

## **Don't Trust Caterpillars**

By Ryan Erickson

On November 26, 2020, artist Ryan Erickson found himself in a peculiar situation. He had a solo show at Semi-Gloss gallery the following week, but as he stood in his studio, he realized the wood panels he had been making weren't going to cut it. He had nothing else to fill the space and only 72 hours until it was time to install.

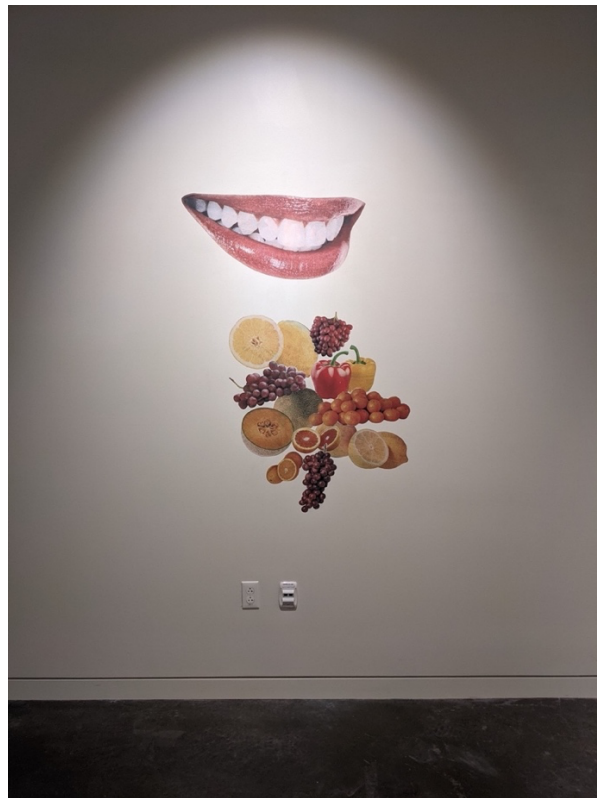
The next day, Ryan went to the gallery to look at the space thinking he would try to install the wood panels and figure out how to make it work. He mapped out where each piece would go, and in considering the layout and lighting, the work didn't seem to agree with the space. It was dim, very dim—the lighting looked as if it was designed for a David Lynch film, and there was no changing it. It was at that moment he realized he had to abandon ship. Why settle for something that doesn't seem to fit? With three days left, Ryan had no time to lose. He grabbed his X-ACTO knife and headed home where an old stack of mail awaited him.

You see, Ryan had accumulated piles of old junk mail over several weeks thinking it would make a great source material for some collage. He figured if he didn't know what to make, he may as well just start working with what was around. He decided to keep it simple—just make a series of collages, scan the good ones, and print them larger for the install space. He knew the variables—he had five slots on the wall where halos of light cast down each ready to illuminate a piece. The only obstacle would be the gallery director Adrian Gonzalez who was expecting a traditionally hung show, but Ryan figured if he showed up with an entirely different body of work Adrian would have to settle for it.

Ryan began cutting. He went through the fruits and vegetable section from the grocery store, some dental ads, and *BOOM!*—he found the images for his first piece. He made use of his

razor blade and a glue stick and had one finished (figure 8), although he wasn't sure what it meant. Part of him thought it was a great promotion for eating healthy snacks, and the other part of him found it uncanny. It made him uncomfortable enough that he didn't want to consider eating anything in its presence. He wasn't sure what it was doing. But that's the beauty of collage—it doesn't have to make sense.

**Figure 1**



Ryan Erickson, *There Will Be No Questions*, 2020, Collage on Wall, Dimensions Vary, Photographed by the artist

He shuffled through some more ads and found a few pages full of construction materials to fix things up around the house. The images were perfect. Without any text interrupting the visual, they were uninterrupted signifiers. He could cut and paste them next to an array of others that met the same criteria. He found a ceiling fan which he was able to fit as the head of some

utility coveralls. All it needed was some feet, so he found some shoes in an interior décor ad and *BOOM!* —the second piece was done (figure 9).

**Figure 2**



Ryan Erickson, *There Will Be No Questions*, 2020, Collage on Wall, Dimensions Vary, Photographed by the artist

Things were going well. Ryan had two pieces together but still needed three more. That's when a potent worry started to sprout in the back of his mind, "*What am I going to say about all this?*" He knew people were going to ask but didn't have time to deal with those concerns now. He still had to round up the body of work first.

Ryan flipped through a few more papers and found duplicates of one brochure. It had an ad for a hearing aid with a hand pointing. On the tip of the finger was a hearing aid. *Slice!* The hearing aid was gone. Now he had the finger pointing and knew he could do the same to the duplicate copy. *Slice Again!* The two perfectly lined up culminating in a kaleidoscopic

juxtaposition. But what else? It still needed something. He didn't know what, so he decided to put it on the backburner while he got some others sorted out.

