

Salad Days

By

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Gregory Stone

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Abstract

Salad Days is a multimedia installation consisting of sculpture, prints, painting, and artist's books. Viewers are transported to a period of youthful innocence as they climb up into a fort reminiscent of the childhood ideal. The gallery floor forms pathways between patches of decaying grass littered with a colorful array of objects, creating a scene reminiscent of a cluttered backyard in suburban America. Beneath the pleasing layers of youthful nostalgia are cynical reminders of the realities and anxieties that accompany adulthood. Beyond being a platform for the thematic dialogue, the exhibition provides an opportunity for new relationships with the audience as they are asked to participate and contribute to the library of artist's books. It is the mission of *Salad Days* to provide an immersive creative experience that is subversive, nostalgic, and interactive.

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Salad Days

I. Preface

Creator of the iconic comic strip *Calvin & Hobbes*, Bill Watterson once penned the young protagonist calling up his father at work to antagonize him for being stuck in an office while he runs around without a care in the world. In the final panel Calvin addresses the viewer summing up his behavior, “Childhood is for spoiling adulthood.”¹

It is the aim of *Salad Days* to provide a nostalgic escape from reality while maintaining the viewers’ awareness of the artificiality of the experience. As Watterson utilized the archetype of a little boy as a platform for discussing profound and adult ideas, I employ a stylized and commonplace portrayal of youth for analogous purposes. Behind the veil of bright colors and juvenile nostalgia lies the tragic truth that is adulthood. Beneath the layers of nostalgic superficiality are references to a grown-up reality, from to-do lists and scrawled worries to political leanings and allusions to current events. Reminders of maturity are hidden around every corner, on the backs of objects, embedded in images and on pages of artist books, while a theatrical backdrop of prints, paintings, and objects all designed to elicit memories of the youthful days of yesteryear, draws the viewer in for a closer look.

Beyond the thematic elements, *Salad Days* as an exhibition demands viewers to interact with the space and further asks them to participate through collaboration. Upon entering the gallery, the viewer is met with an environment to explore, pathways to walk through, a fort to climb into, benches to sit on, and books within to draw. Objects are

¹ Bill Watterson, *The Days Are Just Packed: A Calvin & Hobbes Collection*, (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1993), 107. (Original strip publication: 08 July 1992).

meant to be touched and admired as the audience is invited to step into the space, enjoy the moment, climb up into a fort, and to sit down on a bench and draw, write and scribble any troubles away.

From the clash between the superficial nostalgia for youth and the embedded anxiety and cynicism for adulthood, *Salad Days* provides an immersive space for interaction and collaboration. The installation does more than simply provide visual cues to evoke that wistful yearning, but rather transports the viewer into an enveloping setting, in which they can physically engage with the artwork.



Figure 1: *Salad Days* Installation view, Art & Design Gallery, University of Kansas, gallery dimensions (28' 8" x 20' x 27' 8"), 2015

II. Nostalgia

Originating from the tragedy *Anthony and Cleopatra*, “Salad Days” is a Shakespearean idiom that refers to youth, or a time of inexperience, innocence, enthusiasm and idealism. We all long for the simpler days of childhood. A simpler time before we were faced with the exponential responsibilities of adulthood. Some people, myself included, also long for a time back before we were sucked into our glowing screens, constantly inundated with news from around the world be it meaningful or inconsequential. I yearn for the time when people talked to each other, wrote letters back and forth, went outside to enjoy fresh air, and occasionally picked up a pencil just to draw something. Alas, life goes on and we are forced to grow up and forced to face the realities of maturity and societal shifts.

This exhibition operates as a battleground between the nostalgia for boyhood; going outside, building forts, and reading comics, and the unsolicited responsibilities that come with growing up. Beneath the layers of bright colors, cartoonish imagery, and humor lay elements of sarcasm, cynicism and anxiety.

As the centerpiece of the installation, the fort has two primary functions: as a space to exhibit a library of books, and a sculpture designed to educe nostalgia specific to American childhood. Climbing up into the fort, one looks up and sees the patchwork of children’s bed sheets that make the roof and the plethora of books, toys, and memorabilia filling the shelves inside. Some objects are pulled directly from my youth, such as a pinewood derby car and map of Georgia, and function as nostalgic items that give nuance to the space, while other objects like comic books and matchbox cars elicit a generalized idea of youth.

