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## "Advertopia" : The ethical ramifications of advertising to children

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# **“ADVERTOPIA”**

**THE ETHICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF ADVERTISING TO CHILDREN**

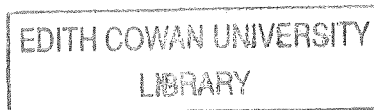
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**Bachelor of Arts in Visual Art**

**This thesis is presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts Honours in Visual Art**

**Faculty of Communications and Contemporary Art  
Edith Cowan University**

**November 2006**



## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

## ABSTRACT

In this thesis I explore the ethical ramifications inherent in advertising to children. In particular the affect of commercial information on the psychological development of contemporary Western youth and I explore these issues in relation to my painting practice.

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## Introduction

Advertising has been an inherent part of Western culture for many years and contemporary Australian society has grown up with it. Advertising has told Australians which Beer to drink, how to emulate the teams they 'barrack' for in the football and which car to drive. (Bryden-Brown introduction) Advertising's strength has lain in its encompassing nature, to the point where its more ambiguous concepts may rarely be given a second thought by those it is aimed at. We are faced with brand names and corporate logos at every turn and few in contemporary Western culture would not recognise MacDonald's, Pizza Hut, Shell, Target and KFC. So ingrained is advertising in Australian culture that if I were to mention Vegemite or Aeroplane Jelly, most Australians would be able to happily hum the jingles from the respective commercials. Indeed, I would suggest most would know the words better than those of the national anthem. The overwhelming presence of advertising is inescapable; on television, radio, billboards, on clothing, in movies and on computers the individual is given little freedom to exist in an unmediated environment.

My primary concerns with advertising are both its intended use as that of a commercial information conduit and the less obvious, but to my mind more important, side effect of instituting cultural identity and value systems in the young. I am concerned that children's minds are being manipulated for commercial reasons rather than educational ones. The following discussion will approach the advertising establishment's viewpoint by looking at the writings of Wally Olins, arguably one of the world's foremost advertising moguls, who sees advertising in a positive light, believing that the service advertisers fill is essential to the future of humanity. Through the studies of authors such as Roy Fox, Victor Strasburger, Barbara Wilson and Juliet Schor I will also explore the sociological consequences of advertising on children whose limited capacity to evaluate mediated information makes them vulnerable to the agenda fuelled information that advertising offers. Further to this I will touch upon the ethical culpability of multinational corporations, in regards to the institution of cultural and identity stereotyping in order to garner profit.

In reaction to the preceding topics and through the writings of Naomi Klein, I will continue by exploring the issue of perceived need and the prevalence of prejudice in advertising, examining it in relation to psychological effects and minority culture alienation. At this point in the discussion I shall look at how these issues have informed my artwork, and the role my paintings might play in the debate about ethical advertising.

Finally I will discuss the plausibility and inherent problems of creating an ethically sound advertising realm and the ramifications therein.

This research will be presented as a series of six sections, in each of which I shall endeavour to present objective research alongside the subjective issues inherent in my arts practice. This will then be followed by a conclusion. The sections are as follows;

1. The question of the intent of advertising and its less obvious ramifications.
2. The ulterior affect of advertising's agenda and the limited capacity of children to evaluate consumerist information.
3. The implicit culpability of multinational corporations in instituting cultural and identity stereotyping in order to garner profit.
4. The perceived need for advertising and its affect on the individual.
5. The prevalence of prejudice in advertising and its relationship to cultural alienation.
6. The plausibility and inherent problems of creating an ethically sound advertising realm.

## ADVERTOPIA

Interspersed throughout this discussion I will illustrate many of the issues broached by introducing the paintings I have produced in conjunction with this research.

For several years my arts practice has had as its central theme the relationship between society and the mass media. In previous bodies of work I have explored the bombardment of contemporary society by the agenda driven information of television, print and radio. Many of the paintings produced over this time have had an overtly political context. My current series, which I have group titled 'Advertopia', continues this politically charged narrative by exploring the tangent of advertising and its affect on children. The artwork is influenced primarily through my personal experiences and observations, but also through the research undertaken for this thesis. My personal experiences of alienation and anxiety as a child, feature heavily in many of the paintings. However, in conjunction with the subjective content of the work, I have also endeavoured to balance them with the objective concepts raised during my research of advertising in regards to children.

The group title 'Advertopia', a hybrid of the words advertising and utopia, is a term I have coined for the fantasy world children visit when they believe the promises of commercialism. It suggests a utopian realm, where all the promises of commercialism are, in fact, true and realised. My artwork broaches many of the issues raised in the body of this research, including the perceived need, alienation, anxiety and the confusion involved in information overload. All the paintings in this series are of a large scale and are symbolic of billboards or advertising posters, using the bright garish colours and the typography often found on goods marketed to children.

## 1. The question of the intent of advertising and its less obvious ramifications

In the literal sense it is accepted that the primary role of commercial advertising is to “to announce or praise (a product, service, etc.) in some public medium of communication in order to induce people to buy or use it” <http://www.dictionary.com> (accessed 30/04/2006) In simple terms, a tool with which to sell a product or service and as I shall elucidate, a very powerful tool indeed.

There are many vocal proponents of advertising within the commercial industry perhaps none more so than Wally Olins, former director of Wolff Olins, a very successful advertising agency. He has written many books extolling the virtues of advertising including *Wolff Olins Guide to Identity* (1984) and *On Brand* (2005). He has also had involvement in multiple high-powered corporations including British Telecom, Prudential, Orange and even had a part in improving the public perception of Scotland Yard.

