Hypertension brings together multi-media artists and designers whose work reflects the blurring of artistic disciplines evident in our contemporary visual culture. The selected works disrupt boundaries between the cerebral and the physical; between past and present. They encourage us to absorb and interpret information across multiple channels, channels that often trigger paradoxical emotions, expanding both the intellectual and emotional involvement of the viewer.
According to Molly Shannon’s voice over in the first scene of the 1999 film Superstar, there are two different ways of getting into a swimming pool. In the first way you take your time, carefully testing the water’s temperature. If that feels okay, you slowly get into the water, letting your body adjust to the cold. Then there’s the second way of getting into a pool: YOU JUMP! Cue young Mary Katherine Gallagher leaping into the water with arms flailing.

It is in jumping that we make a choice – to submit to gravity. Although in jumping we experience a loss of control (surrendering to the fall), we also demand a total control (the choice of action). I maintain that the choice of action overrides the submission to gravity. After all, we chose it. It’s not like we had to do it. It becomes a controlled chaos. I’ve always loved oxymoronic phrases — jumbo shrimp, living dead, mad wisdom — they jumble the synapses in the brain. They are physical. The way Oppenheim’s fur lined teacup is physical.

HYPERTENSION, a new four person show spanning two floors at the Elaine L. Jacob Gallery at Wayne State University, is oxymoronic. It would jump into the pool. The show, which was curated by Zack Ostrowski and Tom Pyrzewski, is filled with bold choices, paired with moments of complete surrender. While exerting a mastery of composition and design, the work gives into the physical and the optical. The work is first felt. It is heavy and smart: sampling across culture and art history, and leaving us ruminating in the visual. Though the Elaine L. Jacob Gallery is on Hancock Street in Midtown in Downtown Detroit, the work in HYPERTENSION transports to the Las Vegas strip.

In Dave Hickey’s article “A Home in the Neon,” he explains that “Vegas only has two rules: one, post the odds, and two treat everybody the same. Just as one might in a democracy. In Vegas, there is a deficiency of secrets and economy.” HYPERTENSION embraces Vegasian democracy. The four artists approach culture democratically: Elmer Fudd and Maxim, Freud and psychedelia, Burger King and Nike. All the cards are on the table. The work is rooted the layered. The pop. The saturated. Responding to our contemporary cultural condition, the mediated abounds, and the simple is non existent. The sample however becomes normative.
Michael Boswell’s Untitled, for example, appropriates an iconic emblem of consumer culture: the Burger King mascot. I’ve never quite trusted this character. Something about his odd body proportions, or consistent grinning mask, to me, are like petting a cat backwards. Boswell pictures a floating King’s head swimming in a sea of red, upside down and menacing, yet somehow regal. As one moves closer to the piece, the King’s cover is blown. His face is revealed to be a thin mask with a pair of unassuming eyes lingering underneath. Boswell pulls the curtain back to reveal the plainness of the wizard.

Elliott Earl’s work appropriates even more covertly than Boswell’s use of Nike, Looney Toons, and fast food mascots. Like so many computer windows open on a screen, Earl’s work is densely layered with imagery that mimics itself. Steeped in the language of advertising, the work creates an internal logic that speaks of cultural conditioning and it’s effects on identity. One approaches the work through visual awe, then begins to wade into the milieu of Freudian psychology. The work becomes autobiography, slowly, deftly.

Patrick Hill’s samplings are at once fresh and historical. Humor and sexuality ooze out of the work; like RuPaul: at once campy and glamorous. Hill’s geometry and materiality recall Tony Smith, while his coloration and symbolic references tie the work to Southern California Pop.

Margi Weir’s work roots the show in Vegas iconography. Neon green frogs, yellow parrots and dice are shaken and rolled to create a repeated pattern, recalling a tacky golf shirt. While the four artists work was created in separate cities spanning the nation (Hill in LA, Earls and Weir in metro Detroit, and Boswell in New YorkI), they uncannily finish each other’s sentences, like an old married couple.

It is not uncommon for those in my generation to hear a sample of a song before the original. As a child, for example, I idolized Mariah Carey. Her song “Fantasy” made it’s way onto many a cassette mix tape of mine. Upon recently hearing The Tom Tom Club’s song “Genius of Love,” the all too familiar lyrics “What you gonna do when you get outta jail...” from Carey’s sample startled me. I hadn’t considered that Mariah could be using another musicians content, yet the fact that she did (or her writers did) allow her music to complexify. To be in conversation with a different genre and time period. Mariah the time traveler.

Of course, today this is old hat, and “musical collagist” Girl Talk’s bread and butter. In his most recent album from 2010, All Day, Girl Talk sampled 372 other songs, creating a masterpiece of densely layered and spliced tunes. The beauty of it, is that you already know the beats and lyrics. One immediately identifies with the mashups, yet also gets taken by surprise. Our cultural climate is filled with this type of information looping, and it is in this space that the artists in HYPERTENSION derive their potency. Upon experiencing the work, one has a sense of already knowing it.

