Dan Donaldson was born and raised in Winnipeg, and graduated from the University of Manitoba in 1996 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree. In the early to mid nineties, he was a member of the Student Bolsheviks Gallery group, who were known for their thematic based art shows. This rogue based gallery had no fixed address, as month long shows were set up in studio spaces, or short term warehouse locations. Although the original concept of the gallery was based on an open format whereby artists (familiar or unfamiliar) could exhibit their work, it was apparent after a short while that there was a “core” group that became known as the Bolsheviks. This group was infamous not only for their gallery ‘happenings’ but their antics within the art community as well.
Dan Donaldson’s “Art Imitating Life Imitating Art” is a crazy quilt contemplation of the art/life divide and the effect of the media age on collective memory and individual imagination. The work is a provocative assemblage of oil paintings that spew across the room in an arrangement that only seems limited by the available space and time.

This manifestation is just a slice of what could be an endless project of sorting through the visual detritus that shapes our minds.

The title, “Art Imitating Life Imitating Art,” is a palindrome that echoes Oscar Wilde’s claim that life imitates art more often than art imitates life. Taking his habitual pleasure in inversion, Wilde reversed the assumption that art copies nature. People learn by imitating each other, and, especially in our over-saturated media age, our lives are as likely to be formed by the fictional people and stories we see on television, movies, magazines and the internet as by real people. Wilde decided the conservative utilitarian materialism of his age and argued for a space for free imagination where the pleasures of fiction would triumph over fact. I wonder what he would have made of our virtual-screen-worlds and the availability of so many pictures. Would he have chosen to crib pictures from this defunct periodical that life imitates art more often than art imitates life. Taking his habitual pleasure in inversion, Wilde reversed the assumption that art copies nature. People learn by imitating each other, and, especially in our over-saturated media age, our lives are as likely to be formed by the fictional people and stories we see on television, movies, magazines and the internet as by real people. Wilde decided the conservative utilitarian materialism of his age and argued for a space for free imagination where the pleasures of fiction would triumph over fact. I wonder what he would have made of our virtual-screen-worlds and the availability of so many pictures. Would he have chosen to crib pictures from this defunct periodical

It is as if he is overwhelmed by pictures and has become their vessel. On the other hand, these paintings take months to make. While the images may come quickly, the artist’s process slows them down, digests them. By ripping the pictures from their texts and contexts and combining them in his eccentric fashion, Donaldson declares his complicity in the visual barrage and blurring of the life/art divide and yet also attempts to wrestle a space in his ironic appropriations for a less frenetic consideration of pictures (rather than actual experiences) that affect his interior life.

The title, “Art Imitating Life Imitating Art,” is also a joke in that the “Life” Donaldson is imitating is life mediated by Life magazine. That he chooses to crib pictures from this defunct periodical suggests nostalgic feelings for the pre-internet era when Life was a common reference point for the collective North American visual imagination. “My hope,” Donaldson explains, “is that the viewer will not only be intrigued and stimulated by the work, but also re-live some memories (good and bad) through the images, and perhaps reflect upon their own life at that moment.”

The exhibition is a memento mori to the second half of the twentieth century. But rather than focus on iconic collective moments to jog shared memories, images are chosen that happened to capture the imagination of this one consciousness, Dan Donaldson, during its early formation. Images are not selected for their importance according to the agenda and tastes of an editorial board but to the predilections of this one consciousness, Dan Donaldson, during its early formation.

As someone not much older than the artist, I am not surprised that I recognize the Mad magazine double parody of Life (as Laff) and Alfred E. Neumann as Mona Lisa. But I am shocked that I not only recognize but also remember Carol Channing’s name! Such is the power of the media machine and the memory power of the young mind. The associative joke is that Channing is famous for singing “Hello, Dolly!” and Dolly is the name of the first cloned sheep doubly represented near-by. Donaldson is not simply engaging in Rauchenbergian free-association; there are meanings in his visual madness. The series is rife with visual jokes, copy play and an uncertainty about a future in which the real is replaced by the virtual.

The inclusion of Alfred E. Neumann is an acknowledgment of Mad’s influence on his art, but what of the near-by dinosaur watching internet porn - surely not from Life but life(!?!). The artist explains that pornography, once seen as the scourge of society and hidden from view, is now just a click away and condoned by default. The dinosaur (old man) can now get porn with ease and not much stigma. Is this a sign of enlightenment or decadence and decline?

“Art Imitating Life Imitating Art” is a portrait of the artist’s mental processing of images that affected him in his youth. To take another example, the viewer can imagine the young Dan being shocked and yet also fascinated by the image of an unidentified African American man chained to a tree and tortured. Growing up in Winnipeg in the 1970s with few black folks, this is a difficult image to understand. In an effort to process or mitigate the horror, he juxtaposes an image of Abraham Lincoln, the president credited for the emancipation of the slaves. But at the same time, he pictures a big, black spade next to the wrecked man. His free associations include racist ones. In the cartoon above, African-American children also try to understand their environment. The arrangement invites the viewer to consider their own early processing of such images and learned (racist) associations, both of which take years to understand and exorcise.

Not that the artist is primarily interested in undoing racism, or any of the other ills he catalogues. Donaldson is a confessed pessimist about human nature and the possibility of progress. He is not an agent of change but a provocateur of thoughts who lob visual bombs to get a reaction.

“Art Imitating Life Imitating Art” is an exhibition about the power of images to wordlessly make up our minds and art’s ability to help us re-make them. It is not that the artist wants to remake our minds, so much as we can take our measure against his opus and determine our selves with or against its parts.

David Garneau, 2011