Wally Olins believes that the service advertisers fill is essential to the future of humanity. "They fulfill a need in society, albeit a perceived one. The proletariat needs shelter, transport, food and entertainment and the corporations manufacture such integral goods and services. Advertising simply plays the role of 'middle man' by introducing consumer to manufacturer in as creative a way as to successfully give a mutually desired result." <http://www.wallyolins.com/home.htm> (accessed 19.04.2006)

Superficially there appears to be no ethical concern in the aims and achievements of advertising; consumer need is recognized and consequently met by the corporation through the advertiser. However on further examination of this situation the broader ramifications become apparent. To begin with the term ‘need’ is intrinsic to this debate and as such its meaning should be addressed. [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com) defines ‘need’ as “urgent want, as of something requisite.” It is my position that advertisers manipulate the potential consumers in their perception of need. For instance there is little argument that people *need* food and shelter to survive, conversely they do not *need* wide screen televisions, luxury cars and several hundred choices of soft drink. Granted, they may *want* these things, but *wanting* is far from *needing*. In reality, the advertisers aim is for people to have the perception that they need the advertised products or services. These perceived needs are nurtured through the subtle manipulations of advertisements, preying on the fears and desires of the individual such as the fear of rejection or failure and the desire for success and peer/family acceptance. “The many changes to the ways

in which advertising messages now seek us out and permeate our lives, which Naomi Klein has summed up as a change from 'commercial interruption' to 'seamless integration', can make consumers feel as if they are being taken for suckers. And people don't like the feeling." Dunn 2003 (p.149)

In the following extract Wally Olins freely admits that advertising manipulates, the quote is taken from an interview in which he talks about the new desirable brand of "social responsibility" where being 'perceived' as socially responsible is advantageous for corporations; "Of course brands are trying to manipulate the customer, we live in a world which is deeply manipulative. Children try to manipulate parents and vice versa. But corporations and their brands cannot directly control consumers, however hard they try. ~ the corporation will instead have to anticipate what the consumers want and provide it. Now consumers want to see socially responsible companies... and they will buy their products. It is in the interests of a corporation to behave better for market share. Corporations are increasingly taking this into account."

<http://www.wallyolins.com/home.htm> (accessed 19.04.2006)

It is important to be clear about how Wally Olins carefully chooses his words; note Olin's claim that corporations are taking into account the consumers *perception* of the corporations *appearing* to be socially responsible. This is not to say that corporations are actually *behaving* in a socially responsible manner, which, when one considers the reach and power of advertising, is a disturbing thought.

In *Harvesting Minds* George Gerbner, (Dean Emeritus of The Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania) writes "Broadcasting is the most concentrated, homogenized and globalized medium. The top 100 advertisers pay for two thirds of all network television. Four networks, allied to giant transnational corporations- our private "Ministry of Culture"- control the bulk of production and distribution, and shape our cultural mainstream. Other interests, minority news, and the potential of challenge to dominant perspectives, lose ground with every merger." Fox 1996 (p.ix) Analysing Gerbner's view, it appears advertisers are manipulating moral, ethical and political perspectives. The proletariat becomes a source of wealth for the few and a subservient populace for the dominant governing body. This may explain the loose guidelines imposed on advertising by both government agencies such as the Advertising Standards Bureau and the Australian Association of National Advertisers to curb the more insidious and dishonest advertising practices. The (AANA) self-regulatory code of practice states that "to ensure that advertisements are legal, decent,

honest and truthful and that they have been prepared with a sense of obligation to the consumer and society and fair sense of responsibility to competitors.” (Dunn 147). These rather ambiguous self regulatory codes of conduct go some way to prevent quantifiable breaches of ethics, but they fail to address the social manipulation that is so prevalent in contemporary advertising practice.

In regard to this worrying side effect of mass media, Theodore Adorno observed decades ago; “The concepts of order which the culture industry hammers into Human beings are always those of the status quo... It proclaims: you shall conform, with no instruction as to what; conform to that which exists anyway as a result of it’s power and omnipresence. The power the culture industry’s ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness (1991:90)” (Gauntlett,p. 22)

Adorno does not stand unopposed however, as John Fiske in *Understanding Popular Culture* argues; “Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry. All the culture industries can do is produce a repertoire of texts or cultural resources for the various formations of the people to use or reject in the ongoing process of producing their popular culture.” (Gauntlett, p.23)

In answer to Fiske’s suggestion I would counter that the formulation and/or rejection of an original and fresh cultural identity is severely restricted as contemporary society has been thoroughly saturated by commercially mediated information for several generations. The individual draws on the information available to it and the most prominent information, ready to hand, is that which the advertising agents have established for the sole aim of the promulgation of consumerism. As I will discuss in the next chapter, society’s youth has been comprehensively colonised\* by commercial ideals, values and institutionally preferred cultural identities.

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\* colonised; In regards to the concept of systemic colonisation explored by Jurgen Habermas, elaborated upon further in chapter 3.

## **2. The ulterior affect of advertising's agenda and the limited capacity of children to evaluate mediated information.**

Contemporary adults, as intelligent and reflexive as they may be, are still not immune to the omnipresent influence of advertising. Hence the banning of alcohol and tobacco advertising to the general public, as advertising was found to have a quantifiable affect in the rise of consumption of these injurious products. Children in our society, however, are equipped with even fewer tools to decipher the 'selling intent' of the commercial agenda. [http://www.aef.com/on\\_campus/classroom/speaker\\_pres/data/3003](http://www.aef.com/on_campus/classroom/speaker_pres/data/3003) (accessed 21/09/2006)

Before I address this issue, I believe it is pertinent to briefly discuss an issue that often arises when speaking about the 'protection' of children from advertising; that is the concept of 'childhood' itself. In *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Neil Postman writes; "Unlike infancy, childhood is a social artefact, not a biological category. Our genes contain no clear instructions about who is and who is not a child, and the laws of survival do not require that a distinction be made between the world of an adult and the world of a child." (Postman introduction) He goes on to elaborate that childhood, both as a social structure and a psychological condition emerged around the sixteenth century. Previous to which the 'child' had a similar existence to adults in both work and pleasure.

