

2014

Less class, more sass!

Amanda Lee James

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses



Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

James, Amanda Lee, "Less class, more sass!" (2014). *LSU Master's Theses*. 3478.
https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/3478

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Master's Theses by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.

LESS CLASS, MORE SASS!

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art and Design

by

Amanda Lee James

B. S., Portland State University, 2011

August 2014

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If I had my way, the acknowledgments of this thesis would be the longest section and it would be written in giant, brightly colored and bold letters. This collection of prints and drawings is all about the people I care about- the people that made me who I am and always kept me afloat.

I would first like to thank my wonderful fiancé Ian Thornton for standing by my side through over a decade of adventures and shenanigans. It takes a special kind of man to willingly be transformed into a hand-drawn, pants-less sasquatch. He has provided me with so much strength and spunk. He is my one and only true anchor. I would also like to thank my long time friends Ron Spence and Dane Thomas for joining my motley sasquatch crew. The inside jokes and illogical memories I share with these three men kept my lungs laughing and my hands drawing even when my eyes could no longer see straight.

I would also like to thank many friends that I met during my time in Louisiana. The list of remarkable people I have met here is endless, but I would like to personally thank the trio of printmakers that I entered into the program with. Molly Miller is my spider-catching super hero, constantly talking me down from ledges and letting me sass up a storm. Nathan Pietrykowski is my partner in illustrative crime, always there to help me form a fake art collective or tell me that I really need to use blue. James Kimura-Green is my big-city promoter, spreading the word about Squatch Records to chalkboards across the country.

Lastly I would like to thank my thesis committee. I am very fortunate to have had Kimberly Arp, Kelli Scott Kelley, Leslie Koptcho, Paul Dean, and Gerald Bower with me from my very first semester of graduate school. As mentors they gave me the appropriate verbal kicks in the butt when I needed them, but also gave me room to grow and find my own direction.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	iv
WHAT'S WITH ALL THE SASQUATCHES?	1
TELLING STORIES	3
EVERYONE LOVES AN UNDERDOG	4
POSTERS, TATTOOS, AND DIY	6
SELF PORTRAITS	9
CONCLUSIONS	11
BIBLIOGRAPHY	12
VITA	13

ABSTRACT

Less Class, More Sass! is a visual soundtrack to the crass jokes, hairy faces and smelly wardrobes of my disorderly, and politically incorrect friends. These young men and women have mutated into a ragged crew of personified sasquatches to tell a collection of stories about coming of age in the American punk and metal music subcultures.

In this series of prints the characters grow from aimlessly rebellious youths into hopeless but happy young adults, ashamed of their desires for a nice neighborhood and a steady job. While thrashing through a sea of self-destructive tendencies, each character slowly finds their inner resilience empowering them to stay afloat and keep swimming.

WHAT'S WITH ALL THE SASQUATCHES?

“Sas-quatch: a large, hairy creature that walks on two feet like a man and that some people claim to have seen in the northwestern U.S. and western Canada.”

—Merriam Webster Dictionary



Figure 1. Amanda James, *President Vicehole*, 2014

My friends and I always saw the sasquatch as our hairy alter ego. He was a wild non-human: not having to shower, go to school or report to anyone. Year after year we would sneak off to our tiny wooded sanctuary on top of Mount Tabor toting beat up acoustic guitars and yellowed comic books. Just like our sasquatch hero, we would vanish into the fir trees, hiding from random hikers and forgetting our domestic and societal responsibilities as we made music and laughed away mosquito bites.

In *Less Class, More Sass!* these alter egos have come alive. Sasquatches run amuck through my memories, drunkenly reorganizing personal histories, inserting bad puns and chasing daydreams doomed to never see reality.

At first they just partied all the time, finally free from the restraints of human society. They squeezed into tiny basements lit with heathen Christmas lights to see their favorite bands.

They tattooed their bellies with absurd sayings just for the hell of it. They skateboarded through lazy summers, attempting tricks on shoddily built plywood ramps. But even sasquatches can get partied out and eventually they started to want those cliché human things: love, houses, picket fences, and drinks from the top shelf.

They had grown from pierced youths filled with aimless rebellion into hopeless but happy young adults covered in tattoos, ashamed of their desires for a nice neighborhood and a steady job. The heathen Christmas lights in the basement soon found their way on to a fresh cut pine tree in front of the living room window, displayed for the neighbors. House shows became dinner parties and the jet black tattoo ink faded to a dusky navy blue.



