

# 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY VANITAS

by Anna Waters

# THE CONCEPT



The inspiration for my piece was the vanitas genre of painting from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Vanitas comes from the Latin word “vanus”, meaning “empty”. A vanitas artwork symbolically shows the fleeting, brief nature of life – how futile our pleasures and pursuits are because death is inevitable. This was often accompanied by a moral lesson or hopeful hints at an eternal afterlife in heaven if one did not indulge in worldly vanities.

Recurring symbols included:

- **The human skull:** a reminder of mortality
- **Lemons:** pleasing to look at but bitter to taste
- **Musical instruments:** ephemeral transience
- **Globes:** the earth and sky
- **Empty glasses:** the end of life’s pleasures
- **Food:** death and decay
- **Coins and luxury items:** worthless wealth

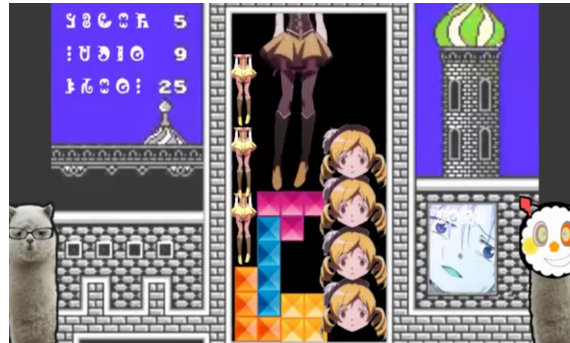


These symbols worked to communicate how temporary and unimpressable our lives are. They also provided a chance to paint beautiful objects in an interesting composition.

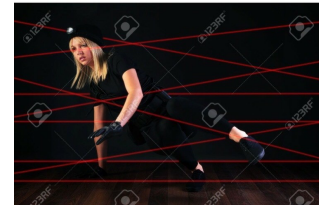
In this piece, my intention was to convey a special brand of “21<sup>st</sup> century vanitas”. This interpretation of vanitas is informed by nihilism and characterized by sarcasm, self-deprecation, and commiseration. It is a feeling, a mood, and a life-long mindset that I have both experienced and seen in others. While not exclusive to any one group, I most frequently observe it in millennials and post-millennials who are navigating adulthood and adolescence with increasing anxiety about the future. Thus, I wanted to portray 21<sup>st</sup> Century Vanitas in a modern, computer-generated still life using objects and images which are recognizable to that audience. In doing so, I hoped to evoke the humor and fleeting disbelief which often accompanies their vanitas experiences.

I also drew inspiration from social media posts and recent trends that reflected key sentiments. However, such content is not always understood by those who are out of the loop. The power of referential humor is only fully understood through consumption of the original content and its many variations. Social media feeds that circulate much of the same content in different forms provide a veritable trove of referential humor. As a result, we consumers of social media have shared 21<sup>st</sup> Century Vanitas through memes and viral communication, both online and off. Such content may seem obscure to anyone who does not hyperactively surf the web, but many of the thoughts we share can be felt and understood regardless.

Examples of my inspiration:



trying to be honest with my therapist but not so honest that I get involuntarily hospitalized

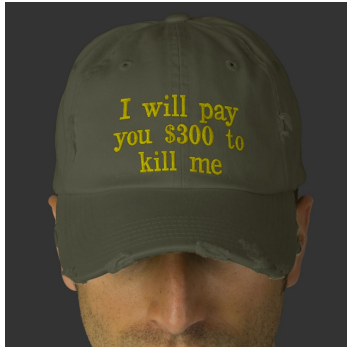




what  
@chanelpuka

Me: I'm gonna go to sleep early this week

Me @ 3am:



meryum siddiqi  
@sassysiddiqi

how many times we gotta tell y'all... WE ARE HERE FOR A GOOD TIME NOT A LONG TIME

TONIC @dailytonic  
Nearly all boxed mac 'n cheese contains a chemical you don't want to eat bit.ly/2Ux4kVA



This dark, absurdist humor is sometimes pushed to a degree that others may see as worrisome – suicide jokes in a population prone to depression and anxiety are one such example. However, playing off negative issues as comedic is a common coping mechanism that is strongly evocative of that 21<sup>st</sup> Century Vanitas feel. For better or for worse, lamenting through humor, geniality in the face of helplessness, and indulgence in the harmful are all symptoms of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Vanitas.