Cultural theorist Henry Giroux argues that the "concept of childhood innocence is less a description of reality than a way for adults to project their own fantasies onto children." Giroux argues that these fantasies "allow adults to believe that children do not suffer from adult greed, recklessness, and perversions of will and spirit." (Schor p.15)

Wendy Varney describes children not simply as agents subscribed to commercialism, but as "a wide-eyed and icon-literate audience" (Varney p.61). Taken on face value these statements would suggest that any opposition to advertising's access to the realm of childhood is at best misinformed and patronising to children; since children, if we are to believe the previous definitions, are really just young adults. I have no doubt that advertisers would prefer those concerned believe that children are indeed well aware of the subtleties and intentions behind advertising and able to responsibly manage the ideas being presented to them. However Roy F. Fox argues that although children identify with commercials, they generally believe that Television advertising's intents

are altruistic. (Fox p.148) He does allow that "commercials are a vital part of kids' lives. They provide a means for kids to socially interact with others." A view that is shared by Anne Dunn "contemporary advertising is an often pleasurable, playful and unthreatening part of their lives." (Dunn p.138)

Unthreatening towards children perhaps, but perhaps not so for the informed parent as Jonathan Rowe and Gary Ruskin suggest;

"An entire industry arose to mold young minds to crave products, and to cast parents in the subordinate role of financier of these fabricated wants. James U. McNeal, a former marketing professor at Texas A&M University, is perhaps the most influential advocate of modern marketing to children. "[T]he consumer embryo begins to develop during the first year of existence," McNeal writes, with no hint of embarrassment or shame. "[C]hildren begin their consumer journey in infancy and certainly deserve consideration as consumers at that time." <http://www.consumercide.com/cc/rowe-ruskin-parents.html> (accessed 21/09/2006)

Despite children's apparent comfort with advertising, an ethical dilemma is brought into focus when we realise that that children don't begin to develop an understanding of advertising's 'selling intent' until they are 8 or 9 years old. (Strasburger/Wilson, p.35)

In other words children believe the information that commercials offer with very little question. The information in advertisements is designed to play on positive associations in children's lives, specifically to coerce a belief that the products and lifestyles portrayed in advertising are intrinsic to achieving a fulfilling and preferred existence. This assertion is backed up by Juliet Schor, when she writes "More children here (America) than anywhere else believe that their clothes and brands describe who they are and define their social status." (Schor, p. 13). Advertisers count on this belief becoming a social more within youth culture; "The assumption that each consumer is isolated from everyone else is implausible ... In truth, consumption is a thoroughly social activity, and what one person buys, wears, drives, or eats affects the desires and behaviours of those around them. Without social analysis, it is just not possible to understand the appeal of Nike's swoosh, the desire for a diamond ring, the rage for Harleys, or the taste for sun-dried tomatoes. Nor can one comprehend the rapid rise and demise of Pokemon, the turn away from Britney, or the ubiquity of hip huggers and chunky silver bracelets from Tiffany. Kids have sensitive antennas to what's in and out, what's cool and hip. They care, often desperately, about how their consumer choices are received by peers." (Schor, p.191)

It is easy to understand why there is a push to saturate the childhood market,



Schor highlights the importance of children to advertisers;

“Children have become conduits from the consumer marketplace into the household, the link between advertisers and the family purse. Young people are the repositories of consumer knowledge and awareness. They are the first adopters and avid users of many of the new technologies.” (Schor, p.11)

The importance of cultural awareness in children, continues on into their teenage years where that demographic, becoming more financially independent becomes ever more important to the corporate world; “- logo-decorated middle-class teenagers, intent on pouring themselves into a media-fabricated mold, have become globalization’s most powerful symbols” (Klein p.118)

More insidious than this consumerist ideal however is the subtle and often overlooked affect of identity and value system building. David Gauntlett in his book ‘Media Gender and Identity’ discusses how television dramas such as soap operas show us how people interact and how friendships operate. He also talks about how magazines contain advice on how men and women should live, look and interact. He suggests that even if the individual only read these items in an ironic state of mind, it must have a consciousness altering affect. He also feels that the attractive nature of movie stars, through being advertised to us constantly has some impact on the style and preferences of society and implies that this must have some impact on how the individual perceives themselves. (Gauntlett, p.2)

As Gauntlett suggests, advertising pre-supposes that everyone places the same importance on conforming to the social, gender stereotype, and behavioural patterns used in commercials. Roy F. Fox, believes "They (children) have more important things to do - like being allowed the freedom to grow up nurturing their own images, not images that sell products." (Fox, p.xix). The children's market today (through to age 12) is estimated to represent \$500 billion, consisting of both personal spending of \$200 billion--primarily for snacks, soft drinks, entertainment and apparel--and \$300 billion in directly-influenced spending in these same categories plus food, toys, health and beauty aids, gifts, accessories and school supplies. Another \$500 billion worth of purchases are indirectly influenced in categories such as recreation, technology, vacations, etc. The spending power of children is, altogether, in the area of \$1 trillion.

[http://www.aef.com/on\\_campus/classroom/speaker\\_pres/data/3005](http://www.aef.com/on_campus/classroom/speaker_pres/data/3005) (21/09/2006).

So, the likelihood of the multinationals stepping back and allowing children to nurture any unprofitable images, is extremely unlikely.