It is not new for artists to mimic the world around them. Art appropriates life, and often the reverse occurs: i.e. Andy Warhol’s soup can paintings inspiring fashion lines. The appropriation employed by the HYPERTENSION artists is similarly complex; commodity culture, art culture, and personal iconography become a densely composed witches brew. A tincture of Kanye, an eye of Oedipus. Then, a toe of Rosenquist, a flank of Morris. Just a sprinkle of Bridgett Riley. A whisker of Warhol of course tops off the brew, and brings it to a steady boil.

The distinguishing X-factor of the four artists however is not their cultural sampling, but their unabashed embrace of design. Without positing the show under any pretext, the
curators who ride under the name sUPERIORbelly possessed a subtle mission: to meld the work of artists and designers. By choosing two designers whose work functions in a fine art context (Earls and Boswell), and two artists whose work is informed by design (Weir and Hill), sUPERIORbelly was able to capture a certain “je ne sais quoi” that provides a seamless dialogue between the work. These themes are felt – not pounded into skulls.

Many a curator has traveled down the here’s-what-the-show’s-about-path (picture vinyl wall text demanding that “graphic designers have a place in the art world too, man”). The subtext of these protestations establish a clear line of demarcation between “Art” & “Design.” Designers demanding an equal place at the art world table, does nothing but further separate the distinctions between the two, because it firmly establishes a superior position for “Art” above “Design.” SuperiorBelly effortlessly evade this type of curation. The sophistication of the curation lies in its clear understanding of the power dynamic between the two disciplines, and a willingness to blur lines, or perhaps more apt, toss lines out the window. Within the HYPERTENSION exhibition we find a progressive curatorial vision coupled with work that embraces the slippage of disciplines. The work comes first. Not outmoded dualism between two creative fields. The show title and poster (designed by Zack Ostrowski) are prime examples of this. Both perform semiotic puzzlers that are not meant to be solved, rather dwelled in. One approaches the show poster first for it’s physicality, and secondly for it’s potential cultural referents. Jumbo shrimp.

As I mentioned earlier, the show jumps. The bodily relationship the work engages in with the viewer is uncanny. Earls’ stacked optics spin the viewer on a carousel. Meanwhile, Hill’s sculptures silently stand by, ready to stabilize spinning retinas. There is an undefinable or a restless energy that the show contains, pushing and pulling between states of being. The hyper-optic stimulation of Weir’s and Earls’ work, the off kilter arrangement of Boswell’s installation, and the stylized graphic sculptures from Hill build up an intensity which is felt. Furlined teacup.

HYPERTENSION induces amnesia – we forget the thing we are seeing, yet we are comfortable, familiar. Perhaps this is how Hickey feels in Vegas. In a democracy, everyone has the same odds, the same luck of the draw. We all have the right to eat Burger King, but more poignantly, we all have the right to sample Burger King. Through appropriation comes power shift; we may all have the same luck of the draw, but by remixing cultural icons, and filtering them through a seamless mash-up of art and design language, the HYPERTENSION artists are holding the cards.
PATRICK HILL (L) PRINTS AND SCULPTURE / MICHAEL BOSWELL (R) INSTALLATION

OPPOSITE PAGE: PATRICK HILL SCULPTURE / MARGI WEIR INSTALLATION

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MICHAEL BOSWELL INSTALLATION

OPPOSITE PAGE: PATRICK HILL SCULPTURE
ARTWORK IDENTIFICATION LIST

PAGES 8-9

ABSOLUTUM DOMINUM; 2013; ELLIOT EARLS;
PLASTER, ALUMINUM LEAF, WOOD, HIGH DENSITY URETHANE FOAM

GOD; 2013; ELLIOT EARLS;
HIGH DENSITY URETHANE FOAM, EPOXY AND PIGMENT

SUPER-ANTI ZERO, 2013, ELLIOT EARLS,
EBONIZED ASPEN PANEL

SOMNAMBULIST RISING, 2013, ELLIOT EARLS,
HIGH DENSITY URETHANE FOAM

MILK, 2013, ELLIOT EARLS,
OIL ON LINEN

UNTITLED, 2013, ELLIOT EARLS,
OIL ON WOOD PANEL

UNTITLED (LOS ANGELES TIMES); 2010; PATRICK HILL;
WHITE CARRARA MARBLE, NEWSPAPER, WOOD, DYE
COURTESY OF SUSANNE HILBERRY GALLERY
ARTWORK IDENTIFICATION LIST

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MILK, 2013, ELLIOT EARLS,
OIL ON LINEN

SOMNAMBULIST RISING, 2013, ELLIOT EARLS,
HIGH DENSITY URETHANE FOAM

PAGES 11

PAPER TIGER 3, 2013, MARGI WEIR,
2 ML ADHESIVE- BACKED VINYL AND ACRYLIC PAINT ON WALL
*DETAIL PHOTOGRAPH
ARTWORK IDENTIFICATION LIST

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PAPER TIGER 3, 2013, MARGI WEIR,
2 ML ADHESIVE- BACKED VINYL AND ACRYLIC PAINT ON WALL