The installation presents a scene reminiscent of an unkempt cluttered backyard on the outskirts of an American suburb. The gallery floor forms pathways between patches of grass on which are scattered faux objects, large portraits, rocks, and detritus. The paper rainbow that forms an archway between the fort and the gallery wall creates an element of youthful wonderment.

While all of these pieces are pulled from recurring imagery from my prints and drawings, many of them are specific to the personal narrative. Painted in bright Nickelodeon colors, the boom box and small-screen television exist as elements of nostalgia. Conversely, objects like the Brian Williams-owned bomb and liquor bottles serve as reminders of adulthood.

In the end, every piece and object making up the installation adds to the conversation between nostalgia for youth and apprehension for adulthood, and ultimately reveals a lot about myself as an artist. I allow my own yearning to return to boyhood and anxiety towards facing the growing responsibilities of maturity to be visible in anticipation of forming relationships with viewers who might have my same desires and trepidations.

III. Catalyst

In an interview for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Funk artist William T. Wiley famously stated, “I’m just a landscape painter. I look out the window and I see what’s going, and I paint it. While I’m painting it, I also write thoughts about what I see going on out there.”² Looking at Wiley’s work, it is obvious he is taking some liberties describing his process and cannot simply be described as a landscape painter portraying scenes from his window. What Wiley expresses, however, is an idealistic yet honest approach to art making, one that is immediate and uninhibited by material or content.

Having created everything from drawings, paintings and prints to sculptures, installations, and videos, Wiley has never worked in a specific medium, but rather made use of every mode and resource available. His meticulous, stream-of-conscious mark making captivates viewers, demanding a closer look, all the while maintaining its allure from afar.

In the interview, he went on to say, “The imagery I find from various sources sometimes just kind of filtered through me and other artists, but sometimes more directly taken from a specific source, because I feel the imagery will convey what it is.” Just as Wiley cannot be pinned to any specific medium, he also cannot be tied to a specific subject matter as his work covers a plethora of themes from historical to current events, Zen philosophy to the creative studio practice.

² William T. Wiley, interview by Paul J. Karlstrom, *Oral history interview with William T. Wiley*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Oct 8-Nov 20, 1997.

Elizabeth Broun of the Smithsonian compares looking at Wiley’s art to “viewing a family scrapbook, where the awkward and embarrassing specifics capture the curious insecurities of our headlong stumble into the future.”³ With Wiley’s practice in mind, I strive to create work that likewise demands “close attention and patient looking,” allowing viewers the opportunity to get lost in imagery, line and text.

