High Noon in Desire Country

The Lingering Presence of Extended Adolescence in Contemporary Art

Gean Moreno

The camera-toting tourists, pressed against the railing, are all dressed in their awful Hawaiian shirts. An ultramarine sea stretches out in front of them. From a cliff at the right edge of the postcard, one of Acapulco's famous divers is taking the plunge. Below the cliff, there are two mounds, the wrong hue and too round and wrinkled to be a natural part of the jagged landscape. On these mounds, surrounded by scant wiry brush, sit a pair of plastic figurines in bathing suits and a lizard way out of scale. The two mounds belong to a body as Mexican as Acapulco but much more prone to stir up trouble: they are Miguel Calderon's balls; the brush is his pubic hair. Calderon has pasted an image of his testicles onto a series of kitschy postcards that he has, in turn, blown up to roughly 50 by 70 inch c-prints titled *Greetings From My Hairy Nuts* (1996). These pictures are intended to look like the crude tinkering of an adolescent with time to spare and wanton wit to waste. In a very calculated way, they are made to feel like feisty one-liners. Had Calderon taken the time to consider, say, the erotic possibilities of exploration and play that arise when the body comes into intimate contact with the landscape, he may have seemed less outrageous, concerned with something other than sabotaging our expectations and short-circuiting our response.

A confluence of wry humor and mischievous conceptual maneuvering, Calderon's work sets out to be aggressively wrong, defiant, offensive, and self-indulgent. It is all these things with such tenacity that it betrays the presence of the very opposite accruing around it—a sense of alienation or disaffection, a fear or inability to engage an adult world of compromise and restrained impulses. One wants to claim that it is, at the same time, a critique of this

Miguel Calderon, Photo Shoot #1, *1997, C-print, 50" x 68 1/2" (photo courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery).*

adult world and its corrupt institutions, its accepted hypocrisy, its sly manipulations, its sanguinary managerial imperative, etc., but such criticality in Calderon's work is open to question. All too often his "critiques" grow indistinguishable from the very thing they are attacking, and in what may have begun as critical commentary on the objectification of women we end up catching a whiff of glib misogyny. More a provocateur tailored after Céline than someone with a defined political agenda, Calderon sets out to produce work that is about asserting to no particular end his incontestable right to offend just about anyone. It is about refusing any position too easy to uphold, about overturning expectations, about skewering anything that smells of propriety, and, ultimately, about snatching cultural permission for art to be fun, frivolous, silly, trivial, permissive, pernicious, irreverent, and thrilling. It is an effort to rescue art from dogma by way of desire, from the inflated solemnity of critique by way of teenage mischief.

Calderon's work is part of an extended adolescence at work in contemporary art that simply refuses to go away, one which has clearly made it beyond the climax of Sean Landers, the Chapmans, Tracey Emin, etc., and the canonization of Mike Kelley, Larry Clark, Paul McCarthy, Jim Shaw, Martin Kippenberger, et al. This arrested development has some practitioners on intimate terms with hip-hop, DJ culture, graffiti crews, fashion rags, *Spin,* and all sorts of seemingly trivial and frivolous things. The work of these "extended adolescents" aspires to be hopelessly insolent, caustic, disruptive, ribald, insensitive, and crudely beautiful, eschewing almost categorically any transformative possibilities that may be attributed to art. It champions effect over intentionality, surface over conceptual complexity, how it feels over what it is meant to do and mean. All along it's looking to make us blush, palpitate, laugh, identify, and grow aroused or disgusted. It goes to incredible lengths to be gratuitously wrong, to plug into the invigorating rush of senseless belligerence, to tap into the incomparably sweet pleasure of taxing all our accepted ideas of correctness. Sardonically, it often challenges us to bring on our backlash, our moral censure, our paternal reprimands. It is of a sneering sense of humor as voracious as its unwavering intolerance for the proper, and often propelled by a desperate urgency to showcase a relevance it isn't sure it, or any other work, has. It can be ambivalent, prattling, insincere, solipsistic, duplicitous, and as narcissistic as a teenager who has learned how much a blossoming body is worth.