THE DOCTOR ON PLANET TEGMARK; 2013; MICHAEL BOSWELL;
INKJET PRINT, CAN OF RED BULL, POLYESTER FLAG

UNTITLED; 2013; MICHAEL BOSWELL;
POWDER COATED STEEL, COLBY DIGITAL PHOTO FRAME

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FISCAL FORECASTING; 2013; MARGI WEIR;
2 ML ADHESIVE-BACKED VINYL ON WALL, WITH 2 PAINTINGS OF VINYL,
ACRYLIC PAINT AND RESIN ON PANEL
ARTWORK IDENTIFICATION LIST

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FISCAL FORECASTING; 2013; MARGI WEIR;
2 ML ADHESIVE-BACKED VINYL ON WALL, WITH 2 PAINTINGS OF VINYL,
ACRYLIC PAINT AND RESIN ON PANEL

SELF-PORTRAIT AS ABRAHAM LINCOLN, 2013, ELLIOT EARLS,
OIL ON LINEN

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FISCAL FORECASTING; 2013; MARGI WEIR;
2 ML ADHESIVE-BACKED VINYL ON WALL, WITH 2 PAINTINGS OF VINYL,
ACRYLIC PAINT AND RESIN ON PANEL
*DETAiL PHOTOGRAph
CLUMSY ANGEL, 2011, PATRICK HILL, WOOD, DYE, WHITE CARRARA MARBLE, GLASS
COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

HOT AND DUMB (BLK 4 1/4), 2010, PATRICK HILL, BLACK URETHANE RUBBER ON JAPANESE MASA RICE PAPER
COURTESY OF SUSANNE HILBERRY GALLERY

HOT AND DUMB (AP), 2010, PATRICK HILL, BLACK URETHANE RUBBER ON JAPANESE MASA RICE PAPER
COURTESY OF SUSANNE HILBERRY GALLERY

HOT AND DUMB (BLK 3/4), 2010, PATRICK HILL, BLACK URETHANE RUBBER ON JAPANESE MASA RICE PAPER
COURTESY OF SUSANNE HILBERRY GALLERY

HOT AND DUMB (BLK 3 1/4), 2010, PATRICK HILL, BLACK URETHANE RUBBER ON JAPANESE MASA RICE PAPER
COURTESY OF SUSANNE HILBERRY GALLERY

HOT AND DUMB (BLK 2 1/4), 2010, PATRICK HILL, BLACK URETHANE RUBBER ON JAPANESE MASA RICE PAPER
COURTESY OF SUSANNE HILBERRY GALLERY
ARTWORK IDENTIFICATION LIST

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HOT AND DUMB (AP), 2010, PATRICK HILL,
BLACK URETHANE RUBBER ON JAPANESE MASA RICE PAPER
COURTESY OF SUSANNE HILBERRY GALLERY

HOT AND DUMB (BLK 2 4/4), 2010, PATRICK HILL,
BLACK URETHANE RUBBER ON JAPANESE MASA RICE PAPER
COURTESY OF SUSANNE HILBERRY GALLERY

HOT AND DUMB (AP), 2010, PATRICK HILL,
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COURTESY OF SUSANNE HILBERRY GALLERY

HOT AND DUMB (AP), 2010, PATRICK HILL,
BLACK URETHANE RUBBER ON JAPANESE MASA RICE PAPER
COURTESY OF SUSANNE HILBERRY GALLERY

PLIÉ; 2011; PATRICK HILL;
WOOD, DYE, WHITE CARRARA MARBLE
COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY
ARTWORK IDENTIFICATION LIST

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PLIÉ; 2011; PATRICK HILL;
WOOD, DYE, WHITE CARRARA MARBLE
COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

CLUMSY ANGEL; 2011; PATRICK HILL;
WOOD, DYE, WHITE CARRARA MARBLE, GLASS
COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

FISCAL FORECASTING; 2013; MARGI WEIR;
2 ML ADHESIVE-BACKED VINYL ON WALL, WITH 2 PAINTINGS OF VINYL,
ACRYLIC PAINT AND RESIN ON PANEL
ARTWORK IDENTIFICATION LIST

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UNTITLED; 2013; MICHAEL BOSWELL;
FACE MOUNTED C PRINT, GOLD PLATED BRONZE GRILL, STINK BOMBS

UNTITLED, 2013, MICHAEL BOSWELL,
PLAYING CARDS

UNTITLED; 2013; MICHAEL BOSWELL;
SHELVING, NIKE ID EMBROIDERED AIR MAX 1, COMMERCIALY KNITTED
SCARVES, ELECTROPLATED HUMAN TEETH, SCREEN PRINTED TISSUE PAPER,
MATCHBOOKS, CREW NECK SWEATSHIRTS

HYPE BEAST; 2013; MICHAEL BOSWELL;
POWDER COATED STEEL FRAME, SCREEN PRINT, 2 FINGER GOLD PLATED
BRONZE RING, HIGH POWER MAGNETS, FOAM BACKED RUG, GOLD BARS,
PLASTER CAST GOLD BARS

UNTITLED; 2013; MICHAEL BOSWELL;
INKJET PRINT, LASER PRINT

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POSER; 2011; PATRICK HILL;
WOOD, DYE, WHITE CARRARA MARBLE, GLASS
COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY