



Sweet and Syrupy Tears

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Cherub's is definitely art that bites some bullet or other in regards to taste. ¹ It is sincere in some regard most art is not, and this sincerity brings with it an exciting, recognizable strangeness. It is disinterested in a specific sense of the word taste, and many would call it tasteless. ² Bourdieu should have little to say about it at least as far as cultural capital goes; the shapes and colors therein, far from being indicative of culture, are sold mainly in videogame stores, are not manifestations of a particular privileged background, but of a particular consumer background. They often reflect a culture of a very different sort than what Bourdieu typically calls cultural capital. This culture is demonstrated by Cherub's intimate understanding of the aesthetic logic of certain widely available products of the entertainment industry – mainly Nintendo games. This understanding seems almost greater than that of the original concept artists themselves, and Cherub himself has claimed that he could “design a better game than *Yoshi's Story*.” In that sense, though the art is not tied to cultural capital as it is popularly understood, it is certainly tied to literal capital by virtue of its connection to franchises, so Cherub is not altogether free from the yoke of Bourdieu. Additionally, Cherub believes My friend Cathy described some of his art as ‘internet gothic’ – a monstrosity of entertainment industry-originated artifacts (parts of Mario Bros. characters, anime hairdos, light physic quirks recognizable to people familiar with a particular strain of 90s videogames with technical limitations) all shouting something which is at the core of this hungry aesthetic to the viewer. In this ravenousness they echo Ngai's notion (quoting Adorno) of cute/objectivated art transmuting into a ‘swarming mass’. ³ That being said, much of his art is not aesthetic vomit, but earnest character design, or focused studies of a particular “ice cream flavor” of game design he is

¹ I have decided to refer to him as his online nickname, Cherub, not his real name, because it feels more in his spirit.

² I asked Cherub about the possibility of his art being put in galleries – he said he made peace with the fact that this might never happen.

³ Ngai, 841.

interested in at a given moment. If cuteness is the closest art comes to becoming food, Cherub's art is a delicacy, and an art whose possibility for being judged aesthetically indubitably lies beyond a terrifying truce with agreeability, the unexpectedly strange taste of a sweet and syrupy tear. Even delicacy is not an apt metaphor; it is less analogous to the subtleties found only in the taste of a roasted ortolan served to a select privileged few but to those unexpectedly found in the taste of an exotic flavor of Coke briefly but widely sold two decades ago. Is looking for strangeness in places like these disinterested in a way most art, historically, has not been? What truce of agreeability is this exactly – what does the viewer have to indulge in to find said strangeness – and is it a price worth paying?

Where I purport there to be disinterest is that this art does not accrue cultural capital for its appreciator in the traditional sense. Perhaps it should – in the future it could, but, presently, it does not.⁴ A learned palate is absolutely present here, but, as stated in the previous metaphor, it's not one of a socioeconomically prestigious character. The fact that such a palate can exist alone is remarkable: Taste “is not a thing demanding a palatial stage whereon to play its part.”⁵ Contingency is thus able to clear ground for taste in strange places. I also think prestige and taste come hand-in-hand, and that Cherub holds prestige in the eyes of people with a particular interest in the aesthetics of historical videogames, people who think said aesthetics can and should exist for their own sake. But is this apparent disinterest just the vacancy left by an interest that moved house? Said interest might be hidden inside the word “videogames,” a blood relative of “product,” the child of “capital.” I don't believe it: this is precisely the effort to allow these aesthetics to live beyond their pricetag. Besides, these shapes and forms have long been passé by the standards of the market; the commodities have long ago been sold, but their box art

⁴ “Believe me – I've tried!”

⁵ Melville, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories*, p. 279.

is kept around and studied by Cherub. If there was a solely limbic motivation behind the enjoyment of them, they would incorporate artifacts from today's industry, which I'm sure is much more adept at making appetizing aesthetics than back in the time period from where the artist draws most of his obsessions. That's not to say they aren't appetizing – as a matter of fact, it might be hard, or even impossible, for somebody who does not find them appetizing to taste and appreciate them in the more disinterested sense. It would be to judge a dish without eating it.