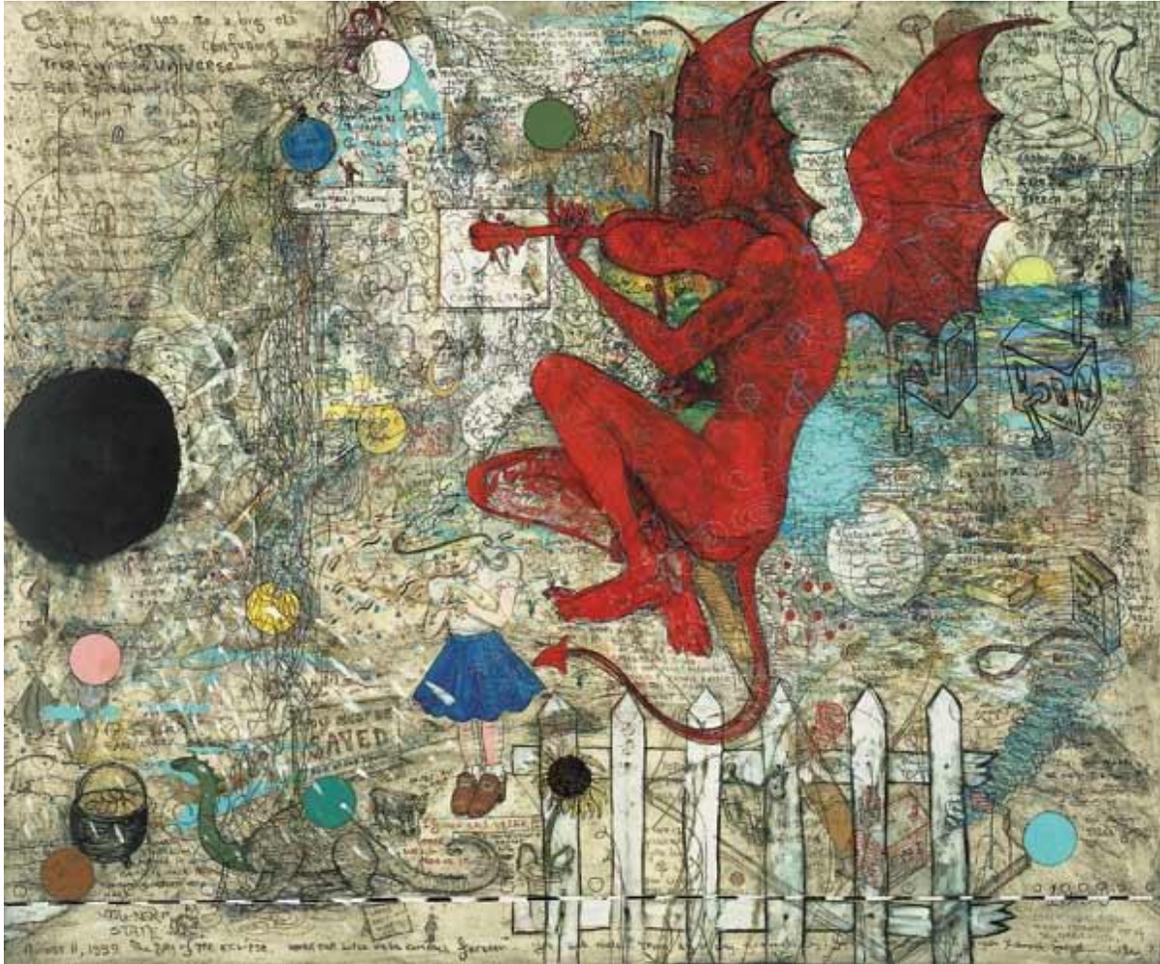


Figure. 2: William T. Wiley, *Evolution, the Eclipse & the Devils in Kansas*, 1999, acrylic and charcoal, 70 x 82 ¾ in.

³ Elizabeth Broun, foreword to *What’s It All Mean: William T. Wiley In Retrospect*, by Joann Moser (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 10-11.

From studying Wiley, I have learned the possibility of creating work about everything all at once, that I can explore all media, and that art can be honest and personal while speaking to a greater audience. While I am influenced by a wide range of sources and references, from pop culture and album art to history and current events, my work can be summed up as an amalgamation of ideas and images stemming from the personal narrative. As Wiley looks out his window and records what he sees, I do the same in my practice, endeavoring to create work that is honest, engaging, intimate and inclusive.

IV. Process

i. Books

The library of artist's books, part of the *Salad Days* exhibition, began as a project for recycling old material. Prints and drawings cluttering flat files got cut into pages for books and sewn together down the spine in saddle stitch method. Treating these sketchbooks like unfinished canvases I began filling them up with new material through drawing, painting, and collage. I discovered new relationships were created through the juxtapositions of rearranging imagery and reconstructing past work into novel forms. I could draw on top of old imagery, on blank pages transforming old material into unique forms.

I sought free and unlimited expression, and allowed the books to become filled with a wide range of imagery, from finished sketches and to scrawled lists, notes, and song lyrics. The books became canvases for working out ideas, while remaining intimate works of art. With the intention of turning the traditionally private sketchbook into

something to be viewed, admired, and studied, I began an effort of building up a library of artist's books to one day put on exhibit.

As I seek new efforts to collaborate and communicate with others in my creative practice, it seemed that growing a large collection of hand-made artist's books naturally lent itself to collaboration. I began sending out unfinished books to friends, family, colleagues, and mentors. I sent books in different forms, some bound some unbound, different pages assembled, sometimes curating the pages used specifically to the collaborator and other times leaving it to chance. I aimed to reach a wide audience across the country, from New York to Oregon, as well as a diverse audience of artists and non-artists, including: scientists, engineers, architects, writers, musicians, teachers, parents and children.