Karen Kilimnik, Me Waiting for My Drug Dealer Boyfriend…Park Avenue…oops…Forgot—the Village, 1967, *1999, water-soluble oil on canvas, 20" x 16" (photo courtesy of 303 Gallery).*

The most interesting artists who engage this lingering adolescence are those that slip on a pose and work it until they irritate and fascinate the rest of us. They think through cool adolescence—through its signage (product logos, band names), its heroes (Cobain, Moss), its attitudes (bad boy swagger, teenage "angst"), its habits, its restless effrontery, its promiscuous irre-

sponsibility, its willed outrageousness, its unalloyed brashness, and even its awkward emotions and dismaying enthusiasms. These artists stand in their work much as adolescents stand in life—beside themselves, beside everything, offending everyone, acting up, unable to define the most basic parameters of their identity, often ensconced in worlds of their making, in private fantasy islands, protecting themselves from any adult demands that may wash up on the shore by dissolving into the lush vegetation of pop stars and supermodels. And they are bound to invent themselves again and again, to recycle everything, to start from scratch endlessly, because nothing is as aware of its imminent end as adolescence is—particularly, the second time around. After all, one is bound to grow up sooner or later.

Miguel Calderon, Greetings from My Hairy Nuts #4, *1996, C-print, 49 7/8" x 74 7/8" (photo courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery).*

Michael Bevilacqua catalogues the look of "cool" adolescence, from its confectionery colors and its retro-mad design to its favorite bands. His paintings comprise an archeology of now, a soft and indulgent ethnography, a generational mapping. Throughout his paintings one can find references to Oasis, Matthew Barney, Marilyn Manson, Kappa sporting apparel, Gucci, MC Solaar, Prada, Twister, Trainspotting, the Beatles, painter John Wesley, Kiss, Yves Saint Laurent, Nirvana, etc., not to mention toys, pills, bubbles, Chinese characters, psychedelic rainbows. Logos, album covers, movies, hot-rod painting, retro-mad graphic design—everything pop that defines the cool side of now is rendered in saccharine colors, against hard-edge backdrops. One could speak of appropriation, but the critical distance the discourse of appropriation banks on doesn't apply here. This is more like sampling, like picking out bits and pieces from what's in the air, high and low, and hoping for titillating juxtapositions, for enough correspondences and contradictions to make music of the thing. Bevilacqua's paintings are bulging with a sense of boundlessness that seems hardly constrained by their candy shell. They seem like they can go on forever.

If Bevilacqua gives us sweeping vistas of now, Elizabeth Peyton focuses obsessively on a few of its highlights—Kurt Cobain, Sid Vicious, Liam Gallagher, Elliot Smith, Beck. All lollipop boys, rendered by Peyton, bereft of interiority, ripe for the betrayal all celebrity is bound for, basking in the warm light of androgyny. *Princes William and Harry, September 99* (1999) adoringly turns these royals into fragile pop princelings. Her boys are ethereal, angelic even, and like angels they belong in stratospheres to which we'll never have complete access. She traffics in those seditious images that are engrossing because when we look at them we find our desire mirrored. But beyond this, Peyton commingles the protagonists of her boy hagiography with boys from her own life, irrevocably fuzzying the rigid mathematics that make the accessible banal and the distant flamboyantly exotic. Like a teenager, she looks to blur the line between her immediate environment and the fantasy world she has slowly woven out of magazine spreads and album covers. Hers is an exercise in memorializing that last stop on the road to growing up. This is what infuses her entire endeavor with a romantic melancholy. Everything in Peyton's work revolves around an effort to keep forever the fleeting beauty not of media darlings, but of the moment in which they embodied the very things we recklessly desired.