How culpable are the multinational corporations in culturally colonising the identities of our youth and to what purpose? I will explore these issues in the next section.

### **3. The implicit culpability of multinational corporations in instituting cultural and identity stereotyping in order to garner profit.**

At this point it is important to make the delineation between advertising agencies and multinational corporations. Advertisers are at the frontline of commercialism, the foot soldiers if you will, though actually only a tool used by big business. Successful advertisers are only so because they make huge profits for their clients, by any means necessary. If there is any ethical culpability in advertising, I believe it is logical to place it on the heads of the corporate sector.

George Gerbner, uses the analogy of commercial entities as storytellers;

"For the first time in human history, children are born into homes where mass-mediated storytellers reach them on the average of more than seven hours a day. Most waking hours and often dreams, are filled with their stories. These stories do not come from families, schools, churches, neighbourhoods, and often not even from the native countries. They come from a small group of distant conglomerates with something to sell."

Gerbner also asserts "Broadcasting is the most concentrated, homogenized and globalized medium. The top 100 advertisers pay for two thirds of all network television. Four networks, allied to giant transnational corporations- our private "Ministry of Culture"- control the bulk of production and distribution, and shape our cultural mainstream. Other interests, minority news, and the potential of challenge to dominant perspectives, lose ground with every merger." (Fox, p.ix) So, according to Gerbner, Advertisers are not only selling products to the young but are manipulating moral, ethical and political perspectives. It could be argued that the proletariat becomes a source of wealth for the few and a subservient populace for the dominant governing body.

The individual, especially in heavily advertising saturated environments, is taught how to act, think and identify with the dominant consumerist system. In the case of children this 'colonisation' is so gradual and insidious as to not even be noticed by those it is affecting. The commercialisation of the public sphere is now something children are born into. As Theodore Adorno foresaw it has indeed become the status quo. Lee Salter addresses the issue of systemic colonisation in the public sphere as explored by Jurgen Habermas; "His claim in *Social Transformation* was that mass media was anti democratic, duping the public into accepting manufactured opinion as

their own.” (Salter pp.117 – 139)

This 'colonisation' through advertising raises many ethical questions. Secondary to advertising's intended role; that of selling a consumable product for companies and corporations, advertising also presents a preferred ideology. Many commercials portray utopian images of a leisured class in order to sell their products. These images and stereotypes have been deemed attractive and preferable by the advertiser and their clients for many years, primarily because the people characterized in such ads represent the commercially viable demographic; 'cultural consumers', with expendable incomes. Jean Baudrillard touches on this 'desirable' section of society in *The Consumer Society, Myth and Structures*, he suggests that 'accultured' people generally fit in better both socially and professionally; He believes that one of the successes of the "functionalism of human relations is the promotion of culture: there 'human design' meets 'human engineering'." (Baudrillard, p.109)

As I mentioned in the introduction advertisers such as Wally Olins are aware of the increasing distrust and skepticism of society in regards to advertising. It has become essential to corporations that they 'appear' to be honest and above board in their dealings with their consumers. But as Naomi Klein points out “ The shift in attitude (of the corporate world) was not the result of a mass political conversion but of some hard economic calculations” (Klein, p.111) The corporations have been astute enough in many cases to appear faultless and responsible, however new mediums such as the Internet have presented further opportunities for businesses to manipulate the choices of children. The following is taken from the Advertising Educational Foundation website;

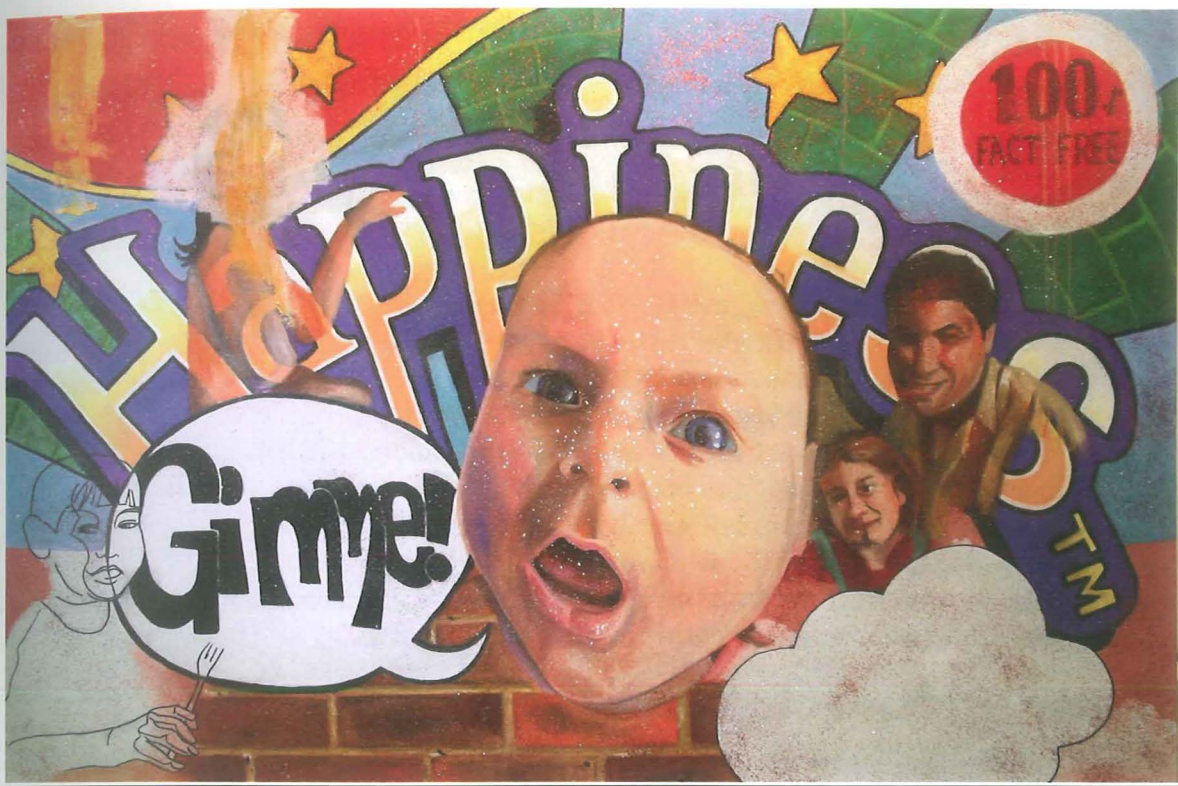
“Today's report from the Kaiser Family Foundation found that more than eight out of 10 (85%) of the top food brands that target children through TV advertising also use branded websites to market to children online ... Dale Kunkel, a professor of communication at the University of Arizona, told a Kaiser Foundation forum that using viral marketing to reach children was an untoward attempt to co-opt child-to-child e-mails, essentially "rewarding children for becoming agents of the advertiser." He questioned whether children under 8 even understand what advertising is. ... Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy for the Center for Science in the Public Interest, said the problem isn't the tactics, it's the foods advertised. She said the ads present a "whole different diet" of foods than those the government advises.” <http://www.aef.com/industry/news/data/2006/6060> (accessed 21/09/2006)