He remembered several months earlier he had made some collages which he never did anything with. So, he began digging through a pile of old sketchbooks and found them. But most of them didn't work. Only one met the criteria (figure 10). The lawnmower and ceiling fan playing tug-of-war was perfect. Now it dawned on him, he needed something to thread this together, but he was done for the day. He knew he needed to make one more collage and finish the kaleidoscopic hands in progress, but it would have to wait for the next day.

**Figure 3**



Ryan Erickson, *There Will Be No Questions*, 2020, Collage on Wall, Dimensions Vary, Photographed by the artist

Ryan had 48 hours left and started flipping through his few remaining collage materials. His archive was dwindling. He had run out of ads for all the junk pushed on him. All he had left were some catalogs from the Saint Louis Art Museum and the Missouri Conservationist. He decided to give them a try and ended up striking gold. He found a Roman sculpture: a bust of a boy's head. He slapped it on the tip of one of those fingers and *Boom!*—he had another finished (figure 11) and only needed one more.

**Figure 4**



Ryan Erickson, *There Will Be No Questions*, 2020, Collage on Wall, Dimensions Vary, Photographed by the artist

The Missouri Conservationist was great to Ryan. With an exposé on caterpillars, he knew he would have no issues wrangling one last piece together. He cut several caterpillars out but found one that looked like a larva. It was gross and weird—a perfect candidate. He pictured it standing up speaking into a microphone, so he sourced one from the internet. A caterpillar with a

standing mic, what could be better? Now he really started to worry about what he was going to say about all this stuff. He knew people were going to ask. That's when it occurred to him. He'll have the caterpillar, the ringleader of this motley group, announcing, "There will be no questions." He broke out the rubber stamps and *Boom!*—the last piece was finished (figure 12). It was foolproof. If anyone asked him something, they would be disrespecting the art.

**Figure 5**



Ryan Erickson, *There Will Be No Questions*, 2020, Collage on Wall, Dimensions Vary, Photographed by the artist

At this point, Ryan only had 24 hours left. He scanned each of his collages and ran over to the print shop and had them printed at 3x4 feet. When he came back a couple of hours later to pick them up, the man behind the counter opened one up for his approval. It happened to be the caterpillar. The man looked at it, then looked at Ryan with a smirk on his face, and Ryan said, "this looks great, thank you." It was a critical first test to see if anyone would ask Ryan anything,

and he passed. With some relief, he paid, rolled up his freshly printed images, and headed for the nearest pair of scissors.

When Ryan got back to his studio, his heart racing, he started cutting out each of the images. He had to get rid of the white background. The idea was for the images to function as an installation, so he couldn't have a rectangle around them. That's what the white walls of the gallery were for.

After a couple of hours of slicing and dicing, he had to figure out how he would get these things to stick to the wall. A quick google search solved the problem. All he needed was some liquid starch—as often used for putting up wallpaper—so he ran off to the store without hesitation. He had less than 10 hours left and no time to lose.

When Ryan arrived at the gallery, Adrian was there taken aback by the last-minute arrival to install the show. There were only four hours left. Ryan apologized, letting Adrian know he had experienced some hiccups while preparing the work. They walked to Ryan's super cool car, a green 1994 Honda Accord, to unload and Adrian was caught in disbelief. There were no wood panels like he had been expecting, just some rolled-up images, a 2-inch brush, and a bottle of liquid starch. Adrian turned to Ryan speechless waiting for an explanation. Ryan said, "the wood panels weren't going to work, so I took some liberties with the direction of the show." Adrian responded, "You Bozo! You can't just flip the script like that, but I guess we'll have to install what you have."<sup>i</sup> So, they unloaded the car and got straight to work.

The pasting didn't go as easily as Ryan had hoped. But with only a couple of small tears from the paper getting wet, they were okay. He was able to finish installing the show with less than an hour to spare. The installation as a whole got along with the lighting as he had hoped (figures 13 and 14). Ryan was finally able to take a moment to experience and consider the space

they were in. They were uncanny, disorienting, and absurd. But most importantly, he found a way to dodge the painful questions about their meaning and intent.

**Figure 6**



Ryan Erickson, *There Will Be No Questions* (installation view), 2020, Collage on Wall, Dimensions Vary, Photographed by the artist

**Figure 7**



Ryan Erickson, *There Will Be No Questions* (installation view), 2020, Collage on Wall, Dimensions Vary, Photographed by the artist



*There Will Be No Questions* was an exercise in creating something with what's available. Ryan identified a space and created a body of work to install within it, instead of making work to fit into a standard white wall gallery. By identifying the number of slots for work in the space and committing to a restrained set of source material to collage, he was able to quickly and efficiently produce a body of work.

---

<sup>i</sup> Gonzalez did not actually say these words as such, although he has called me a bozo on many occasions. Gonzalez is an artist.