illusion. Progress is not bound by time and has no need for time. Progress can happen at any moment with the enlightenment and involvement of people at the individual level. To relegate progress to a flippant “time will take care of it” is grossly irresponsible and insensitive to people who have the least amount of time.

Humans for all their “progress” and “expansion” and “gains” still destroy one another through the most positive false intentions and jokingly mellow rejections. Soft violence is still violence, and it pervades our lives in insidious and nearly invisible ways. Service with a smile, and nothing more.