Karen Kilimnik knows something about transience of perfect bodies; about the way we can momentarily think through them even when they are not ours. She knows that the line between idolization and identification is paper fragile, that we are who we are in relation to others, that we may turn out in the end to be no more than the distance that separates us from them. She knows the kind of body we long for these days—those that glide along an edge: the edge of irreversible deterioration when beauty suddenly cracks; the edge between genders; the edge where grim reality and haute theatrics, where repulsion and seduction grow indistinguishable. And she knows, finally, how to look at others and think through them the way stark-struck teenagers do. In *Me, Waiting for My Drug Dealer Boyfriend—Park Avenue—oops—Forgot—The Village 1967* (1999), a self-portrait as a Kate Moss-ish waif, we can see just what Kilimnik knows—everything about grafting an unattainable object of desire over her own body, appropriating for herself the glamour that has been so often the subject of her work. And we can see that for all she knows, Kilimnik—or, at least, the Me in the paintings—has no clue of who she is or how she got to be there. In the painting, she is

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Muntean/Rosenblum, Untitled (Girls mature faster...), *1999, acrylic on canvas, 41 1/4" x 31 1/2" (photo courtesy of Georg Kargl).*

pure reflective surface, depthless appearance. In fact, in all the paintings she has been producing since she left behind her scatter installations, Kilimnik is doing the very same thing—inventing herself in the image of a pop icon culled from magazines and movies. In all of them she asserts that the more she is like another, the more she is herself; that the more she explores her body through another's, the more she thinks by imagining and emulating the way Kate Moss and Alicia Silverstone think, the more she is. Kilimnik's work is unwittingly candid of its inability to build up, perhaps because the supermodels she depicts are never more than frozen images, always the same perfect surface. Kilimnik begins anew with every painting. It is in enacting this inability to grow, this gross loss of identity that nullifies her as a determining force in her own life, that Kilimnik's work seems adolescent, and turns the homage she pays the world of supermodels utterly ambivalent.

Muntean/Rosenblum, a Vienna-based duo, also know something about trying to think through others, particularly when we've become those others, when our sense of self has vanished and we're nothing but vacant images, all indisputable surface, all fragile and ravishing looks. In *Out of Sorts* (1999), a limited edition booklet of their drawings, nothing but beautiful young people are depicted, and all of them screaming.[1] Every image is accompanied by a caption. But the captions seem to be all wrong. These images, like fashion spreads, depend so much on their muteness, on being no more than efforts at clasping something that quietly nears beauty. And yet, the captions speak about the desire of these awkwardly beautiful youngsters to regain a voice, to speak again, to say something other than what the eloquent images of their perfect and perfectly dressed and groomed bodies say. "Perhaps there are times in our lives when we simply float," the first caption of the booklet reads, "our own production of words and stories silenced." But the drama escalates: "Suddenly something rouses us and touches us, a word or a phrase that fingers the all but dead nerve in us in a way that no other words have done." These anonymously impeccable bodies want to narrate their own stories, a sort of regaining of self, but their very image may perhaps provide a more seductive story and they know it. "But still there is a question of why it was necessary to speak in the first place." Muntean/Rosenblum's savvy hipsters want to negotiate a terrain somewhere between the stories their bodies tell (or allow us to inscribe on them) and those they hope to speak. Throughout, however, they can't decide which is more compelling. After all, who wants a beefcake or a Vargas girl, a waif or a grunge brat, for their stories? In the end, the narratives they are so eager to speak yield to their images. And we return to Muntean/Rosemblum's waifs because where the body is flaunted and left unattended by overbearing narratives, it becomes a screen for desire, fodder for our fantasies.

Peyton, Kilimnik, and Muntean/Rosenblum give strength to the impression that this work is as much about the habits of adolescents as the way we lay our eyes on them. The proclivity to explore the cool may have everything to do with the fact that most things cool are explained through the body, that flesh is everywhere present and throbbing. The bodies that embody cool are taut and tanned, the faces are irreplaceable, the clothes come in dazzling Kool-Aid colors, and the hair, left to dangle negligently, is often enviable. Penises and scrota coyly peek out of everywhere like unpicked peaches; cleavages, puckered lips, erect nipples, tangled tufts offer themselves up with a feigned timidity that vamps up the decibels on the erotics of posture. The entire affair seems, at times, to be aimed at our incorrigible loins, at having us feel it way down past the domain of sensible reasoning. I think what Bruce Hainley has written about the work of Larry Clark applies here: the desire to be is indistinguishable from the desire to have. To want to be an adolescent may have

