

Laura Kikauka

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Laura Kikauka: *Strength Thru Embarrassment*, exhibition view (2012): Images courtesy MKG127, Toronto.

By Anastasia Hare

Laura Kikauka's most recent exhibition, *Strength Thru Embarrassment*, left the impression that a fine line exists between pride and insecurity when it comes to taste and the things that one loves.

In keeping with the audacious aesthetics characteristic of Kikauka's practice, as well as the ongoing installations and projects at her Funny Farm live-work spaces in Berlin and Meaford, Ontario, *Strength Thru Embarrassment* consisted of altered thrift-store art in a dense, salon-style display that toyed with the distinction between low and high culture. In what the gallery called "an act of double-appropriation", Kikauka inserted excerpts of popular song lyrics from various genres and periods within the scenes, and signed her name alongside that of the original creator. Such 'collaboration' is not new for Kikauka; she commonly sets her glue-gun and glitter to work on found paint-by-number-type paintings, or plastic skulls and lamps, bejewelling with beads, costume jewellery and fur, making these things, with their unknown pasts and childlike appeal, into even quirkier iterations. Expanding on this strategy, her graffiti in *Strength Thru Embarrassment* embodies the drive to obtain and surround oneself not only with ubiquitous objects, but also popular music and trends that, ironically, affirm one's personal experiences and sense of individuality.

Laura Kikauka
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Laura Kikauka: *Special Pussy Cat* (2011).

Kikauka's pairings and modifications convey the intimacy and enthusiasm inherent in her process of collecting and quoting pop-cultural icons. Composed of disparate lyrics and imagery, each work in the show becomes a framed and nuanced fantasy space informed by personal undertones. In some pieces, the lyrics emphasize the mood of the image. In "What Went Wrong?" (all works 2011-12), the lyrics "as I walk along I wonder what went wrong with our love that was so strong" are written vertically along the trees of an eerie forest. In others, Kikauka creates simple, witty combinations as in "This Bird Has Flown", where the lyrics "got a good reason for taking the easy way out" are paired with a fleeing bird. Or, in "Wise Eyes", the text "coloured lights can hypnotize sparkle someone else's eyes" is written in a glittery font amid the fixed stare of two owls.

When viewers recognize lyrics, they become engaged in recollection. As Daniel J. Levitin says in his book *This is Your Brain on Music*: "A song playing comprises a very specific and vivid set of memory cues... the music that you have listened to at various times in your life is cross-coded with the events of those times." The song, musician, hype and other associations come to mind and, in this way, *Strength Thru Embarrassment* activated a consideration of the ways in which one interprets and is affected by music in everyday life. Layered with meaning, pieces such as "This Song is about you" appeared satirical, being composed of a mirror with the lyrics "You probably think this song is about you" adhered to the surface. Such work not only implicates the viewers' reflection, but also Kikauka's. The gallery's windowsill similarly served as a vanity for framed glamour shots that share the exhibition title. These objects depict a woman applying lipstick; she conveys confidence despite her cosmetic faux-pas of smearing the make-up well outside the contour of her lips. Evidently, Kikauka knows that by skillfully sampling and flaunting the mainstream, one separates the mundane from the remarkable.