Even within this text, it becomes apparent that a tug of war between corporations and the government is taking place over the information presented to children; to the point where advertising agents are even employing child psychologists to help them pitch

more affective campaigns to capture the attention of children. "The American Psychological Association named a task force to look into the ethics of members helping firms that target children, after some members filed a formal complaint. In a letter, they said such consulting violates their mission to "work to mitigate the causes of human suffering."-"How is it ethical to share your psychological knowledge with people who will use it to get children to nag their parents - to create ads so that children will believe that owning something will make them happy?" asks Susan Linn, a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School in Cambridge, Mass. <http://www.aef.com/industry/news/data/2000/1454> (accessed 21/09/2006)

This opens the question of how children are expected to navigate their way through the barrage of suggestive and manipulative information continually dealt to them by the corporate world. Perhaps of more pertinence, is the affect it has on those children who cannot comfortably conform to the restrictive values that advertising imposes.

Plate one “Happiness tm”



*“Happiness tm” oil and acrylic on canvas, 111cm x 167 cm (2006)*

Happiness TM is written in large advertising text across the canvas in bright heavily saturated colours in stars and stripes in the background. A huge baby’s face floats in front of the text blurting out a comic book speech bubble with the word “Gimme!” inside it. On the periphery are images of happy family members, perhaps the parents and siblings of the baby in the foreground.

This painting is intended to highlight the crass and garish methods of advertising and the idea that an emotion such as happiness could be trademarked and marketed as a consumer item. In a society where virtually everything is catered for, the ultimate panacea would be the manufacture of contentment, which of course is impossible. However, advertising continually suggests consumerism as a placebo for what ails us.



#### 4. The perceived need for advertising and its affect on the individual.

As I have explored in previous chapters, children are bombarded with brands, lifestyle choices, new technologies (and the associated issues of obsolescence), music and fashion choices and even food choices. Children are made to believe that all these consumables are intrinsic to their wellbeing.

“If a kid buys a pair of Nike shoes and feels better about himself or herself because of them, then Nike's ads may enhance self-esteem. But the messages are a double-edged sword because they also do the reverse, undermining self-worth. Sometimes the reality doesn't meet the promise. Sometimes kids desperately want a product because they're convinced it's essential to their happiness but there's no money to pay for it. As the nation's children are increasingly likely to live in poor and low-income households, this gap between desire and means is likely to grow. Many psychologists already find this a worrisome trend. Allen Kanner and M. E. Gomes have argued that many young people are suffering from feelings of deep inadequacy brought on by an inability to keep up with consumer culture.” (Schor, p.179)

This demonstrates that parallel to this glut of choice is the unpleasant side affect of palpable anxiety caused by ‘perceived’ need. Few of the items advertised to children in the media are ‘essential’ to the wellbeing of the child, however, children perceive them to be so, so they become integral for them to ‘fit in’ and prosper in their social lives. These perceptions have worrying side effects

“High consumer involvement is a significant cause of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and psychosomatic complaints. Psychologically healthy children will be made worse off if they become enmeshed in the culture of getting and spending. Children with emotional problems will be helped if they disengage from the worlds that corporations are constructing for them. The effects operate in both directions and are symmetric. That is, less involvement in consumer culture leads to healthier kids, and more involvement leads kids’ psychological well-being to deteriorate” (Schor, p.167)

Most intelligent adults in contrast to children are able to be somewhat more reflexive and aware of what advertising is expecting of them; “Brands live where Reason meets Desire. Most of us don't need 90% of the stuff in our apartment. We don't need art, among other things. We don't need Halloween or scented soap or humor.”

[http://www.aef.com/on\\_campus/classroom/speaker\\_pres/data/6000](http://www.aef.com/on_campus/classroom/speaker_pres/data/6000) (accessed 21/09/2006)

Children on the other hand, who believe that advertising is based in fact, (as explored in

chapter two) believe they do ‘need’ the items aimed at them as members of their target demographic. This perceived need causes great anxiety; “ Today’s average (ie, normal) young person between the ages of nine and seventeen scores as high on anxiety scales as children who were admitted to clinics for psychiatric disorders in 1957.” (Schor, p.13)

Advertisers would argue that there are codes of conduct that protect children from ‘misleading’ advertising; “For example, both the AANA (Australian Assoc. of National Advertisers) and ADMA codes contain standards setting out that advertisements ‘shall not be misleading or deceptive’ or that ‘[a] member organization shall not make misleading or deceptive claims about an offer delivered through direct marketing.” (Dunn, p.144)

This of course does not exclude advertisers from depicting situations and lifestyles that are financially and socially unrealistic to the average child.