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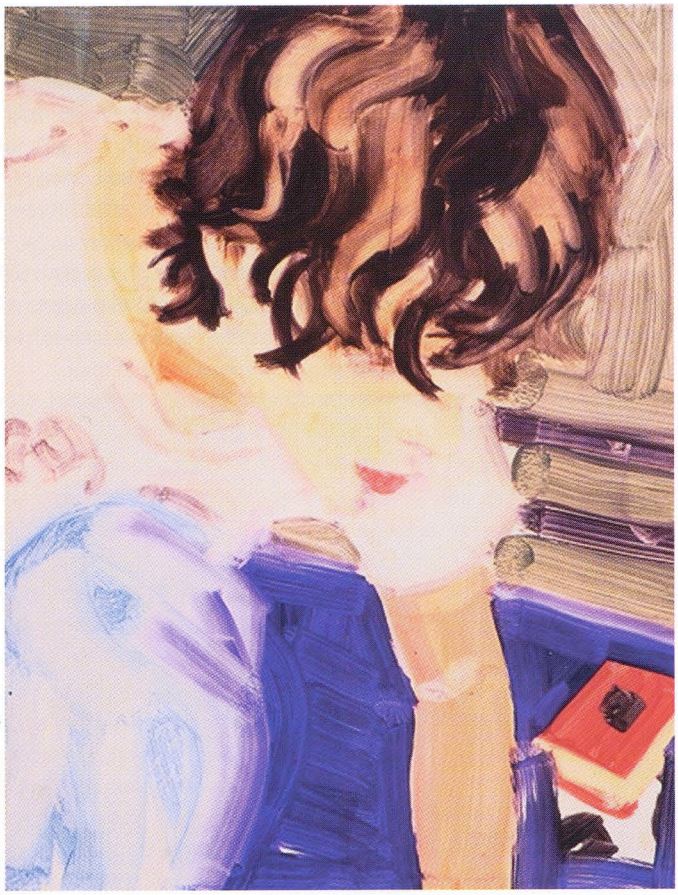
Elizabeth Peyton, Princes William and Harry, September 99, *1999, oil on linen, 40" x 30" (photo courtesy of Regen Projects).*



Elizabeth Peyton, Tony reading (Silver Tony)*, 1998, oil on MDF, 14" x11" (photo courtesy of Regen Projects).*

everything to do with wanting to have adolescents close enough to whiff up their aromatic innocence, their fragrant uneasiness in the world. And the attention we, viewers, pay to this work has everything to do with the implacable desire impeccable bodies awaken in us. Adolescence in the work of these artists is a complex site of desire and longing.

Lisa Yuskavage zeroes in on and perversely unearths all the complicated ambivalence with which our puritan underpinnings infuse the act of looking at and yearning for younger bodies. The prepubescent girls she paints are swollen with a sexual ripeness they feign knowing nothing about. They teach us everything there is to be known about the naughtiness of faux innocence, about the mischievous coyness that revs up our libido drive. *Little Big Laura* is passive, meek, and vulnerable enough to dissolve into the candy-coated field of color around her. At first glance, at least. But we know that she knows what that round nipple, hardened to glass, glistening in the shower of dramatic light, does to us. No effort is spared to grab our attention, and yet we feel in front of the image like intruders spying on a peep booth with a girl way too young for us to derive any pleasure from it. Unwittingly turned into lascivious and unredeemable Humbert Humberts, we hang around, stealing a glance now and again. The pleasure involved in looking at these girls has a way of complicating itself. It would be truly distressing were it not for the fact that Yuskavage girls are only salacious Japanimation, eroticized cartoony sci-fi, parodies of the pin-up, and we can always fall back on the safety of that. What the voracious male gaze usually warps—the female body—is here warping the look that preys on it. Nipping the grotesque, Yuskavage girls turn male fantasy into a parody of itself, into a garishly infantile and obscenely crude parade of sexy mutants, all the while bringing to the fore the complicated erotics of gawking at younger bodies.

The segment of adolescents these artists take on—skaters, b-boys, models, grunge stars, Lolitas—is a very limited one. It encompasses only those who understand the body as the landscape on which and through which all their adventures will unfold. This adolescent body oozes sexuality. Its faux innocence and swagger swelter something in us. Everywhere—at the corner store, in the clubs, on the catwalk, on stage, in bed—these bodies are glistening with beads of sweat. There is an availability at play here, a sense that these bodies are on display for consumption—visual and otherwise—that invites desire to set up camp and go about its disorganizing business.

