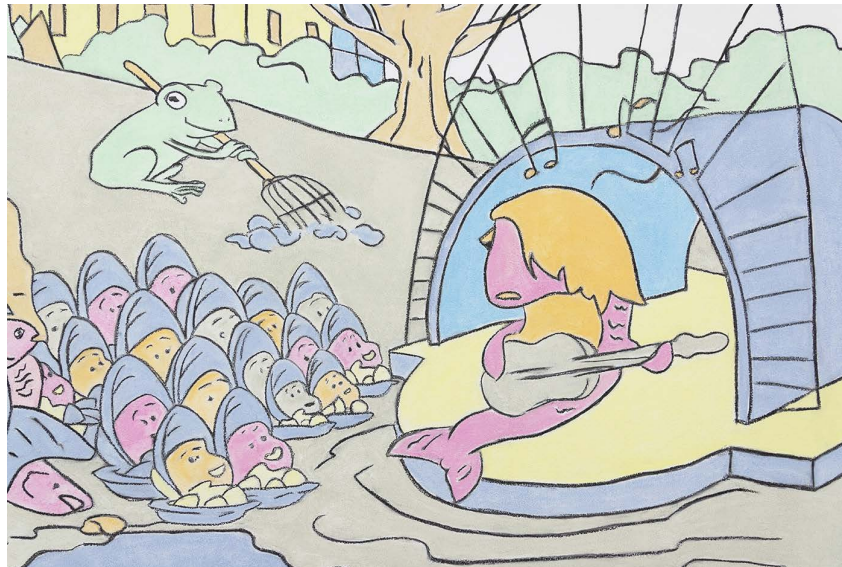


X—TRA

Of Boomers and Bass



Dena Yago, *Big Fish Eat Little Fish (detail)*, 2020. Chalk, charcoal, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Bodega, New York.

*For the Re:Research column, artist Dena Yago takes us into the as-seen-on-TV murk of Boomer pathos that spawned her latest exhibition, *Dry Season*, on view at Bodega, New York, from September 12 to October 24, 2020.*

Somewhere among my adolescent memories of George W. Bush—lodged between him choking on a pretzel and falling off of a Segway—is an image of him standing in his living room in Crawford, Texas, during the Florida election recount with Big Mouth Billy Bass mounted on the wall behind him. I imagine him parading former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott and House Speaker Dennis Hastert before the animatronic fish, triggering its rendition of “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” while millions of Americans sat in a state of suspended animation as the nation descended further into an ever-widening gyre of chaos.

Since 1998, the animatronic bass has accrued a layered, river scum-like patina of cultural signification. Superficially, it is nostalgic kitsch—a novelty item intended to communicate everything and nothing simultaneously. At its rubbery surface, the object feels most at home in a wood-paneled American pastoral: an uncle’s fishing lodge, a father’s workshop. These trophy fish hang in declaratively patriarchal spaces—spaces where men can be men, where dads can crack a beer and loosen their ties, where uncles can do whatever it is that uncles do behind closed doors. The fish is rumored to have graced the walls of Bush’s Oval Office. Bill Clinton gifted one to spurned presidential hopeful Al Gore. Big Mouth Billy Bass has become a transactional object among Boomer men both powerful and pedestrian. The fish’s unexpected animism elicited chuckles nationwide, and that was enough. Meanwhile, embedded in the object’s production and material signification was the imminent collapse of Boomer hegemony (which we have unfortunately not yet reached) and yet another nail in the coffin of American industrialism (designed in the USA, manufactured in China).

Dena Yago, X-TRA, December 7, 2019

Knowing this, why wouldn't one of the most nefarious and inept American presidents—who followed Rumsfeldian vagaries into unending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have, as of 2020, resulted in shy of three hundred thousand deaths—find peace in a novelty fish that, like a big-box store Lazarus, reanimates again and again to sing neoliberal mantras such as Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry, Be Happy," or Al Green's cleansing, baptismal tune, "Take Me to the River." With all that blood on your hands, Billy Bass may be the only figure telling you to chill out and seek redemption as you continue hurtling a nation towards financial, environmental, and ethical catastrophe.

My more recent interest in Big Mouth Billy Bass was piqued while watching the millennium-cresting HBO series *The Sopranos* twenty years after its premiere. At multiple points in the show, Tony Soprano is gifted, and subsequently haunted by, the singing fish. First, Billy is left on Tony's desk by an underling, where it prompts a nightmarish vision of Pussy, a friend whom he left to "sleep with the fishes," brought back to life in the form of a talking fish. Tony later uses Billy Bass as a weapon to beat up a bartender who mistakes the cursed object for harmless decor. His daughter, Meadow, unaware of the trauma it brings her father, gives Tony a Billy Bass for Christmas, setting off a dissociative state in the family patriarch. The fish appears once again during an exchange between the older Boomer Paulie Walnuts and his young Gen X protégé, Christopher Moltisanti. After a threatening "snitches get stitches"-style warning, Christopher sees Paulie reach in the back of his car and fears that he is pulling a gun. Instead, Paulie pulls out a Billy Bass and states, "My godson got me this. They're all over the place." After pressing the button, Christopher looks on in horror as the fish sings the lyrics to "YMCA": "Young man, there's no need to feel down / I said, young man, pick yourself off the ground / There's no need to be unhappy." Both characters proceed to nervously and maniacally laugh as the threat of violence diffuses. In each of these episodes, Big Mouth Billy Bass serves as a vessel for Boomer pathos. It triggers memories of past violence and the potentiality of future violence. It becomes quite literally weaponized. It is the object through which trauma and violence, whether it be real or imagined, is passed intergenerationally from one man to another. Like many novelty items, Big Mouth Billy Bass is something to give the Boomer men in your life when there is nothing left to say.



