

Reckless A. Bandon: Recent Works by Chris Williford
July 4th - August 12th 2016
at The Lunchbox
731 E. Center St. Milwaukee, WI 53212

you never were the same

by Zach Hill

Have you ever imagined yourself slow dancing with Marlon Brando on his private Tahitian island? Lying on a beach towel as the sun kisses your cheeks, a chlorine coated hand riffling through a damp bag of potato chips?

In the most recent exhibition at The Lunchbox, Dallas based artist Chris Williford has created a portal into a summer fantasy land. In it, a romanticized world of “trashy” beach culture is projected through a series of slickly appropriated images and readymades. Williford states that the processes he works with are “driven by a conversation between low and high culture.” After graduating from The Maryland Institute College of Art with a degree in Printmaking, Williford had to find new ways to create imagery outside of the hyper traditional medium. Reveling in the freedom to explore modern ways of creating print, *Reckless A. Bandon* (affectionately titled after the blink-182 song of the same name) is both lush and enigmatic. Digitally printed beach towels, a large vinyl banner, a pair of wigs, and a poolside lounge chair altogether create “some sort of fucked up adolescent narrative” with undercurrents of ecstasy, bliss, and sexual freedom. The subversion of pop culture through the queer gaze floats beneath the surface of each piece.

The show sparks with Marlon Brando. *Licky Brando (Re: Gauguin)*, a digitally printed beach towel, features an iconic image of the star dancing with an indigenous woman on his privately owned island in Tahiti, called Teti'aroa. In current time his occupation of the island could ignite political controversy, however in 1966 he was well received by the locals. Though Brando is often portrayed as the foremost all American hunk, he did not prescribe to this basic representation and used his celebrity to promote activism and social justice throughout his lifetime. Williford, who studied the icon's life and career while at MICA, has always been drawn to Brando as a subject. He goes so far as to call him an artist rather than an actor, specifically by contextualizing his ownership of Teti'aroa to the many excursions Paul Gauguin took to Tahiti. Unlike Gauguin who was exploiting and in some cases assaulting the Tahitian women in his paintings, Brando's encounters were both genuine and romantic. In the piece, the artist monumentalizes an image of Brando wearing a crown of flowers, meanwhile his face melts like an ice cream cone on a hot day. By doing so, Williford reclaims this benevolent figure and sexualizes him, stating that “he kind of has his tongue sticking out, making him look like a horny, ‘werewolf’ kind of guy.”

Along the back wall of the space hangs a large commercially printed vinyl banner, *Untitled (Nightswimming)*. Hung from the ceiling with silver chains, it echoes the nearby melting forms in *Licky*. The pixelated photograph is in fact a screenshot from the semi-faux hit reality TV series *The Hills*. Described by the artist as an informal research

project, the image was one of many collected from a regimented schedule of streaming the show with closed captions turned on. Imagery and text collided to create an absurdly poetic selection: a nighttime shot of a swimming pool paired with the phrase “you never were the same”. The bright blue surface of the water forms a divide between two spaces. When considering the idea of a nighttime dip, the world above the water represents a place of suppressed thoughts and emotions. It is only once you dive in and break the surface that you enter a world where inhibitions run wild. The caption itself harkens to a dazed summer evening, a coming of age story that has yet to be told.

A second digitally printed beach towel, *Untitled (Bleachers)*, stretches itself across a poolside lounge chair. The image is a screenshot from an obscure gay pornographic film that depicts an expanse of high school bleachers surrounded by palm trees. The idea of the “tropical lifestyle” as a spiritual space prevails as the artist asks, “Wouldn’t it be great to walk out of school and go straight to the beach?” This way of living is in fact a double edged sword, where reality and indulgence converge on a day to day basis. Additionally, this notion of duality and pop culture lends itself to *Rest In Paradise (Courtney and Kurt)*, a readymade in which two identical blonde wigs rest quietly atop a white pedestal. The more experimental piece is an ode to the notoriously brash and highly publicized couple. The arrangement carries with it an air of emptiness and melancholy. Perhaps Courtney and Kurt could have been invited as guests into this tropical fiction. They remain the Queen and King of an eternal summer, their greasy blonde locks intertwined as they dance on hot sand, not giving a fuck if it looks good or not.

The installation as a whole, with its crisp aesthetic, functions like eye candy. Though enticing, these visuals are the product of a critical disposition. A benevolent Brando pulls you in close, poetry is extracted from reality television, and the beach is only a day-dream away. *Reckless A. Bandon* is a sunset that rises.

Reckless A. Bandon is curated by Zach Hill and continues through August 12, 2016.

*** The Lunchbox is a white wall gallery within the After School Special studio space that is approximately 8ft x 8ft x 8ft. Programming for The Lunchbox is planned by members of A.S.S. on a rotating basis and serves to platform experimental curatorial endeavors and projects by local, national, and international emerging artists. ***