Jose Antonio Hernandez-Diez builds strange versions of the objects that have soared to the top of any adolescent's list of things wanted since the "Americanization" of experience in his native Venezuela. In the seventies, an unprecedented amount of American consumer goods began to appear in the market throughout Latin America, becoming an integral part of the experience of the "McOndo" generation.[2] It is a generation that was brought up desiring everything American: skateboards, plastic figurines, battery operated trinkets, video games, etc. But, unlike their American counterparts, it was a group that lived in a social reality where class division was everywhere apparent, where blatant injustices went unchecked, where economic disparity was obvious. So while these "McOndo" kids ride skateboards and chromed GTs, they move through a social landscape riddled with discrepancies. Two realities—that of pristine objects and that of grim conditions—are inhabited at once. In the skateboards that Hernandez-Diez has made out of fried pig skin, a popular snack food in Venezuela, and in his photographs of chewed plastic toys, this incompatible duality is brought to the surface. The skateboards in Hernandez-Diez's ironically titled *La Hermandad [Brotherhood]* (1995) are metaphors for these "McOndo" bodies, always torn between realities, continually desiring one thing while living another. (Hung in the gallery, the grease was allowed to drip from the boards, the way fluids drip from the body.) The shapes and textures of the boards are like the visceral architecture of a body turned inside out. It's as if the skin, tortured, revealed the secret of the insides it protects and contains. And these insides, it turns out, are made out of everything found outside—foodstuff of course, but also a sort of incompatibility and incongruity. (Think of the awkward juxtaposition of beautiful fluorescent wheels and chunks of pig flesh.) It is a body undifferentiated from its environment, mirrored by and mirroring the social space around it. It's a

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body that becomes a social map, "explaining" itself and its situation through piss-funny metaphors and metonymies.

There are a number of other artists whose work fits snugly in this context. Barry McGee, for instance, who, while producing murals and clusters of drawings with a strong social dimension, moonlights as San Francisco graffiti star Twist. By painting directly on the walls and presenting the instruments of the trade—spraycans, wire-cutters, customized jackets—as part of his installations, McGee wants to give us, at once, an American version of the divided reality Hernandez-Diez finds elsewhere and a poignant reminder of everything graffiti is—a rush, a marking rendered in passing, an unbridled gesture of defiance, a vulnerable body creeping in the shadows, and, of course, an adolescent's "transgression."

Jonathan Meese's cluttered rooms and the cosmology he has made out of all things '70s—Charles Bronson, *A Clockwork Orange*, Klaus Kinski, Fassbinder, Herzog, etc.—also traffic in this extended adolescence, as do Jane Kaplowitz's appropriations of *Taxi Driver* and rap album covers. There is Rita Ackerman, with her sexy Lolitas and her involvement in the music scene. There are the truly aggressive identifications of Elke Krystufek with Marilyn Monroe and Edie Sedgwick. There is a candid rawness to her venture that leaves us reaching for the soothing and often empty clasp that prescriptive terminology affords us.

But to assail any of this work with prescriptive terminology, to understand it as a symptom or pathology, is to pretend that the attention we have paid it has been characterized by clinical coolness. And, of course, it hasn't been. We attend to this sort of work because it fascinates us. Our motives for looking at it are complicated. It reflects something of the broader youth-oriented mass culture, it's true, but beyond this it tickles an appetite that, in our puritan atmosphere, may feel less than halfway decent. It sacks whatever it is that allows us to keep this hunger buried.