Figure 2. Amanda James, *The Big 3-0*, 2014

TELLING STORIES

I have been lost in stories my entire life- holding my breath I watched monsters come to life on the silver screen or absentmindedly doodling song lyrics on to tattered notebooks. I yearned to make art that could be as amazing as listening to my favorite songs or watching a beloved film for the hundredth time. I would struggle for weeks and weeks, trying so hard to manufacture complex characters that the audience would love or at least hate. I made some really beautifully rendered figures, but somehow these characters could never quite added up to my expectations. They seemed shallow and generic, like a badly written pop song.

Then it hit me. I already had the greatest characters I could ask for. They were filled with charming quirks and bazaar flaws. They shared hopeless dreams and tiny triumphs. I would make art about my wonderfully politically incorrect friends as well as our shared journey into young adulthood.

Using my friends as my characters empowers me to fill every image with tiny details and eccentricities. Every drawn prop whether it be a sticker, tattoo or photograph, reveals another layer of personal history. The excessive amount of specificity invites the viewer to peer into the personal lives of each character. Just like in a good film, as the viewer learns more about each character their relationship is strengthened for better or worse. Revealing all of the tiny oddities that make these individuals unique helps the viewer to connect with and relate to them.



Figure 3. Amanda James, *Closing Time*, 2014

EVERYONE LOVES AN UNDERDOG

The narratives I am interested in involve collaborative creative efforts destined for “failure”. Growing up in the punk community I was surrounded by individuals that would put in exhaustive amounts of effort into creative endeavors that were never intended to go anywhere. Sometimes it would be a music project that literally never left the basement or a magnificent mural drawn on the bathroom wall in a squat house. I am fascinated by these attempts because they are about creating and not creations. At the same time they are shackled by a fear of success hiding under a veil of “authenticity”.

These doomed creative attempts are symbolized by the wooden anchor. Wooden anchors appear frequently throughout the show. Each character has this symbol tattooed on their middle lower knuckle. *The Wooden Anchors* band logo adorns the walls of various sasquatch venues. Although carved beautifully, the anchor’s materials render it useless. When put to the ultimate test, the anchor will float along behind a drifting vessel rather than holding fast. In a more positive light, the wooden anchor is also SLOW TO SINK.



Figure 4. Amanda James, *Slow to Sink*, Temporary Tattoos, 2014

Each character aimlessly drifts through his own sea of self-destructive potential, making purposeless decisions, fearing success, and hopelessly struggling against the tides of time. At the same time, the characters share a common buoyancy that keeps them from sinking too deeply into their individual flaws and fears, allowing them to bob to the surface and continue to swim.

The same use of wood as an innovative object, made useless by its material is found in a wooden camera in *Exclomen A Dominae* and a wooden mixer in *Our First Thanksgiving*, both of which tell stories of delightfully failed creative attempts.



Figure 5. Amanda James, *Exclomen A Dominae*, 2013

POSTERS, TATTOOS, AND DIY

Stickers and posters appear frequently throughout the show. They serve both as props to reveal the histories of various characters and places while also indicating the passage of time. The images and text memorialize iconic bands alongside bands that never quite escaped their drummer's garage. These overlapping references of imagery and text communicate the ever-changing history of underground music venues as new bands plaster their names over the top of old weathered relics.

Many of the posters advertise real shows that took place at former Portland music venues, which have decayed into abandoned warehouses and cheap auto body shops. They serve as a mass obituary to a jaundiced music scene and all of its fallen musical heroes, now working as used car salesmen. Relying on an equal mix of memory and nostalgia, I recreate posters that have long since disappeared into recycling bins. In *Satyricon Kiss*, the poster to the left of the prominent female figure, lists numerous names of former venues that I and my friends frequented while growing up. With these references, I am assembling a visual tribute album to the culture that I and countless other musicians, artists, and writers cobbled together.



Figure 6. Amanda James, *Satyricon Kiss*, 2013

In contrast to these disposable mementos, many of my characters collect tattoos throughout the exhibition. Tattoos are the only souvenir that one will never lose. As they accumulate, they record personal histories, whether it be a dumb drunken friendship tattoo destined to provoke laughs and dirty glances or a profound promise to oneself only visible in the most vulnerable of situations.

Tattoos are often associated with youth and rebellion, but I am interested in how they age. The former punk rock guitarist turned new dad picking up his kid from school amongst disapproving soccer moms. The middle-aged woman that owns her own business and proudly presents her knuckles that read “LADY-LIKE.”