It is my aim to both participate in this process and encourage the viewer to analyze it. I hope the humor of my piece is a gateway for the viewer to seriously consider the practical implications of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Vanitas. Those who live by it still have earthly preoccupations, despite being aware of their ultimate meaninglessness.

This duality is also presented in classic vanitas paintings. However, instead of looking to religion or morality for commentary, we dwell on this feeling in the form of jokes, in the form of viral commiseration, and in the form of escapism. This art piece reflects such forms. Despite the insignificance of humanity in the big picture, immediate concerns have very real consequences on ourselves and the people around us, and in order to function as a society, we must address those concerns.

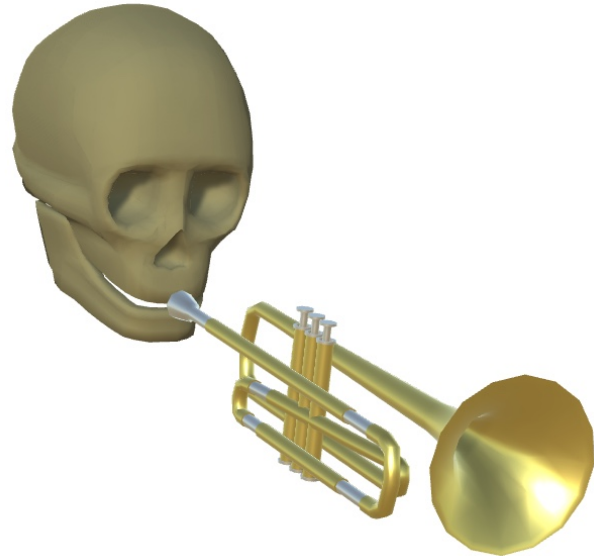
# THE OBJECTS



## DOOT DOOT

The skull and trumpet in this piece reference one of the very first memes on the internet: a poorly-rendered animation of a skull, trumpet in hand, honking “doot doot”.

It is an absurd concept that has two objects traditionally used in vanitas paintings (a skull and musical instrument). While the context here is changed significantly, I thought it fitting to include this relic in the scene.



## BEEP BOOP

The CRT monitor and old Apple logo apple both symbolize the fleeting of novel innovation. Devices that were revolutionary in our childhood have rapidly improved, and must keep improving to stay relevant. As the world becomes exponentially more competitive, younger generations feel increasingly anxious about themselves and how they will fare in the future.



## BUBBLY BLEACH

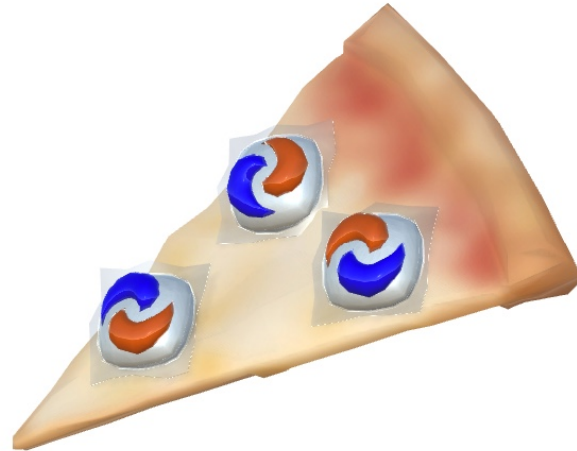
The can of sparkling bleach is a reference to people telling others to “drink bleach”, usually in hateful comments on social media. It was simply another way to say “kill yourself!” – to which the beleaguered victims of such talk eventually said, “okay!”, and turned it into joke they would use to dissolve the gravity of the situation.



## PODS ON PIZZA

The Tide Pod challenge was a trend in late 2017 and early 2018, inciting many post-millennials to eat Tide Pods on social media because of their tasty, gelatinous-looking texture. Most people merely pretended to do so, and even the ones who actually did, didn't die – thanks to a good stomach pumping.

The trend was merely catharsis for our generational anxiety – another way to joke about ending it all.



