

Dallas Jaggard

Times I Felt Pretty

Marion Nicoll Gallery, Calgary, AB



On campus at the Alberta University of the Arts, in the Marion Nicoll Gallery from February 14 – March 8, 2025 is *Times I Felt Pretty*, the debut solo exhibition by Dallas Jaggard. Centering on personal aesthetics, each piece in the exhibition is seemingly offered up as a moment in which the artist found something to be “pretty.” In the show didactic, Jaggard describes these moments as “a new rubric by which to look at my work,” which suggests the show will be a reflective, meta-analysis of the artist’s own practice and approach to art making. Through the exploration of film, photography, and painting, this self-reflection is rooted in ideas of value and authenticity, institutional critique, and themes of anti-authority that run throughout the show.

The gallery is located in the university that Jaggard is currently attending as a graphic design major. It’s a white cube – with one wall made entirely of windows that typically allow for the possibility to view the space in passing as one walks through the main atrium of the school. The show uses multiple projections and therefore requires a dimly lit space, and so the windowed wall has been covered with long black curtains. Though the curtains are a technical requirement, they are also theatrical. The artist is not allowing a passing glimpse – Jaggard has built a show around his observations of fleeting “moments,” and stands firm in his conviction that they get the attention they deserve by insisting the viewer enter the space completely.

The work is installed on all three walls of the gallery. Filling the entire back wall, a massive projection acts as the fulcrum between the salon style grouping of paintings, photographs, projections and mixed media sculptures hanging on the walls to the left and right. I use the word fulcrum because I'm immediately thinking about balance. There is nothing seemingly out of place or any one piece that stands out from the rest. Sixteen artworks total (including a sound piece), fill the space without crowding. Projection mapping is used in this show as a medium and as the main form of lighting. Some of the pieces on the walls to the left and right are video projections; others are paintings or photographs spot lit by the projection. The result is that each piece in this exhibition literally glows. The use of projection mapping in this show speaks to the ideas of value and authenticity; Jaggard has built a hierarchy into the exhibition by putting projected work and physical media on the same playing field to draw comparisons between the commercial viability of film, photography and painting. The exhibition is framed by a soundscape, an echoey track of melancholic instrumentals and ambient sound mixed with recordings of distant public transit; the track begins with the sound of a city train. It fills the room with a nostalgic, slightly eerie moan. Taken as a whole, the show is cohesive and has a strong visual appeal; for lack of a better word, it's *pretty*. It's clear that Jaggard has a keen eye for design. Here is an artist who simply *knows what looks good*.

I'm drawn to the oversized projection on the back wall. It's a looped film of a pool scene, and a work that has been left off the show didactic and therefore has no title I'm aware of. The shots of the pool are closely cropped and at times employing the use of a Dutch angle to instill a warped perspective. A clothesline with socks and women's underwear hangs over the pool, moving in an apparent breeze that I notice does little to ripple the surface of the pool itself. The film cuts between various shots and angles of the pool, never revealing a horizon line. Clothing and seemingly discarded items (clothespins, newspapers) are free to float through the frame while the camera stays static. The colors are saturated, bright sunlight reflects from the water. The tension in this piece lies in the subject matter and camera angle that suggest a candid documentary scene while the items floating in the pool, the contrived breeze, and the obvious use of a tripod point to deliberate staging. But Jaggard is not attempting to hide this effort made at staging, as this tension is the point of entry into the work.

As I sit with this piece, I consider the scale and the effect the sound piece has on my viewing. It's entrancing; I feel content to let time pass as I watch. It ceases to operate like film at all and I start to read it like a photograph instead. The pacing of each shot is long enough that I can study every detail, I can sit with each scene like I could with a photograph. Each shot divulges the same level of detail in terms of specific setting or time of day, and while I expect a film to unravel and reveal itself, nothing happens. I'm forced to reassess my expectations and shift my perspective to that of viewing a photograph instead where I'm suddenly more focused on composition and subject matter instead of narrative or story. I'm reminded of a David Hockney painting, not just because of the obvious similarities in subject matter and color palette between some of his iconic paintings and this work by Jaggard, but because Hockney was

interested in photography's effect on painting and the limitations photography has in its ability to depict more than a single viewpoint at a single moment in time. Referring back to the idea of "transitory moments" from the show didactic, Jaggard too explores the relationship between film and photography and their ability to delineate seemingly insignificant moments from day-to-day life.

Film and photography are further explored in the pieces *Film Vignette #2: Train*, 2025 and *Film Vignette #1: Crosswalk*, 2024. Both films are again displayed via projection, except this time they're projected onto canvases fixed on the walls to the left and right. The films displayed are exactly as they are titled. A vignette from a train: a close shot of a person's hand grasping a pole used for stability on public transit. And a crosswalk: a static shot like that of the pool scenes, with the corner of a bright yellow crosswalk acting as a backdrop to the shadows and footfalls of passersby. Here is where aesthetic begins to feel as though it's being critiqued instead of just admired. Jaggard employs an inverted Cindy Sherman-esque technique of staging these single-shot film vignettes, building a *mise-en-scène*, to draw attention to the limitations and perhaps, the worship of photography and painting. The subject matter of the vignettes: the restaging of a hand grasping the pole, the overly exaggerated exchanges between two silhouettes against the crosswalk; are as performative and as obvious in their inauthenticity as the projection of the film onto a canvas acting as a painting.