In *Less Class, More Sass!* the number of visible tattoos increases as the characters grow into more domestic or adult roles. For instance in *The Show's Downstairs* very few of the characters are tattooed, but they are reckless and wild all crammed into a tiny drunken basement. In contrast the characters in *Wax and Weddings* and *Our First Thanksgiving*, have a far greater number of tattoos, but are participating in very domestic activities such as cooking or wedding planning. It has been my experience that tattoos are often exoticized and evoke images of rash and wild individuals, but in reality they are permanent souvenirs and will follow their wearer for a lifetime whether it be on a motorcycle road trip or a minivan supermarket run. By contrasting these wild untattooed images with domestic heavily tattooed images I am addressing some of the stereotypes commonly associated with tattoo culture.



Figure 7. Amanda James, *The Show's Downstairs*, 2014

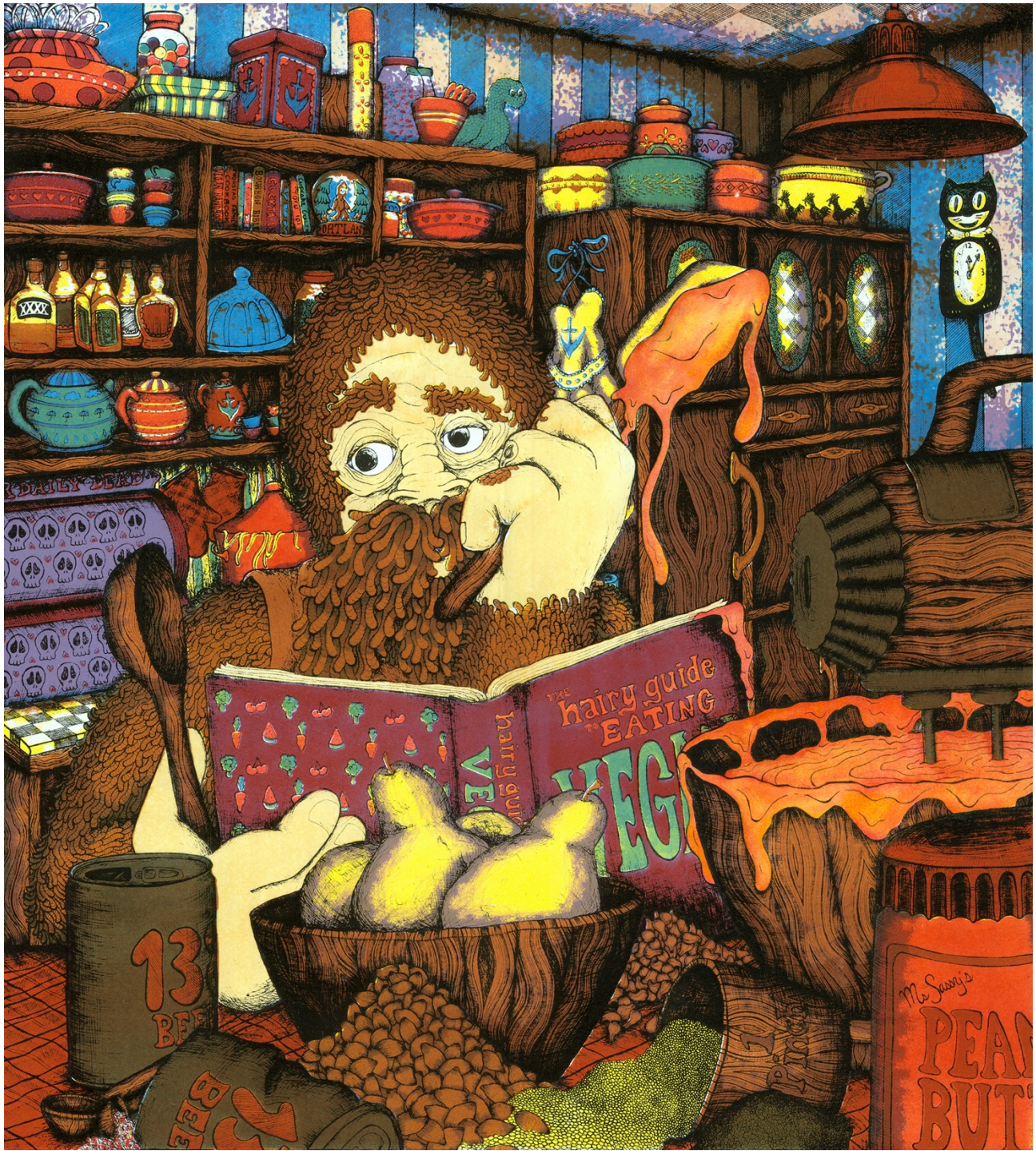


Figure 8. Amanda James, *Our First Thanksgiving*, 2014

SELF PORTRAITS



Figure 9. Amanda James, *The Wallflower*, 2014

When I first began this body of work it frightened and exhilarated me. I had never felt so close to communicating something personal and honest. It made my heart race and sink like those three chord basement songs or the angsty poetry I would post on to my teenage blog. I eagerly showed the early images to the people that had inspired them. Although supportive, they also asked me a completely terrifying question: “Where are you?”

