

# In Review

Meredith Allen: Recent Photographs

by Carol Schwarzman

Sometimes a popsicle is just a popsicle. But in the photographs of Williamsburg artist Meredith Allen, frozen confections on a stick become much more than something cold and wet to eat on a hot summer's day.

Allen's recent show at Gracie Mansion in Chelsea offered a series of eleven photographs of cartoon character ice pops inhabiting bucolic country landscapes. Amidst the trees, ponds and beaches of far eastern Long Island, Tweety Pie, Pokemon, Bugs Bunny, *et al.* melted and dripped their way into intertwining dialogues on nature and culture, temporality, and the impermanence of corporeal existence. Pretty heady stuff, yet cartoon personages have long shouldered the burden of acting out humans' most difficult conundrums.

Instantly accessible, these works function well as pleasing, goofy, sticky images of favorite fantasy figures. Each photo presents a single popsicle held by a disembodied hand against a blurry, cliché backdrop of blue sky, water, and greenery. Very pleasing – sugar on sugar – and easy on the eye. But something of a darker tone is at work beneath the surface glint of sun shining on colorful liquefying ice. The characters are all in varying states of meltdown: bright blue goo runnels down in between fingers, and pink drips caught in mid-air imply the body, its innards and, perhaps, its illnesses. We are called upon to consider the unappetizing along with the tantalizing.

In *Moriches Island Road (Supersonic)*, a mostly melted, white and cerulean blue face streams down from the popsicle, over the hand, and off the bottom of the picture plane. It's a specimen proffered for our meditation. The disintegrating shapes of Supersonic's visage are echoed in the cumulous clouds floating silently behind. His button candy eyes are topped by a still intact apostrophe of a worried eyebrow. In this lovely setting, anxiety is palpable, decay is evident – creating a *momento mori* not only for the end of summer, but for an age when islands and roads could be universally referenced by the names of people who owned or lived on them.

*Pokemon*, a spooky, impish apparition of the cartoon character (because of the melting process) verges on the disgusting. It's wonderful to remember that this synthetic, drippy

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dessert is something to be eaten. Like mythic Saturn devouring his offspring out of jealousy, or the Titans devouring Zagreus the baby (whose heart is later transformed into Dionysus by Athena), *Pokemon* speaks of cannibalism to scare as well as to make mock of fears of death and putrefaction. Fantasies of gorging on children and adults contain and control such fears, and are further transformed in Christian themes of transubstantiation. In fact, Allen's entire series of hobgoblins shown here could be taken as bogeymen to be consumed – they modestly comment on consumer culture and its quest to constantly obliterate and reinvent itself while remaining separated from Nature.\*

Allen, who claims she watched "five hours a day" of television while growing up, originally, "just wanted to take pictures of beautiful landscapes," with this series. She went on to introduce the popsicles and their attendant imagery and content to "make the landscapes [her] own." A previous series of photographs documented 25-cent kiddie rides she tracked down throughout the city. These photos' outlandish animals and cartoon characters have been tamed to fit the needs of busy moms with fussy children – put the quarter in, and for three or four minutes your child is transformed into an adventurous cowgirl or spaceman. Allen's sense of irony is not without sentimentality for what's lost, or joy in being frivolous.

Strongest were those works in which the cartoon persona was most abstracted (melted) and less familiar. These photographs become integrated as things-in-themselves, pushing across the borderlines of Pop insouciance toward a contemplative, quasi-painterly ruefulness. There's a struggle of wills that fuels Ms. Allen's work – almost a fight between sticking it in our face and allowing us to lay down on pillows, propped up on one elbow, to slowly ponder our next thought. It will be interesting to see if this refreshing dynamic propels Allen's inquiry in the future, or, if given the recent tragedy in our city, her playful, tempered jabs at popular culture acquire a different voice.

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\*My thoughts here rely heavily on Marina Warner's wonderful book *No Go the Bogeyman*, which discusses why we like to scare ourselves.