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### I Succeeded in the American Survival Domain and All I Got Was This Kinkade

There is a comforting aesthetic found in the familiar, in consuming art that doesn't challenge our sense of self but rather reflects it. Kitsch acts as a mirror, offering a warm, recognizable glimpse into our lives. It encompasses mass-produced art and decorations designed to please rather than challenge, often prioritizing immediate visual charm over substantial or thought-provoking content. Kitsch can be seen in the home goods sections of commercial department stores, in the familiar wooden decor bearing phrases like "live, laugh, love" and "home is where the heart is" in swirly calligraphy reminiscent of our grandmother's bathrooms. This type of "art" does not challenge us; it exists within a comforting frame that we compartmentalize as cute decor, and as a comfortable and understandable aesthetic addition to our survival agenda. Kitsch is confined to being cute, unable to transcend its familiar frame into truly mystifying beauty. In contrast to the confines of bounded aesthetics, we encounter figures like Jackson Pollock, born in 1912, whose art transcended frames, liberated from ties to the "cute" and the survival domain. Pollock, a central figure in abstract expressionism, transformed modern art with his innovative drip painting technique. His work challenged traditional artistic conventions, focusing on the process and physicality of painting and serving as an antidote to kitsch by prioritizing form over content.

Tin Pan Alley in New York City serves as a quintessential example of kitsch, representing the commercialization of art through the production of pop songs. This bustling street epitomizes art forged from struggle, intertwining survival with artistic creation driven by the pursuit of commercial success. American sentimental art, represented by artists like Norman Rockwell and

poets like Edgar Albert Guest, epitomizes the unchallenging and sentimental qualities of kitsch. Even in literature, John Steinbeck's works often capture a sentimental and accessible narrative that appeals to broad audiences. In his novel, "East of Eden," John Steinbeck's famous quote "and now that you don't have to be perfect, you can be good" mirrors the simplistic, corny phrases often found on decorative posters in home goods stores (Steinbeck). Despite its poetic veneer, his writing grounds us in the pursuit of survival, urging us to persevere in doing a good job chasing the quintessential American dream, even if we don't do it perfectly. Kitsch art is characterized by its focus on easily digestible content that appeals to a wide audience without provoking deep thought. It relies on familiar, comforting imagery that evokes sentimentality rather than fostering intellectual engagement. Kitsch cycles through the themes of the world we know, starving art from a sense of purity, originality, and depth.

Thomas Kinkade is a prime example of kitsch due to his art's mass production and commercial success, making it highly accessible and financially driven. His paintings prioritize content over form with titles like *Main Street Celebration*, *Beacon of Hope*, and *A Peaceful Retreat* in place to reinforce what you are supposed to feel. His sentimental, idyllic scenes evoke comfort and nostalgia, designed to be easily digestible and emotionally appealing (Kinkade). Additionally, Kinkade's work lacks intellectual challenge, prioritizing immediate visual pleasure over complex themes or deeper meanings. Kinkade's whimsical landscapes exist as an aesthetic reward for success in the survival domain. By showing scenes of a tree that's nice to look at in exchange for his customers' "fruit", Kinkade dominated through commercial success.

Kitsch extends beyond merely evoking warm sentiments; it intertwines deeply with our sense of identity, serving as a bridge between the art we encounter and the lives we lead. This

connection is forged through its portrayal of women, wilderness, and machines—familiar elements that resonate with our existence. In the New York jazz scene of the 1950s, Ornette Coleman's "Lonely Woman" emerged as a groundbreaking piece in the free jazz genre (Ake). Despite its avant-garde, genre-defying style, the evocative title anchors the piece in a sense of emotional and narrative depth. This connection to women, a symbol of beauty and survival, provides an accessible entry point that gives a semblance of organization to the otherwise boundless and spontaneous nature of free jazz. Similarly, Edward Hopper employs the elements of wilderness, women, and machinery in his painting "Western Motel" to immerse us in a realm reflective of our societal landscape (Hopper). These symbols, reminiscent of classic American ideals, prompt us to ponder deeper meanings within the scene. The portrayal of the blonde woman evokes a sense of disappointment, suggesting a familiarity with the exploitation often associated with her image in our cultural consciousness. We expect her to bring beauty into our world and find disappointment in the painting when she does not. We understand the frame around this work and the bounds of its reflection into our world.

Pollock's work stands apart from kitsch and liberalism in that it lacks the bounds of the survival domain. Love it or loathe it, Pollock's work exudes purity, originality, and depth. In one of Cecil Beaton's photographs for Vogue in 1951, a blonde stands before one of Pollock's works, appropriately exploiting her presence as she enters his world, rather than bringing beauty into ours (Cecil). Pollock's emphasis on form over content disorients us, drawing us into his world and distancing us from our tendency to impose deeper meaning onto art. The complexity and depth of his drip paintings, characterized by their intricate patterns and energetic compositions, stand in stark contrast to the superficiality of kitsch, which prioritizes easy consumption and sentimental imagery. Clement Greenberg, a notable art critic of the time who had called pollock

“the strongest painter of his generation” wrote of his importance in his essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (Teachout). In this essay, Greenberg's framework underscores the significance of Pollock's contributions, demonstrating the enduring relevance of his avant-garde approach in challenging kitsch's limitations in the art world (Greenberg). Pollock's method prompts viewers to delve into the essence of his art, revealing the stark disparity between avant-garde ingenuity and kitsch's simplistic mass-production. Harold Rosenberg, an art critic who championed Pollock, reconceptualized painting as an event rather than a mere creation in his essay "The American Action Painters." He focused on the artist's physical interaction with the canvas, portraying it as "an arena in which to act," which highlights the dynamic and performative nature of Pollock's work (Rosenberg).

In contrast to artists like Kinkade who embody kitsch, Pollock shifts the focus of his art to its expressive creation, as seen in his use of numbers as titles. His influence stands as a counter to the superficiality often associated with American liberal beauty. His art continues to resonate, reminding us of the capacity of creativity to transcend commercial and sentimental boundaries, offering a powerful alternative to the limitations of kitsch. Pollock's paintings provide a place where the tree of sustenance can be abandoned, allowing for the pure expression of creativity in art.

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