Dena Yago, *Trawler* (detail), 2020. Audio, wood, enamel, Big Mouth Billy Bass, 30 x 27 1/2 x 5 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Bodega, New York.

Dena Yago, X-TRA, December 7, 2019

I began writing the monologues for *Dry Season* in May of this year. Any frustration or antagonism in the text exists because of my own anger at how the coronavirus was being mismanaged, and how systemic racism and a state of policing remain widely unchanged in the US—in part, it seems, due to Boomers’ incapability to see beyond their own self-interest. To clarify, Boomerism is not solely a demographic but rather a state of mind. One that fails to recognize its own privilege, that can only view the world through the lens of its own material conditions, that mistakes the anecdotal for the objective and the experience of one for the experience of many. Because of a fundamental breakdown of intergenerational understanding, Big Mouth Billy Bass seemed to be the optimal conduit for a family constellation therapy session among characters that stand in as generational archetypes.



Left to Right: Dena Yago, *Pitcher*, 2020, audio, wood, enamel, Big Mouth Billy Bass, 48 x 24 x 5 1/2 in.; Chum, 2020, audio, wood, enamel, Big Mouth Billy Bass, 48 x 24 x 5 1/2 in.; *Pleaser*, 2020, audio, wood, enamel, Big Mouth Billy Bass, 48 x 24 x 5 1/2 in. Installation view, *Dry Season*, Bodega, New York, September 12–October 24, 2020.

With a vague knowledge of what is needed to mod a readymade animatronic, plus the volume of YouTube videos and Reddit threads on the subject, it seemed feasible to reanimate the Billy Bass toward my specific ends. During my early research I learned of Billy Bass choirs angelically singing Handel’s *Messiah*, the Bee Gees, and the Talking Heads. There are Alexa-enabled bass telling you about the weather in Samuel L. Jackson’s voice and delivering lines from *Rush Hour 3*. And then there are many snuff films where Billy Bass meets its tragic end. Knowing that this was possible, I reached out to embedded systems engineer Sam Wolk. After de-skinning and disassembling the fish, we learned that there are three motors: head, body, and tail.

The fact that the fish originally turned its head at a nearly ninety degree angle off of the faux-wooden plaque is a key reason that Joe Pellettieri, Billy’s inventor, believes the fish was such a success. “It really goes back to that head turn,” he told MEL Magazine. “If it was just a wiggling fish on a plaque, we might

Dena Yago, X-TRA, December 7, 2019

have sold some, but it would have been long forgotten.” The originally programmed movement of the fish’s body jerked off of the backboard with such violent force that you could hear a large thump whenever it returned to its still position. The violent erectness with which the flaccid trophy fish performed led me to believe that this full-body movement was seen as so appealing by its creator due to a latent anxiety, intuited or perceived, surrounding erectile dysfunction and decreased virility among Boomer men. All of these fathers and uncles were inviting their colleagues, family, and friends to walk by and gawk at an animatronic semi.

The fish in Dry Season are all mounted to wood panels, mimicking the fish- and speaker-mounting system on the original plaque. The hollowness of the panels greatly helped the audio amplification, but also amplified the violent thud every time the fish returned to resting. In order to avoid this, Sam and I decided to tailor the mouth, body, and tail movements of each fish to its particular personality. This was also necessary because I had sourced original Gemmy-produced Big Mouth Billy Bass, and wanted to protect their longevity by using softer movements. With a microprocessor and wireless radio system animating and cueing each fish, Sam was able to wirelessly synchronize them. We designated a “leader” fish, which then sent signals to each subsequent fish when it was their turn to speak. The scripts were all written as individual monologues, and there are minimal points of direct address among the fish. They speak in the royal “you,” “us,” and “them.” It intentionally seems incidental that their statements ever feel responsive to one another’s, even though, at the level of their program, they are communicating directly. The ham-fisted comparison is that this is not so dissimilar to contemporary public discourse as it plays out on top of highly synchronized, intentional algorithms that are architected to determine a specific outcome in favor of the platform over the user, no matter how discordant or destructive the conversation happening on top of it is.

After watching many Billy Bass both glitch out and function with uncanny seamlessness, I have a plan for the body doubles amassed in my studio. I hope that one day, be it the day that American cities divest from their police forces and invest in community-based alternatives, or the US truly commits to healthcare for all, or Amazon workers are able to unionize, I can synchronize all of their batteries dying simultaneously as a kind of twenty-one gun salute to a croaking Boomer ethos.

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