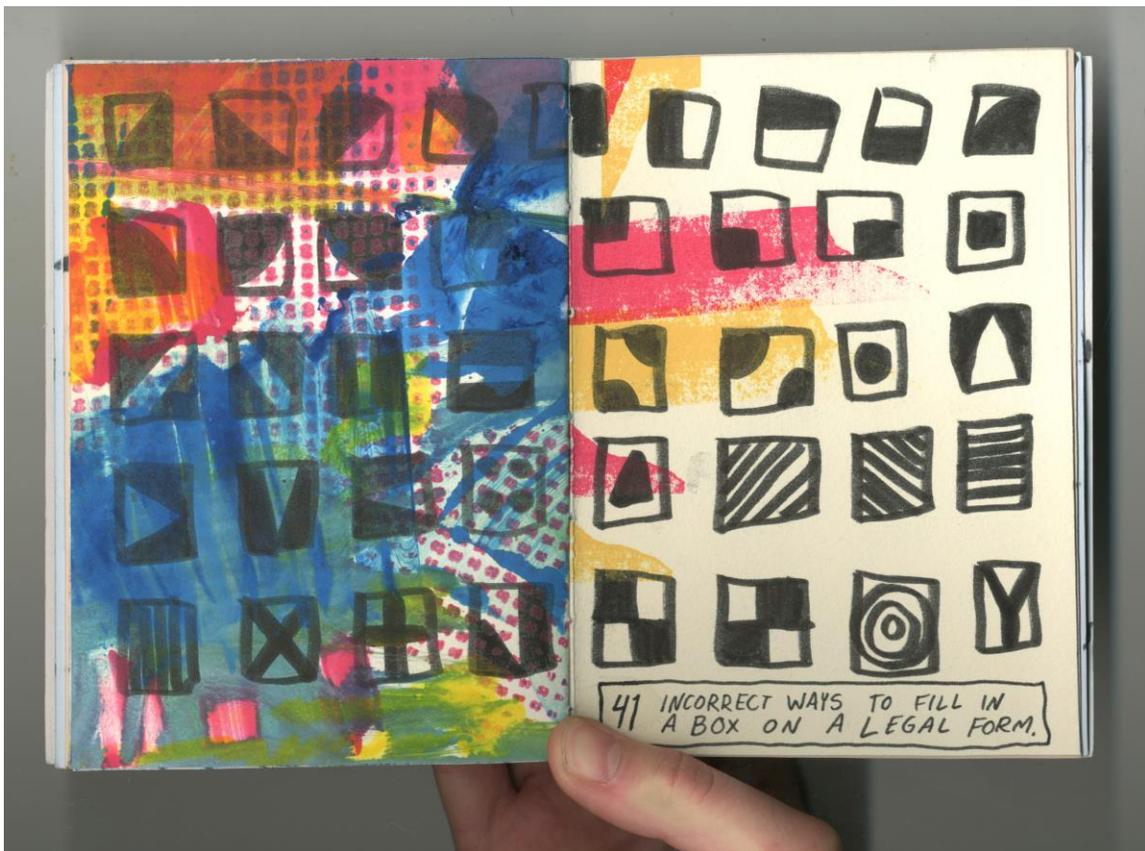


Figure 3: Detail of artist's book, collaboration with artist Tate Foley (St. Louis), 2014.

I became fascinated by how others reacted to the material provided to them and how they chose to transform it. Some books greatly changed, even doubling in size. Others remained relatively untouched other than doodles and notes. Some books were deeply personal while others became thematic narratives. Some collaborators accepted the project with open arms despite little instructions or guidance, while others struggled with the open-endedness of being handed an unfinished sketchbook. Each collaborator brought something new to the process and material, all of which informed my own creative practice.



Figure 4: Interior view of the fort, artist's books, Art & Design Gallery, University of Kansas, gallery dimensions (28' 8" x 20' x 27' 8"), 2015

For information about the collaborative books in the library and collaborators see the Catalog of Collaborative Artist's Books in the Appendices.

ii. Prints

Directly influenced from the process of assembling and collaborating on artist's books, the printed work in the exhibition are amalgamations of new and old material that create unique relationships and meanings through novel juxtaposition. The prints were all made from the combination of old and new matrixes, collage and hand coloring. Past imagery makes reappearances and gets transformed and recontextualized in the same manner of the artist's book.

Treating copper plates like sketchbook pages, I draw with little inhibition, weaving together a landscape of text, pattern, and objects. Through the process of etching, images are given permanence, a characteristic generally not attributed to a sketch or a doodle. I create collage material from comic book pages, saturated gradients of wood grain, and old plates printed on notebook paper and old journal pages. With an arsenal of material, plates and paper at the ready, I enter the studio not knowing with what I will leave.