I had envisioned all of these memories from behind an invisible camera lens. I was nowhere to be found. I was hiding in a sea of patterned lines, tattoos, beards and kitschy props. Drawing my friends had been so easy. I never had to think twice about what made them beautifully flawed and unique, but I was at a loss as to what these qualities were in myself.

This internal struggle is depicted in *Wax and Weddings*. My sasquatch counterpart is removing her mustache and painting her toenails simultaneously, resulting in spilled polish and a pained upper lip. Her tabletop is covered in DIY punk rock bridal magazines and a fancy decanter of whiskey engraved with a bad self-referential pun.

These props all represent conflicting identities, and more specifically gender roles. As a female heavily involved with the underground music communities from an early age I was frequently the only girl in an entire room of smelly men. I steered clear of all things that were

traditionally feminine like dresses, purses or makeup. I was a punk rock tomboy. I was one of the guys. As I grew older I began to want those feminine things and felt extremely guilty and shallow about those desires. *Wax and Weddings* shows my very clumsy attempts at traditionally feminine customs and explores the rebelliousness of letting go of stubborn punk rock rebellion and creating my own definition of what feminism means in my life.



Figure 10. Amanda James, *Wax and Weddings*, 2014

CONCLUSIONS

When I first came to Louisiana for graduate school, I was so excited to discover new things and to get far away from everything and everyone I knew. I began making work about Southern wildlife, but always from a safe distance. Although covered in psychedelic patterns, each character was still stiff and dead like the taxidermied animals in the natural science museum directly above the print shop.

I began to experiment with several different imaginary creatures such as lake monsters, garden gnomes and rock beasts. One day my studio mate wandered in on me drawing some punk rock sasquatches playing croquet and said “Woah, you’re drawing Ian.” I was bewildered. These were *imaginary* creatures and I had no intention of referencing anyone I knew. But when I looked closer at what I had just drawn, I realized it was true.

I watched as my sasquatches grew from punk rock stereotypes into specific individuals. The characters that emerged were my best friends from back home. In my haste to leave the Northwest for a new adventure, I had forgotten how amazing my support system was. Every night that I would stay up drawing alone to the sound of cicadas, I would think about all of the movies and songs I used to create with these individuals. We loved to make things, even if they were awful just because it was fun to try to create something out of nothing.

While exploring these memories as well as glimpses into the future, I became a stronger storyteller and graphic artist, but more significantly I realized what is truly important to me: my friends and family, the people I like to create with. The characters in my show are my pillars. They encouraged me to never discount an idea just because it is too silly or certain to fail. They showed me the brilliance of trying and creating, even if no one will ever see the results. They offered their wooden anchors as a floatation device if I ever felt like sinking. Most importantly, they taught me the worst thing I could ever do is to take life too seriously.

In this spirit I created *Less Class, More Sass!* Like a body covered in tattoos, each image tells a story about where I have been, who I have met and who I would like to become. While creating these images, I realized I had made my own sanctuary. I no longer need to climb to the top of Mount Tabor and disappear into the woods. In these drawings and prints I can stay inside a music venue that no longer exists. In this hand drawn world, I can have my best friends by my side even if in reality they are a thousand miles away. I can even plan out my future wedding in doodled daydreams.

Each print explores my personal friendships as well as my identity within a much larger underground music subculture. These relationships have shaped me into who I am, impacting my artistic aesthetic as well as my life goals and belief systems. These resilient communities and individuals helped me craft my own wooden anchor so that no matter how strong the current, I too will be slow to sink.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary. 11th ed. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2004. Print.

VITA

Amanda James grew up under the cloudy cover of Portland, Oregon. She was incredibly shy and loved to make things. With time she managed to collect an odd menagerie of creative friends and together they made music, short films, bad jokes and unbelievably silly drawings. While creating album art for a band that technically never existed, she realized drawing was her passion. She abandoned her logical plans of pursuing a boring but lucrative degree and enrolled in art classes at Portland State University. In 2011 she received her Bachelor of Science in Drawing and Printmaking.

After graduating she headed down South with her boyfriend Ian Thornton and their three cats to start graduate school at Louisiana State University. Over those three years she saw her first alligator, taught her first class and learned how to become a better storyteller. She also met amazing new people and absorbed excessive amounts of sunlight. With the end of her thesis year coming to a close, and that elusive Master of Fine Arts finally in sight, she is returning North to where she will become Mrs. Thornton and continue to draw until her hand falls off.