## BIG MOOD RAMEN

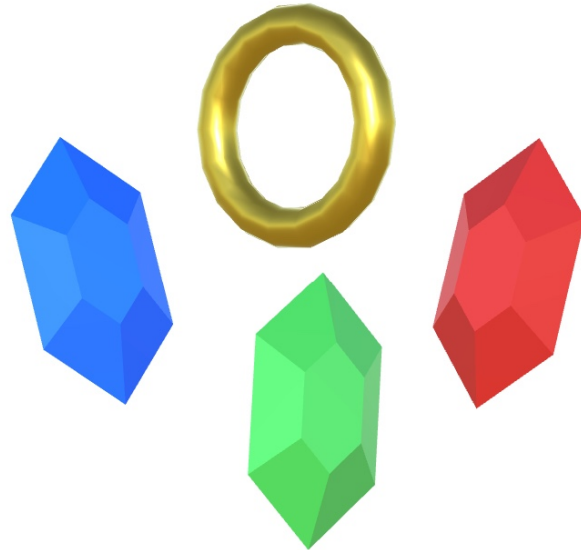
The instant ramen and bottle of vodka are referential to the cheap meals we kids eat because we want to save money, save time, and because it tastes good.

Alcohol is self-explanatory.



## RINGS AND RUPEES

The rings and rupees come from video games, namely the Legend of Zelda and Sonic, but they are stand-ins for virtual currency in general. They point to the escapist habits of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Vanitas – collecting pixels with no monetary worth, but then all money has no inherent worth either... Capitalism is broken and the American Dream is dead.

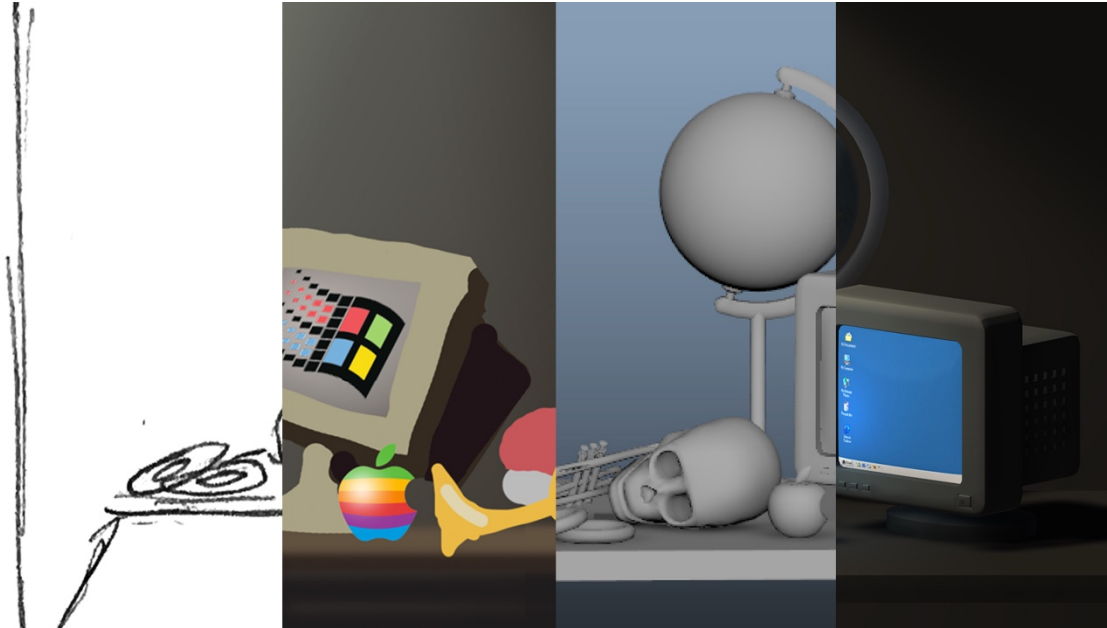


## THE WORLD

At the end of the day, the sun comes up and the world still spins. You can spin it yourself, if you click on it. We all like to joke about how meaningless life is, and it might very well be so, but we all have places to be and bills to pay. It does not do to dwell on memes and forget to live.