## **5. The prevalence of prejudice in advertising and its relationship to cultural alienation.**

Advertising resorts to tokenism and stereotyping of minorities to make them more acceptable to a mass audience. These cultural stereotypes are portrayed as clean, attractive, friendly and uncontroversial.

Naomi Klein highlights how advertisers have capitalized by adopting alternate culture such as the gay 'lifestyle' in order to profit from a hitherto untapped market. "Abercrombie and Fitch ads featured guys in their underwear making goo goo eyes at each other; Diesel went further, showing two sailors kissing ; and a U.S. television spot for Virgin Cola depicted 'the first ever gay wedding depicted in a commercial,' as the press release proudly announced" (Klein, p.112) Whereas some people might think this exposure for the gay community may be a positive event, there is still the fact that advertisers are not only profiting from a minority's exclusion from society but are also moulding the way that culture now sees itself. 'You can't be a real gay unless you fit the current stereotype'. And in a culture where perceived acceptance is a relatively newly acquired commodity, adherence to media generated gay lifestyle guidelines are high on the list of priorities, thus generating huge profits for the astute corporations who sell to that community.

In reality stereotyping and cultural generalisation leads to alienation, which can be achieved in many ways, one of which is disempowerment. The exclusion of minorities in advertising achieves disempowerment. In contemporary advertising it is common to see suburban fathers, working and playing with their sons. Identity role models are suggested and rigorously repeated in various formulas depending on the product being sold. How often are the children of disabled, gay or single parents shown in advertising? If advertising were truly indicative of real life, one would be led to believe children of minority families do not exist.

It is important to acknowledge the distinctions between real life and the utopian vision advertising puts forward as its perception of real life.

"It was accepted from the start that part of what held back women and ethnic minorities was the absence of visible minorities occupying powerful social positions, and that media perpetuated stereotypes – embedded in the very fabric of the language – served to not so subtly reinforce the supremacy of white men. For real progress to take place, imaginations on both sides had to be decolonized ...

Asians and Lesbians were made to feel 'invisible', gays were stereotyped as deviants, blacks as criminals and women as weak and inferior." (Klein, p.108)

Advertisers take the disenchantment of counter cultures and rather than address the change in attitude, turn it into a commodity, seizing on the opportunity to profit from the most recognizable symbols from each alternative lifestyle. If, as in the case of gay culture, the minority is deemed too controversial for the mainstream audience, rather than miss out on the possibility of profit, advertisers will market directly to minority cultures, but specifically to them, not in tandem with the mainstream. Further to this, even advertising within the minority demographic tends to be exclusionary and alienating. The majority of adverts aimed at homosexual men within specialized gay culture magazines, reinforce the age-old body myth (commonplace and widely discussed in 'women's magazines') that the consumer has to be slim and fit to be attractive.

Concerning 'mainstream' advertising; it is pertinent to note that the majority of the advertising that we are surrounded by everyday is considered acceptable, simply because society has been desensitized over time to its inherent prejudicial issues. By mirroring the dominant hegemony in commercials, advertising reinforces long existing value systems and existing prejudices especially in children, who as I have shown earlier, take advertising at face value.

Plate two “Glam!”



*“Glam” oil on canvas, 111 cm x 167 cm (2006)*

“Glam”, refers to the “glamour”, in fairy tales, where mischievous faeries would cast enchantments over unsuspecting mortals;

Two young boys in school uniform sit casually at an urban bus stop, happily playing childish games. They appear oblivious to the billboard advertisement behind them which depicts 3 semi naked sailors engaged in a sexual tryst. Superimposed over the image of the sailors are the words "Glam! Brightens and Whitens". It is apparent that the advertisement is for a laundry product.

The initial reaction when viewing this painting is to notice the controversial replacement of standard advertising imagery with that of gay pornography. The juxtaposition of children and pornography may cause some discomfort even to the more liberal minded viewer. There are concerns of the affect that this image may have on the children depicted. Disregarding value judgements that the children may be influenced into becoming homosexual later in life, there is a concern that viewing what is, ostensibly, adults only material may somehow damage the delicate psyche of the children.

The intention of this work is to highlight the reality of advertising in its ability to

coerce the identity of children and influence the decisions and values of the individual in later life, therefore influencing the society in which that individual lives.

In current society the value systems of a largely conservative middle class demographic are in play, therefore images of homosexual pornography are rarely if ever used in mainstream advertising. I maintain advertising does have a message imbedded other than that of consumerism, subtly coded information presenting value systems, ideal appearances and preferred behaviours.