Using *à la poupée*, a technique of selectively inking a plate in different colors, and *chine-collé*, a process of simultaneously collaging material while printing, I playfully build up layers of imagery. Upon one run through the press, every print is assessed, some receive further layers of etching and collage, while others are treated with silkscreen and paper lithography, a planographic process of printing from Xerox copies. Each piece evolves over the course of weeks and months, starting from drawing into the ground on a plate and dipping it in acid. Reconsidering the directness of drawing which is somewhat lost through the printmaking process, the last step for these images is hand coloring with

Hung on two-clotheslines stretching from the fort to the gallery wall, the prints are displayed without frames, disregarding traditional exhibition practices in order to create a seamless environment. Whereas framing prints would establish two disparate spaces, showing them on the clothesline allows them occupy the same space and contribute to the aesthetics of the installation. Moreover, omitting the pane of glass and wood frame permits the viewer to get even closer to the image, as no longer is there any degree of separation between the work and the viewer, and thus these pieces inhabit a shared space reflective of the imagery within each print.



Figure 6: Prints hung on clothesline in *Salad Days*. Art & Design Gallery, University of Kansas, 2015

iii. Objects

From a growing desire to bring my work beyond the two-dimensional picture plane of prints and drawings and into three-dimensional space, my studio practice has expanded to include experiments in sculpture. Drawing directly from the imagery in my flat work, the objects I created began in the form of signs and cutouts. The result is the many pieces littering the gallery floor in the installation, including large busts of historical figures, a colorful boom box, a steer skull, a bomb owned by Brian Williams, liquor bottles and clusters of vibrant mushrooms.

These faux objects are all plywood cutouts painted in acrylic. Barely reaching beyond the flatness of a print, these objects function as sculpture and two-dimensional work simultaneously. Referencing the pop-up prints of artist Red Grooms, all of these objects were designed as set props to elicit the idea of what is being depicted while addressing the fact that it is indeed not real, in the same way René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* directly addresses the flaw of depicting an object in paint. All of these pieces enhance the general façade attributed the installation and function to undercut that pretense upon deeper inquiry. While the viewer is initially met with a bright and exuberant veneer, further investigation into the environment reveals the treachery of the piece as a fallacious setting for the discourse between nostalgia for youth and apprehension towards maturity.

The most prominent cutouts in the installation are the busts of Vincent Van Gogh, Thomas Jefferson and Mark Twain. Also pulled from recurring imagery in my work, each of these figures was chosen out of ongoing personal interest, as well as how each figure contributed to the whole dialogue. Easily one of the first artists I ever latched onto,

Van Gogh was a man of great personal turmoil, a fact that can be seen in the expressions of his self-portraits and his direct, uneasy mark making. Behind the bright colors, expressive brushwork and cynical humor of his bandage lies a deeper anxiety, which is also literally scrawled across the back of the portrait as the phrase “Sad painters make good art... usually.” Van Gogh functions within the installation not only as a figure of personal interest and art historical reference, but as an object to embed with anxiety, humor, and cynicism.



Figure 7: Installation shot, portraits and print clothesline. Art & Design Gallery, University of Kansas, 2015

Likewise, Jefferson and Twain serve a similar purpose within the installation. Being captivated by American history, I often reference historical figures that have peaked my interest, and Thomas Jefferson is at the top of that list. A well-recognized figure who had a huge impact on the formation of the United States and whose personal

life has caused uproar in recent history, his bust was an opportunity to maintain the dichotomy present in the installation. Similarly, Mark Twain is an individual American youth are all introduced to in school, whose work has come to help define what American boyhood is, and is also a figure of personal significance. The bust of Twain functions as a reference to youth, boyhood, and Americana, but also as a platform to discuss grown-up concerns of facing adulthood.

iv. Environment

The intention of expanding my creative practice into new mediums stems from a desire to form new relationships with the viewer and generate more immersive creative experiences. In this effort, I wanted to create a space in which all my work, books, prints and objects could coexist, an environment that further engaged with the viewer beyond the visual familiarity of traditional gallery art.

Imagining a space for the library of artist's books, I needed to build a structure that provided an intimate setting to view the works of art and could be an art object on its own. The structure needed to transport the viewer and engage them in a visual and physical way. Again, I looked to my printed imagery and settled on building a fort. Not only is the image of the fort rooted in personal history from years of constructing them as a youth, the fort is a universal concept. Whether or not every viewer has had the experience of building or playing in a fort, the notion is widely recognized in contemporary society.