# THE PROCESS



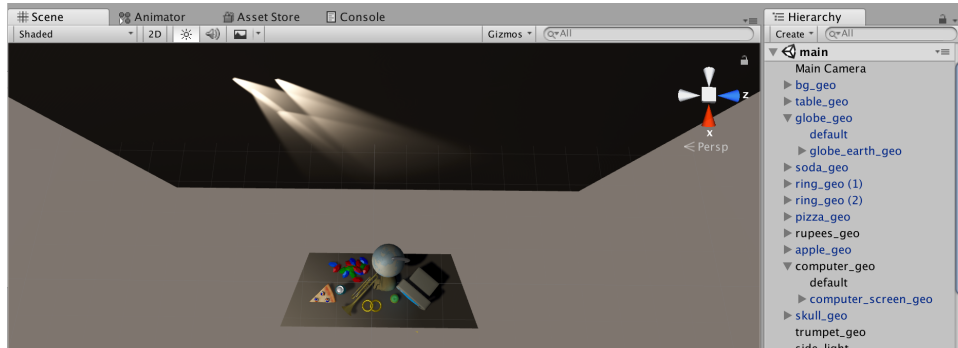
# THE COMFORT ZONE

When I started this project, I had a clear trajectory. I began by collecting reference images of all the items. For complex models like the skull and trumpet, I obtained multiple orthographic views. I modeled everything in Maya and textured them in Photoshop. I did some surface testing in Renderman, but ultimately decided I did not want to do realistic texturing. Most of the things I did at this stage of the project were techniques I had used before, though I did learn a few new things like correct mesh topology, complex glass surfacing, and how Unity imports assets.



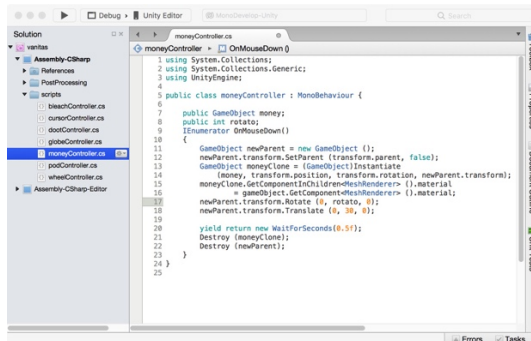
# IT'S COMING UP, IT'S COMING UP

By the time the models were sculpted and texture maps were made, I knew that I wanted this piece to be interactive and not just an animated video. This was this stage where I learned the most as I had to figure out how Unity worked, particularly in the lighting and animation department. I tried to do some volumetric lighting, but ended up using spotlights on a plane as faux god rays. I soon realized that Unity was much simpler than Maya when it came to overall look development, and I had my set dressed without a hitch.



# OH DEAR GOD I'M OUT OF MY DEPTH

Inevitably, the last stretch of a project is always the stage where everything bursts into flames. But equally as certain is my ability to pull it all together into something presentable, if not all according to plan. In this case, the problems that cropped up were not too overwhelming, and while I don't know why the code I wrote works, it does. In the end, I was able to scrape together a successful project that surpassed my initial vision. I even put in two extra objects! Most of all, it was satisfying to work on and finish this piece.



```
1 using System.Collections;
2 using System.Collections.Generic;
3 using UnityEngine;
4
5 public class moneyController : MonoBehaviour {
6
7     public GameObject money;
8     public int rotato;
9     IEnumerator OnMouseDown()
10    {
11        GameObject newParent = new GameObject ();
12        newParent.transform.SetParent (transform.parent, false);
13        GameObject moneyClone = (GameObject)Instantiate
14            (money, transform.position, transform.rotation, newParent.transform);
15        moneyClone.GetComponent<InChildren<MeshRenderer> ().material
16            = gameObject.GetComponent<MeshRenderer> ().material;
17        newParent.transform.Rotate (0, rotato, 0);
18        newParent.transform.Translate (0, 30, 0);
19        yield return new WaitForSeconds(0.5f);
20        Destroy (moneyClone);
21        Destroy (newParent);
22    }
23 }
24
25 }
```



## REFERENCES

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“Skull Trumpet”, article, Know Your Meme  
setheverman and adunilovesthemoon, “what’s the mood... for april?”, blog post  
“Vanitas”, article, Encyclopaedia Britannica