### Plate three “Uberkinder”



*“Uberkinder” oil on canvas 111 cm x 167 cm (2006)*

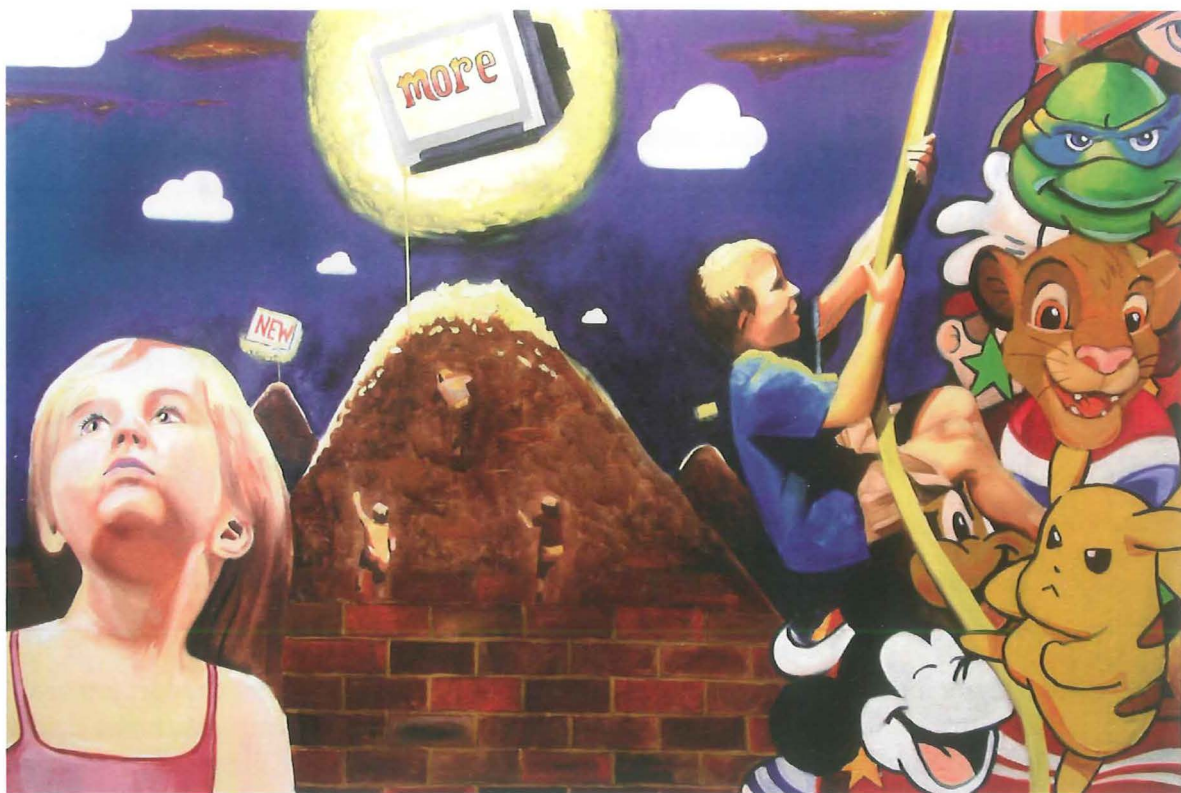
In the foreground of this painting stands a happy young boy posing in a super hero costume, flexing his muscles for the viewer. He is standing in front of a sky blue background with fluffy white clouds painted on it. The backdrop is tied to a brick wall on the corner of a street leading to a large urban factory.

This painting seems almost utopian, a pleasant portrait of a happy child playing in a fantasy world. The only detraction from this is the looming presence of the factory almost hidden by the edge of the painting.

The interpretation of this painting is mainly concerned with advertising's unrealistically optimistic portrayal of life. Children are presented with images of perfect lives, where happy children play and work productively and where parents earn enough to buy all the products and lifestyles that the children could possibly ever want. In reality advertising is a fiction and the vast majority will never live a life that mirrors those shown in the ads. Most individuals will be forced by necessity to work in menial positions if they are fortunate to find jobs at all. This misinformation teaches children to have unrealistic expectations, which inevitably leads to a discontentment with reality. Real life suffers in comparison with "Advertopia".



Plate four “The Next Big Thing... again”



*“The Next Big Thing... again” oil on canvas, 111 cm x 167 cm (2006)*

In a threatening landscape of amorphous mountains, armies of eerily lit children clamber, climb and pull themselves upwards towards the source of the sinister light; giant floating televisions with the words, ‘more’, ‘new’, ‘must have’ broadcasting to the darkened skies. Upon closer inspection the mountains are gigantic mounds of toys, brands and logos.

This work highlights the plight of the contemporary child, bound to forever aim for the next big thing in consumerism. Daily assaults of toy advertisements, junk food marketing, soft drinks, computer games and the latest music and fashion trends. With junk food alone, “If a kid bought each food advertised in a typical day of viewing, it would take six weeks to consume the haul without exceeding dietary guidelines” <http://www.aef.com/industry/news/data/2006/6063> (accessed 23/09/2006)

But the price of failure for these children is social exclusion and with so much consumer information spurring them onwards, children have little choice but to conform. Peer acceptance is paramount but the price of marketing as we have seen is psychologically destructive.

## **6. The plausibility and inherent problems of creating an ethically sound advertising realm**

Throughout this discussion I have primarily concerned myself with the existing ethical problems involved in advertising particularly in regards to children. Through reading this discussion it seems apparent to me that a solution must be found and a more ethical model of advertising instituted.

Previously, when advertisers were called to task for their behaviour, their concern was more to do with how it would affect their financial bottom line; “Advertisers tend to respond to complaints by considering the potential impact on the marketing relationship between advertisers and consumers, but seldom in terms of ethical nature of that relationship.” (Dunn, p.135) Thankfully however there has recently been great deal of discussion about improving ethical standards, if only to minimize the damage unethical behaviour is causing in the consuming public.

