

TITLE MAGAZINE

Allison Bianco: The Baby Powder Trick at the Print Center

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By Olivia Jia

The Print Center

On view through August 2nd



Allison Bianco's prints flood the Print Center's gallery with a frenzy of color. Her palette is slick and artificial – neon greens, electric blues, and powdery pinks imbue the prints with the decadence of pop culture. The ecstatic colors sharply contrast with the melancholy and disastrous subjects of the work.

The Baby Powder Trick contains several bodies of work – as one enters the exhibition space, one is confronted by *Later That Day At Second Beach*, a six-print suite that is split like a triptych and depicts a narrative of a ship helplessly tossed in a cresting wave. Lines of color burst in a cataclysm of fireworks above the shore. The ship appears in the third column, emerging solemnly from the empty seascapes in the previous two sections.

The next few prints in the gallery seem focused on tourist traps and historical disasters that have lost their visceral tragedy and now descend into the realm of curiosity. *The Sinking of Matunuck* depicts a demolished coastal town awash with pops of color – yet the piece is filled with smudges and specks of ink that reference destruction and grime. Completed pre-Hurricane Sandy, today it holds new meaning as a frighteningly accurate portrayal of a disaster still etched upon the minds of its victims and the landscape itself.

Zeppelin is a diptych with the left-to-right narrative progression of *Later That Day At Second Beach*, but it differs in function: *Zeppelin*'s image of an air ship in one print with a continuation of the scene in the second (sans zeppelin) relies on the viewer's historical knowledge. Though Bianco does not illustrate the disaster, the Hindenburg occupies an iconic presence in our collective memory. The absence of the zeppelin in the second print draws power from the historic calamity while also prodding fresh wounds inflicted by the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 and the shutdown of MH17 in Ukraine.

For all their strengths, these works pale in comparison with Bianco's prints across the room. Most magnetic is the installation of 25 prints on the east wall, comprised of the series *Go Ahead and Sink* and *The Last Leg*. Each work depicts a specific shipwreck through careful, delicate rendering. These tiny, fragile constructions are in turn swallowed by boldly colored swaths of sea and sky.

The installation achieves its power through numbers – its impact is not unlike Jennifer Bartlett's painting *Atlantic Ocean*, which was exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts during the summer of 2013. The scale of Bianco's installation is impressive – while the individual prints on the other walls are restricted by their frames (the viewer is placed in the role of a voyeur, peering into a removed scene), the installation breaks the isolating boundary of the rectangle to become a vast field of color, event, and narrative. The scale is cleverly designed – to observe the entire arrangement of prints, you must stand in the middle of the room – it was not until I leaned in and closely engaged each individual print that its intricate details were revealed. Observing Bianco's shipwreck prints is an intimate experience. Yet, as I focused on an image, I became acutely aware that it was merely an island in an archipelago – the entire installation is impossible to comprehend as one complete body. The format of the installation, along with Bianco's choice to include both historical and modern shipwrecks, allows the piece to function as an unending and formless cycle of events and tragedies.

The seascape is an image loaded with meaning; it is a frontier to unknown lands and a place of deeply romantic and transcendental power. Or, with a darker view of history, one may conjure the Middle Passage or perhaps the German U-boats

of World War II. Contemporary relationships between citizen and sea are tied to capital – the ocean is the realm of international trade and provides a steady deluge of consumer goods. It has also become a reservoir for the rubbish and debris that results from consumerism – it is where we expel the unsavory aspects of our culture, out of sight and out of mind. In spite of our growing awareness of climate change and rising sea levels, the commodification of the ocean itself masks the direness of the situation – through beaches and boardwalks, cruise ships and glossy magazine spreads, we have come to think of the ocean as the landscape of leisure and bourgeois bliss.

The Baby Powder Trick addresses the dichotomy between gritty reality and the removed apathy that commercialism generates. Each image in *The Last Leg* and *Go Ahead and Sink* illustrates a specific shipwreck involving genuine tragedy and loss of life. Yet when viewed through Bianco's portrayal, it's hard not to aestheticize and objectify the situation. This element of the show draws parallels to our relationships with consumer goods: our homes are filled with brightly colored and attractively packaged objects of at best ethically ambiguous origin. Although we may be dimly aware of the unpalatable methods of their production, the allure of instant gratification often trumps our desire to peer beneath the surface.

Part of what makes Bianco's work so compelling is that it straddles the ironic line between catastrophe and comedy. One cannot know whether these pieces are a warning that the forces of nature are far more dangerous and alive than we see, or if Bianco is proving – humorously – that even tragedy may be sold under a candied filter.

The title of *The Baby Powder Trick* refers to the use of baby powder to quickly remove sand from skin after a day at the beach. Like grains of sand, these horrors (and their victims) may be dusted from our hands and forgotten. The ambiguity of Bianco's work forces us to confront the nature of our interactions with the world. Her work effectively articulates the rose-colored glasses that consumer culture encourages us to wear. Beneath the velvety surface of her silkscreens, something ominous brews.

Olivia Jia is a painting student at the University of the Arts. She is interested in aesthetic philosophy and writing, and hopes to integrate these pursuits with her studio work.