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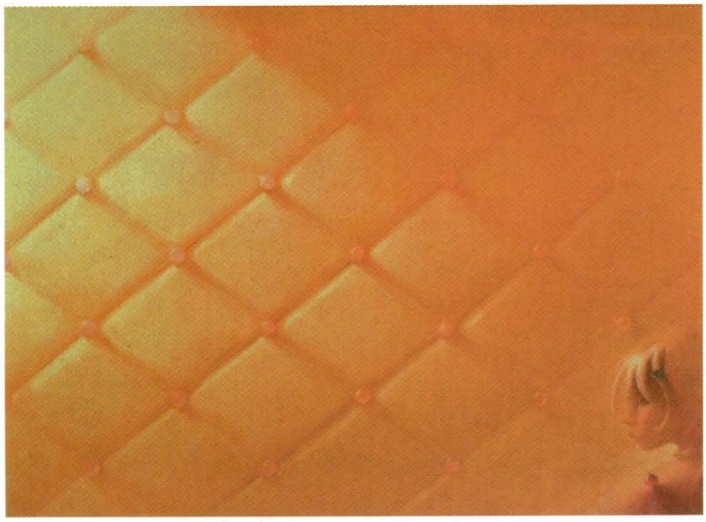
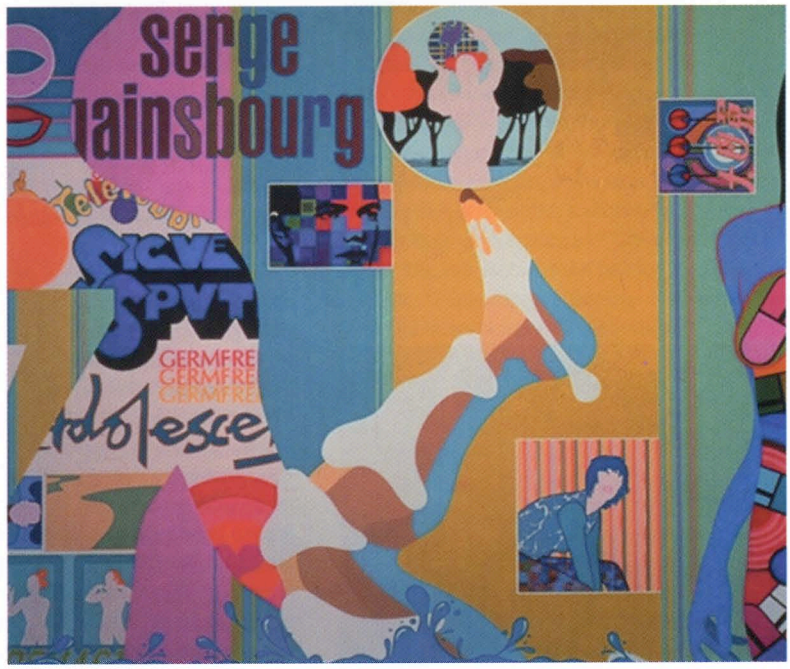


Lisa Yuskavage, Big Little Laura, *1997-98, oil on linen, 76" x 96" (photo courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery).*



Michael Bevilacqua, Atom Tan, *1999, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 43" (photo courtesy of Fredericks Freiser Gallery).*

It's like a baseball through the living room window. It is titillating; it lets us live vicariously; it lets us protest the punitive order to "grow up," the repressive narrative of maturity and the guilt with which it riddles desire. Wonder and delight are not absent when we are invited or coaxed, like dogs to bone, into these countries of flesh, from where everything limp and flaccid has been banished. This work is, in a very concrete sense, about us, about our encounter with it. Nowhere does it pose as a window into anything extraordinary. It is more a mirror than a passageway. And it tells us, if nothing else, that this "extended adolescence" has remained with us because we've soured on the sobriety of hard-edge conceptualism and institutional critique; that now that the body and desire have taken up a seemingly permanent residence in our discourse things cannot help but titter toward a daunting and lovely disarray; that desire turns our unexceptional bodies, in all their base particularity, into countries longed for and irrevocably inviting; that the transvaluations of a desire as stylized as ours can be as unpredictable and unsteady as the swinging moods of steroid-pumped jocks; and that we have desires the way we have dreams—relegating control, basking in the experience, and living with the consequences.

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Notes: 1. Muntean/Rosemblum produce limited edition booklets of their drawings to accompany their exhibitions. The importance of the booklets is that they permanently tie up the narratives that the drawings hold together only for the length of the show. **2.** *McOndo* is a title of an anthology of young Latin American writers that was published in Barcelona in 1996. The overall aesthetic in the stories collected is one that turns away from the magic realism that characterizes the novels of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Alejo Carpentier, et al. These younger writers are concerned, for the most part, with the changes that American goods, trends and technologies have brought to the urban centers of the continent, and in particular to the lives of adolescents and twentysomethings.