“It is not right to treat people as tools or things. The many changes to the ways in which advertising messages now seek us out and permeate our lives, - can make consumers feel as if they are being taken for suckers. And people don't like the feeling.”-“Advertising techniques that abuse trust will in the long term no doubt damage the market – the product will not sell, people will become still more resistant to commercial messages, and new, tighter regulations may result. But more than this, unethical behaviour always has the potential to increase social cynicism and lessen the faith people have in their society to treat them with respect. In the end, ethics – in advertising as in any aspect of our lives – is about the quality of human relationships, the way we treat each other.” (Dunn, p.149)

Within the advertising industry itself there is a recognition that there is a need for a level of self regulation combined with parental guidance when it comes to stemming the problems arising from marketing to children. “Advertisers need to gain the trust of children and their parents through effective and honest advertising. In turn, parents must take responsibility for their children: monitor what they watch and read, determine how they spend their free time, and educate them to become responsible and informed consumers. Advertising to children will become less controversial only when advertisers and parents assume mutual responsibility for its content and exposure.”

[www.aef.com/on\\_campus/classroom/speaker\\_pres/data/3005](http://www.aef.com/on_campus/classroom/speaker_pres/data/3005) (accessed 21/09/2006).

Juliet Schor, a parent of young children herself, agrees and suggests an alternative to the current model of advertising “My favorite idea is to confine ads to a restricted set of commercial channels. If the industry is right that ads are informative,

valuable, and enjoyable for viewers, they have nothing to fear. Those who like ads can watch to their hearts content.” (Schor, p.196)

Through my research, I have looked for instances where ethical concerns have been addressed and where corporations have taken steps to be more responsible in their dealings with marketing to children. Pleasingly, there are many cases. However the majority of these cases are to do with the marketing of fast food to children. Superficially it seems the advertising industry has taken up the challenge to be responsible in the fight against childhood obesity. Unfortunately, the other ethical concerns I have broached in this discussion have been conveniently swept under the rug. As far as I could see little mention is made about the psychological viability of selling violent or racially stereotypical videogames and nothing the concerning consumerist identity building. Meager attention is paid of the affect of marketing to minorities and when mentioned is also taken from the viewpoint of how much more profit could the agencies make, rather than levels of cultural or ethical appropriateness. <http://www.aef.com/industry/news/data/2005/3120> (accessed 23/09/2006)

So, is it possible to create an ethical advertising industry? Many ethical concerns may be met if all the negative aspects are removed from children’s advertising; issues such as racial, gender, class, faith stereotyping, the hard sell of unnecessary items and the preference building of brands. It is improbable that the multi-billion dollar advertising industry will self regulate itself into a wholly ethical realm; to do so would be corporate suicide. It is also implausible that the child advertising industry would dismantle itself entirely and only advertise absolute essentials, with no fancy gimmicks or on staff child psychologists. I believe it is only possible for an ethical advertising realm to exist, if the necessary changes are voluntarily met by the industry itself. This can only happen if an across the board education in ethics is implemented in the advertising industry and then rigidly adhered to.

Chris Brown, in an address to advertising students broaches the subject of personal responsibility to behave ethically

“Change the word "advertising" to "communication" and the ethical questions come home to roost. Instead of being about big business, the same questions are about you; How much of the truth do you owe someone you're trying to impress? If you're trying to impress different people, do you tell different truths? If you knew that your web page would offend Catholics or contribute to child obesity, even if only a few of them saw your page ... would you change it?”



[http://www.aef.com/on\\_campus/classroom/speaker\\_pres/data/6000](http://www.aef.com/on_campus/classroom/speaker_pres/data/6000) (accessed 21/09/2006)

I would hope that in this scenario, the answer would be yes; However, because of the lucrative nature of advertising and if past behaviour is the measure, the likelihood of a working ethical advertising realm is, unfortunately, highly unlikely.

This leads me to what I see as the function of my paintings. I believe myself to be a pragmatist when it comes to the possible affect my artwork might have in regards to the inherent ethical problems of advertising. I do feel strongly about the colonising affect of mass media and it frustrates me that generally this 'mind control' is downplayed and largely overlooked. Exhibiting to my likely audience about this subject is rather like preaching to the converted as many of the people who would be interested in viewing the paintings already have a cultural interest. However I do feel that my paintings will at least provide an opportunity for discussion and perhaps be a catalyst for further discourse on the subject of children's perception of mass media. It is not my intention to visually 'bludgeon' the viewer with my opinion but rather to stimulate an awareness of those issues involved.

## Conclusion

Currently there is a great deal of discussion about childhood obesity and a huge push for fast food chains and parents to attempt to eliminate obesity. It is considered an important problem, primarily because the effects of poor dietary habits are so obvious and therefore quantifiable. I find myself sceptical of the fast food industries compliance; I wonder if they would be quite so responsible if they had more ethical 'wiggle' room. As commendable as the fight against junk food marketing is, it does not address the more ambiguous issues concerned with the marketing to children; namely the psychological affect of living in a mediated society. The child who is targeted by advertising and mass media has every thought or value manipulated for the sole myopic intention of consumerism.

So, what of the future of this insidious and inescapable situation? Children eventually mature and as future adults in our society will be tainted by the value systems advertising has imposed on them. If the hold of advertising on society's youth is left unchecked, I firmly believe future generations will be unable to operate psychologically without the instruction of multinational corporations. Not just in which brands to buy (as consuming will become more and more important as a means to achieve contentment), but also who to be seen with, how one should aim to be perceived, which identity model is preferable to the future one has planned. To me, there is something inherently disquieting in basing a life-world around, a set of consumer agenda driven stereotypical symbols. My concern is that society may at some stage lose the ability to live an unmediated existence.

Perhaps my concern is based on nostalgic memories of my own childhood, flawed though it may have been. My childhood was made up of social events, a great deal of time outside exploring my rural environs and only the occasional children's television program. The level of saturated marketing simply did not seem to exist at that time. I strongly believe that contemporary childhood is being eroded by greater hours in front of screens, television, video game console and the Internet, and regardless of how one perceives childhood, this cannot lead a positive outcome.

*<http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,,1870515,00.html> (accessed 4/10/2006)*

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