Figure 8: Interior view of fort. Art & Design Gallery, University of Kansas, fort interior dimensions (5' x 5' x 7') 2015

Continuing the practice of recycling material, much of the wood for the object was salvaged and repurposed from a previous project. The simple design and rustic aesthetic were intended to evoke a sense of wear and familiarity, while providing an intimate escape for viewers to immerse themselves in a nostalgic experience. Inside, one can draw back the curtain door, peruse the library of artist's books, play with matchbook cars, and strum a guitar.

Of course, the fort itself, along with all the other objects, needed an environment in which to exist. Once more, using my two-dimensional work as a reference, I sought to create a space that was the three-dimensional embodiment of my prints. Patches of grass served as natural surfaces for these pieces to inhabit, while rocks, hay, wood and other detritus act as filler material contributing to the overall façade. These elements form a

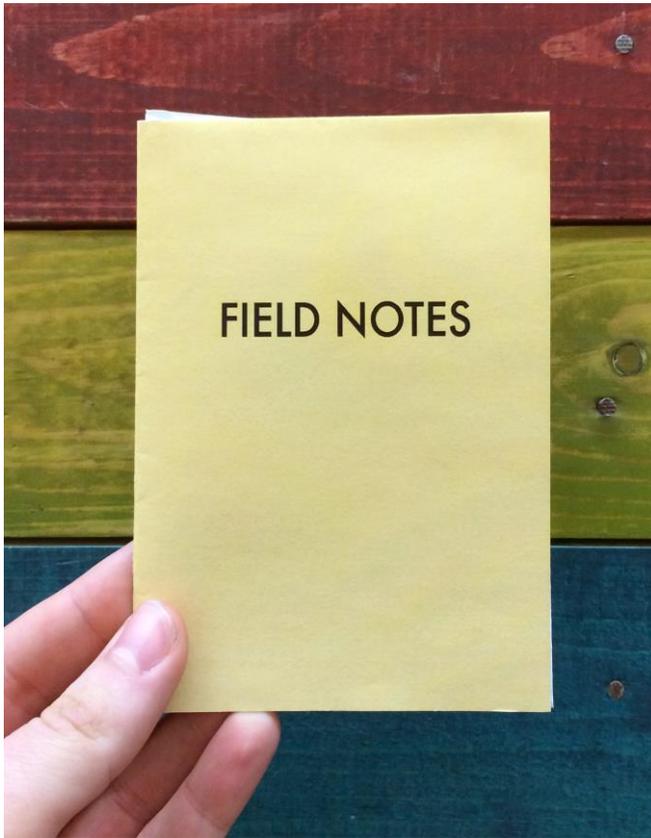
stark contrast to their fake counterparts, transforming the gallery to a certain degree and enabling the installation to become immersive. From the transition of walking on hard gallery floor to the softness of actual grass, to the smell of the dirt, to the feeling of the worn wood and texture of rocks, the genuine objects supply the illusion of reality; all the while the hand-painted pieces break that illusion.



Figure 9: Installation view. Art & Design Gallery, University of Kansas, gallery dimensions (28' 8" x 20' x 27' 8"), 2015

In addition to creating an immersive environment, the space needed to be a place in which viewers would feel compelled and comfortable collaborating. A bale of hay and two benches made from repurposed material function as places to sit, relax, and to soak up the surroundings. Stationed near each resting spot are materials for collaboration. Pens and pencils lay on stumps next to unfinished artist's books, begging to be picked up and utilized.

Knowing that the installation itself might not be enough to entice audience participation, a free zine accompanied the exhibition, providing a prompt for viewers to engage with the space, to climb into the fort, and to partake in the collaboration. The zine was modeled after a *Field Notes* notebook, and further functioned as a place to catalog



the library of artist's books and provide supplementary information, such as a Code of Honor that directly references the Boy Scout honor code and is designed to further elicit feelings of youthful nostalgia.

Figure 10: *Field Notes*. Xerox zine, 5.5" x 4.25", 2015

See Appendices for list of collaborators and other information included the *Field Notes* zine.

V. Artifact

In the end, my creative process becomes cyclical in nature. The sketchbook informs the prints, which become recycled into artist books. The construction of the artist's books informs the prints, while the imagery from the prints informs the sculpture. Deconstructing and recycling material become paramount to my practice, informing the aesthetics and content of the work.