These ideas of authenticity and performativity tie in with one of the main themes of this exhibition, that of value. These themes are explored extensively in the piece *Acrylic on Canvas*, 2025. Described in the didactic as an attempt "to make a piece that I would value too much to ever sell or hang in a public space," the work consists of a transparent plastic bag stuck to a canvas, holding personal items of the artist's such as a driver's license, a house key, \$30 USD from the artist's grandma, a condom, and an SD card containing the artist's childhood photos. From a conceptual standpoint, I'm wary of this piece at first. The title is a cheeky reference to painting; the objects entombed in this work hold sentimental value only and ironically are easily replaceable. Even the ones that aren't, such as the SD card of childhood photos, act as an object representation of what is truly valuable, which are the memories themselves. But Jaggard must be aware of this, acknowledging the limitations of his own creation by having it "hang in a public space" after all. He seems less concerned with the monetary value of the work and more with perceived value, and the idea of object fetishism that rules the commercial art market. With this piece he acknowledges the relativity of value, and that value is something placed upon a work by markets, or authoritative figures such as curators. Like in *Film Vignette #1* and *#2*, there is a critique of authenticity here, as the artist explores motives behind art making. This piece provides a framework to the viewer for reconsidering value as something that is (or should be) separate from the process of expressing oneself through art.

Bubblegum, 2025, is a large mixed media sculpture of a squished piece of bubblegum and a wrapper. It hangs on the wall to the right and shines under the projection-mapped spotlight with a high gloss finish; the wrapper has been designed to reference Fleer Double Bubble gum

wrappers from the 1980s. Like the rest of the work in this show, it is meticulous and refined; the artist's experience in graphic design most apparent in this piece. In the text on the bubblegum wrapper is an ingredient list of the gum. Expected ingredients such as corn syrup and gum base; as well as 7.62mm bullets, tears of mayor Karen Bass, and design dept.'s pedagogy. References to institutional critique are most obvious in this work, but because of the restraint Jaggard has shown in the rest of the show, his pointed criticism is a welcome entry point into the work and does not come off as overly didactic. However, the (lack of) connection between his various references is where the work unravels. The design department is assumed to reference the one at Alberta University of the Arts, Karen Bass is the mayor of Los Angeles. Elsewhere on *Bubblegum*, Jaggard refers to the relationship with his brother by invoking the nickname Texas Twins. Considering all the didactic references, the bubblegum imagery, and a materials list that seems to have no conceptual or physical connection to these themes, the piece starts to lose me the more I probe, and I'm left with the surface level appreciation of the subject as an aesthetic object. It's *pretty*. It *looks* like contemporary art.

The materials list for the show is extensive, and I wonder why the artist felt the need to include as much information on materiality as he did, when almost none of it seems to inform the concepts or themes the exhibition is exploring. There is a strong emphasis on the collective *look* of the show more than each individual piece. There are also some that seem to work only to serve the show title, vacant of anything aside from visual appeal. Perhaps guilty of this: a composition of what appears to be layered prints painted over in acrylic. A corner is performatively curled over, revealing a hidden image beneath. The focal point is a blurred depiction of Earth. Titled *La Haine*, 2025 (in English: Hate), presumably in reference to the 1995 French film of the same name and sharing similar imagery of the Earth that is repeated throughout the film. The film centers around police brutality and classism in a suburb of Paris as it outlines the radicalization of its protagonists in the face of oppressive authority. A curious reference for an exhibition anchoring itself around the aesthetics of prettiness, although granted, there is an anti-authority theme that fits in with the rest of the show here. However, this interpretation is generous on my part; the content and materiality of the piece itself is void of any actual reference to class warfare, racism, oppression, or any other themes explored in the film, and therefore relies solely on the title to bridge this association.

Times I Felt Pretty presents itself as a series of highly palatable, perfectly curated aesthetic images; some with more of a captivating narrative than others, all under the hypnotic effect of a dreamy and nostalgic soundscape. As a viewer I oscillate between exploring satisfying conceptual relationships between mediums and the somewhat vacuous pieces that don't hold my attention for long. *Times I Felt Pretty* tries at first to present a flippancy or a casualness to the process of art making, but Jaggard's attention to detail and technical skill reveal a care and control that undermines his attempt at nonchalance. The exhibition could be read as a critique of the *motives* behind art making, whether they be commercial or required by an institution. The work encourages the questioning of authority and value and employs clever explorations of

authenticity to manipulate the viewer into a novel way of seeing, but it does this seemingly despite the artist, not because of him. By centering aesthetic, Jaggard upholds the very standards of pedagogy and the expectations for producing artwork that he is trying to critique. The breadth of conceptual possibility in this show therefore feels smothered and the work is reduced to a place where it can only be judged on aesthetic, surface level choices. The result is an exhibition that has been *designed* to look and sound so *pretty* it feels as though it's a simulation of a gallery show.

-Chelsea Cairns