So what's appetizing? First off, much of his art is cute. Cuteness has become such a widely sold commodity that its nature as an aesthetic that can easily be consumed and digested is obvious. We even have cuteness gluttons today, mainly fed by cute imports from Japan, a nation whose defeat in WW2 apparently allow them to distill this edible aesthetic to a cheap and high fructose form (though one that is starting to become passé in the West and rivaled by more grounded and arguably more sane cutenesses produced by other nations, such as America's own Frog and Toad, Finland's Moomin, etc.). Ngai points out how Japan's expertise in infantilization comes in part from their own infantilization at the end of the war.⁶ What is ironic is that, much as beholders of the cute are themselves infantilized to the point of only being able to express their appreciation of the object in dumb onomatopoeia, the U.S., which so humiliated Japan, is now itself stammering in its gaze, with its copious consumption of saccharine Sanrio products, cutesy anime shows, and their accompanying large-eyed figurines. Here Japan has sort of bitten a bullet of its own, and in doing so gained a powerful stronghold on the West as a consumerbase. There's something very deleterious and even dehumanizing about this cross-infantilization, and I predict that soon it will be cloying enough to turn most people off from it. This infantilization is also, in part, in the axis of taste – thus my apprehension that someone might interpret Cherub's

⁶ Ngai, 819.

artwork as being contiguous with the work of this market, not only due to its cuteness but due to its characteristically Japanese cuteness. Its charm is undoubtedly partly by virtue of it, not despite of it. Ngai uses Murakami's sharp-toothed *DOB* to demonstrate that cute things can be helpless and aggressive at the same time; in Cherub's art, they are also often aggressive, or even demonic – not only cute, but also edgy.⁷ I differentiate the two, unlike Ngai, who stops at saying that cute things are not any less cute with the addition of fangs. I think a qualitatively different sentiment is added without directly coming into conflict with the cute one, a related sentiment that also stems from a power tension. Cool things are sold just as much as cute ones in Japan, and not always in the same package, after all, so they likely have a power play of their own that appeals to consumer interest in some way. But during all my conversations with Cherub, the term he used to describe his goal with his art was always “cool,” never “cute.” There is something unconventionally edgy about his art in that its edginess is purposefully mixed with cuteness in a way that Murakami's art is not. It takes cute things from Japan's past which have never been edgy before, like his favorite character design, Yoshi, and makes them cool. The result is a purposefully naive edginess, and this purposeful naivete gives it its distinct innocence, it is what makes his dragon with bangs in the cover of this essay such a charming character design to me. Its rounded and harmless fangs admit to the viewer that it is not actually here to bite anybody. It then comes back around to being genuinely fashionable.

Fashion is itself a sort of aesthetic appetite. Cherub is certainly a fan of it. I asked him if he believed something interested goes on when he draws a character, and he assured me that was the case. The unconsciously protagonistic interest that goes on when he comes up with such a “naively fashionable” design, he says, is also the same that goes on in the appreciator of said design. This is what the appetite aspect of his art boils down to: he is using all of these

⁷ Ngai, 823.

aesthetics, some historical, some entirely his own, to realize something that is “cool.” And yet he also does not believe that his fashion actually belongs to him in any way. Here the clothing connotation of fashion works – he thinks of fashion as not actually belonging to the wearer, being its own substance that artists, like scientists, continue to refine and improve in their play. I asked him whether or not he would be okay with his art being treated as an edible commodity, and he also said yes – fun is at the core of his motivation for creating art. What he wants to get out of observing art is more or less the same thing he gets out of playing videogames. Even the process of making art, to him, is pure play. This is the bullet; he does not have a stake in his art being treated as anything other than fashion food. In this sense he is doing the exact thing I, as a child, would do when drawing Godzilla over and over again – what is unusual is continuing this habit into adulthood, the point at which such “dumb fun” is usually relegated to activities outside of art, with the faith that it will produce something that can be disinterestedly appreciated in its evolution.⁸ Most people, at this point, intend to make art for a different reason, and are simply bored by its potential as a tool for “dumb, projective entertainment.” His art, in its playfulness, cuteness and coolness, continues the “child cult” of modernism mentioned by Ngai.⁹ Even the texture of his art is that of a drawing created with the only tools children would have access to; the violent artificiality of pixelated lines, paint-bucket-tool shading, and use of circular airbrushes whose marks look less like continuous strokes and more like a series of daisy-chained Venn diagrams recall rudimentary software like MS Paint. The result is a strange art that looks to have been produced by a genius 7-year-old with a computer and two Nintendo games at his

⁸ Cherub has a lot of interesting ideas regarding the concept of the avatar. He grew up interacting through people in online spaces where everyone designed their own representative character, and thinks that the avatar contains more of the soul than we think. As a big fan of being embodied, I didn't like the sound of this so much, but he is far from making any transhumanist claims – he does not believe in the avatar as a replacement for the body, only in projection onto avatars as a way to communicate aspects of the human soul.

⁹ Ngai, 814.

disposal as his only sources of entertainment. That is not so far from the truth; it is art created by an adult who chose never to exit a register of interested art creation many artists, including me, lost faith in as we grew up and became interested in more sophisticated ways, ways that will bring us greater glory and capital. I think it ultimately vindicates the child cult in some way, because what's produced is not just fun but brings in tow authentic, tasteful disinterest! In that sense he is gracing child art with the faculties of maturity he cultivated in his lifetime and giving us the alchemical result.¹⁰ There's thus something very prelapsarian about this art; in it, I see an Eden I myself left. There is something to the fact that this interested register of creation is usually left for superior pleasures as children mature into adults, but Cherub stayed; did he choose to stay in view of greener pastures? If he did, why? There are two possibilities, not mutually exclusive: either a disinterested attachment to that register of artmaking as a more meaningful pursuit than, say, curating a fashionable wardrobe for oneself, or a genuine lack of interest in such pursuits of "grown up interest."¹¹

I would like to continue to follow the thread of Cherub reanimating these aesthetics for their own sake, "beyond their pricetag," as to potentially find his ludic art's nested disinterest. A lot of art, especially pop art, hijacks commercial aesthetics, often cute ones (think Kaws, Murakami, etc.) both in straightforward retail spirit as well as in a purported effort to comment on commercialization. Cherub's art is in no way about the market – not only is it not a product, he is absolutely unconcerned with commenting on his figures as being those of commodities. He believes there is something truly valuable and nontrivial in the art of *Super Mario World* and *Yoshi's Story*. His studiousness of what makes art from these franchises unique is shown through the ease with which he achieves a purposiveness characteristic of game design. His characters

¹⁰ In this sense it oddly mirrors Paul Klee's art, through which he graces the purity of line in child art with his adult sensibilities.

¹¹ I don't think Cherub has much physical swag.

are outfitted with items that look as though they would serve some kind of purpose in the videogame settings that inspired them, and a lot of his designs look not just like a reappropriation of Yoichi Kotabe characters but entirely new ones that look as though they might have been created by the concept artist under instructions to design a character that plays a specific role in a game. He loves to put incomplete tidbits of dialogue into his drawings that sound just like something that would only be written for the purpose of spurring the plot in a game – for instance, in one illustration, a chameleon-eyed street urchin beckons the viewer to drink from a black and red flask, imploring: “DRINK THIS BRO, TRUST ME.” In another drawing, a monkey wearing a Day of the Dead style dress holds out a well-rendered banana for no reason; one imagines it is to be grabbed by a player as a token, the collection of which serves the player’s goals in some way. There are other, much less obvious aspects of his art that make it look like it belongs in another world with its own cohesive rules different than ours, a purposive worldbuilding. Playfully interested as this mode of art creation may be, this purposiveness is present in it.

Another, scarier bullet is being bitten; Cherub’s work is timeful. He himself seems to grow bored of each new “ice cream flavor” he finds extremely quickly – he refers to his drawings as “short term capital.” He thus sacrifices the longevity of his art in his own eyes, and possibly in the eyes of other people, who probably enjoy it in the same way as he does, only at a slight distance. Cherub being the *poster child*, I think this fast pace of art mortality and birth could be a frightening symptom of the child cult initiated by modernism. That being said, I am not sure to what degree his art dies; my instinct is to say that only the ways in which it is “fashion food” rots and becomes passé, but not necessarily the aforementioned ways in which it is disinterested.

I would like to end by mentioning disinterest in Cherub as a moral human being. An Orthodox Christian, he is one of the most serious I've ever spoken to, almost to a fault. His religious anxiety permeates much of his art (see figures 7, 8, and 9), and, if we want to call this art a mode of interest, there is a sense in which it is an interest that, for one, does not harm anyone – though even on this point he disagrees. Cherub is concerned with what role sin plays in ludic interest, and once told me: “I sinned in my heart while drawing this.” If he is constantly bored of his art, his goal is that, in distilling all sin from his mode of playful drawing (if that is even possible), he will arrive at an art that has the longevity of the Christian truth. The risk in doing this is that of taking away what makes his art work, leaving him miserable in the process, but I think it's a lovely, if very neurotically Christian endeavor, since I'm cut from the same cloth.

The fear in Cherub's child art being, for all intents and purposes, culinary, is that it might aspire to replace the art we don't consider as such. My two questions are whether or not past approaches to art are not more culinary than we think, and whether there is something important to parse in my concern that such a replacement would have to take place, that this child art would aspire to usurp its predecessor and possibly succeed. From where does the questionable instinct that the two cannot coexist come? If it's just food, why would it threaten art?

See figures on next page

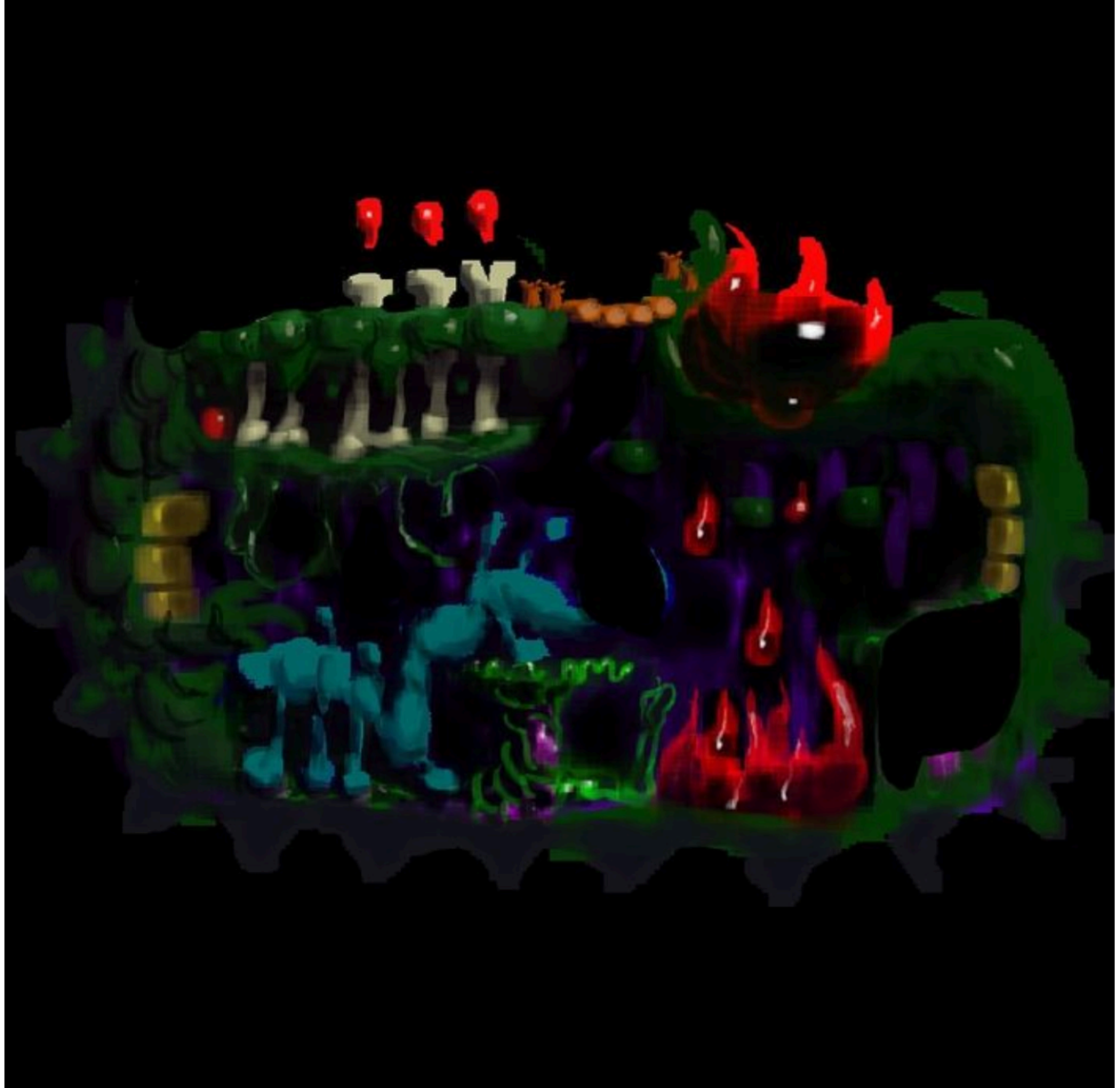


Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

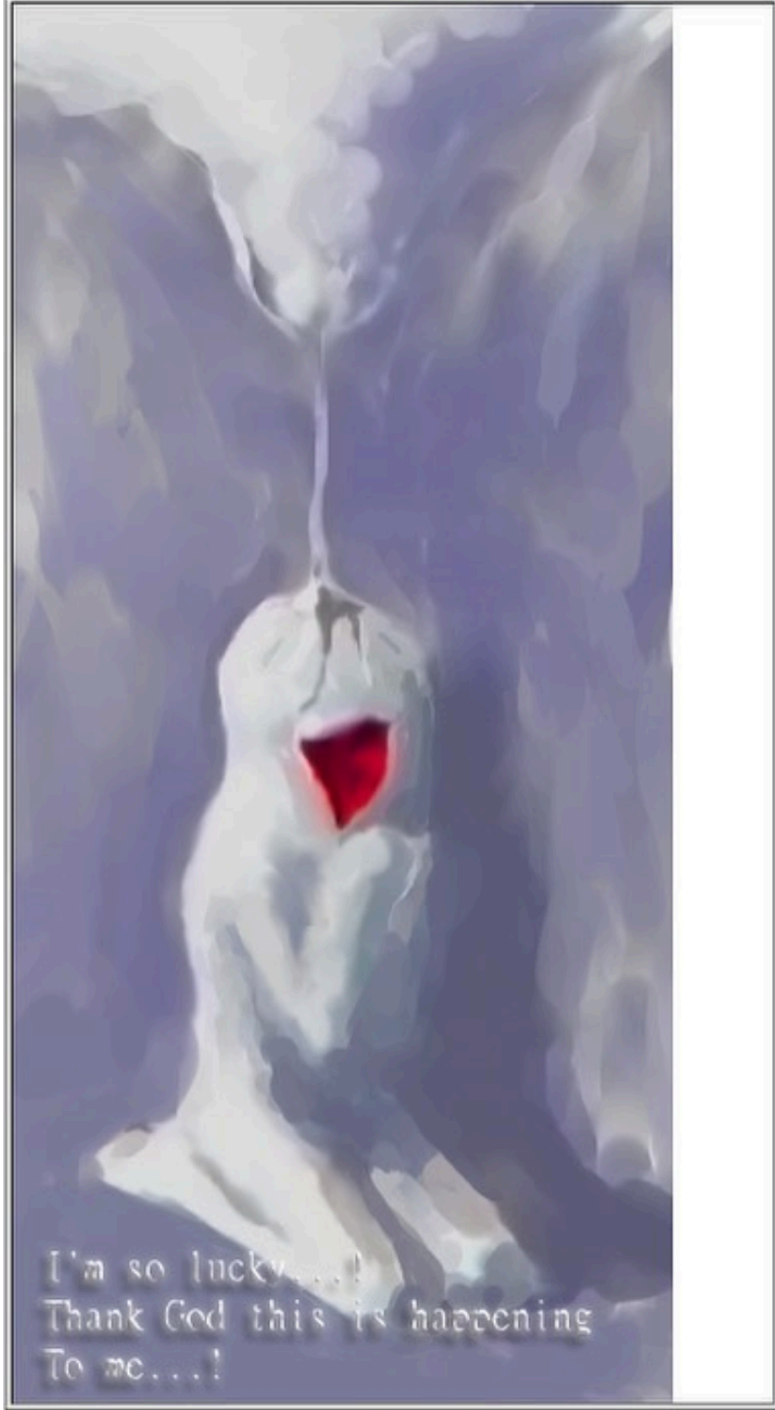


Figure 7.



songs dont
change the way
they sound
every time you
listen to them

you know, i find that rather interesting but
i was also wondering, can i have some
cookies to eat?!

Figure 8.



please God dont let me fall into this hole.
i really dont want to fall into thishole, i
need a good reason not to fall in this
hole. im sorry i fell in the hole earlier
but i wish i was more sorry. please God
guide me onto and along the path away from
this hole. I'm such an idiot.

Figure 9.



Figure 10.



Figure 11.