I aim to elevate the sketchbook and the doodle into objects of permanence through the process of printmaking and alternative modes of display, such as creating a private space to view a library of artist's books. I believe art is a mode for interaction and collaboration, a medium through which to share and communicate ideas, and as my artistic practice grows, I find increasing interest in providing those types of creative experiences.

While conceptually my work speaks about and references a plethora of ideas, ultimately it is about the struggle between the responsibilities of adulthood and the growing nostalgia for youth. Seeking to provide more immersive experiences as a mode of furthering the relationship with the viewer, I presented an installation made through the same reconstructive process and designed to evoke the same nostalgia as my printed work. Unlike any true experience from youth, *Salad Days* does not contain any childhood ignorance towards the real world, but rather contrasts the ideals of youth with the cynicism, anxiety, and reality that accompany adulthood.

VI. Appendices

Collaborative Artist Book Catalog

1. Ally Stone – student, dreamer, photographer (Atlanta, Georgia)
2. Amanda Ferg – costume designer (Quincy, Massachusetts)
3. Amy Stone – mother, dental hygienist (Marietta, Georgia)
4. Andrew Barger – artist, nomad (Charlottesville, Virginia)
5. Anna Youngyeun – artist (Berea, Kentucky)
6. Brian Hawkins – artist, musician (Lawrence, Kansas)
7. Charlotte & Desmond Pemberton – artist & mother; boy (Lawrence, Kansas)
8. Clint Rogers – artist, musician (Lawrence, Kansas)
9. Dylan Stone – baseball star, bugler, scout (Marietta, Georgia)
10. Eddie McKenna – artist (Lawrence, Kansas)
11. Eric Simmons – artist, satirist (Brooklyn, New York)
12. Finn, Max & Mikkell Lappin – boys; mother & graphic designer (Lawrence, Kansas)
13. Gerald Eysaman – architect (Tacoma, Washington)
14. Jack McCaslin – artist, professor (Fishersville, Virginia)
15. Jason Barr – artist (Lawrence, Kansas)
16. Jason Bryant – artist (Minneapolis, Minnesota)
17. Jess Denny – marketing director (St. Petersburg, Florida)
18. John Hill – musician, artist, activist (Wilsonville, Oregon)
19. Jordan Hamm – scientist, researcher (New York, New York)
20. Josh Glickman – writer (Brooklyn, New York)
21. Julia, Katherine, John, Sarah & Judy Bailey – students, mother (Canton, New York)
22. Justin Camilli – artist, musician (Denver, Colorado)
23. Kathy Hannon – special education teacher (Saranac Lake, New York)
24. Ken Eysaman & Gretchen Eysaman – editor, writer; grandmother (Adams, New York)
25. Lindsey Juarez – sales consultant (St. Petersburg, Florida)
26. Love Garden – record store employees (Lawrence, Kansas)
27. Mark Raymer – artist (Lawrence, Kansas)
28. Nicole Robinson – graphic designer (Lawrence, Kansas)
29. Olivia Scarborough – graphic designer (Westminster, Colorado)
30. Rachel Robinson & Michael Dunham – architect; engineer (New York, New York)
31. Rachel Stinson – child life specialist (Syracuse, New York)
32. Richard Morgan – graphic designer (Atlanta, Georgia)
33. Rhonda Ennever – artist, retired teacher (Marietta, Georgia)
34. Robert Spellman – artist, art teacher (Des Moines, Iowa)
35. Robin Goodfellow – poet (Lawrence, Kansas)
36. Ruben Castillo – artist (Lawrence, Kansas)
37. Solace Naeymi – artist (Lawrence, Kansas)
38. Steven Prochyra – scientist, artist (Lawrence, Kansas)
39. Tate Foley – artist (St. Louis, Missouri)
40. Tina Queen – esthetician, yoga instructor, artist (Tulsa, Oklahoma)

Code of Honor

*On my honor, I will do my best
And to hell with the rest
I will make, create, build and populate
The world with art
I will never cease my creative endeavors
Sharing with others forever and ever
I will be novel, reflective, original and subjective
I will be critical and thorough,
And always look forward to tomorrow
I will appreciate the new and cherish the old
I will continue to learn and continue to grow
Until the day comes
When I am no more.*

Ranks & Merits

*Scout
Explorer
Librarian
Tenderfoot
Delinquent
Musician
Activist
Carpenter
Student
Artist*