

Emily Braswell Jenna Rees
STRAWBERRIEMILK & WARMMILKWITHSUGAR

MAY 15 - JULY 2, 2026

MIDDLE OF THE FOOD CHAIN

ST. THOMAS | DUAL-SITE

**81C & XIID Research and Strategy Innovation
Center at the University of the Virgin Islands**

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Foundation for Contemporary Arts

81C ARTS

MIDDLE OF THE FOOD CHAIN

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ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Middle of the Food Chain by Emily Braswell (Strawberriemilk) and Jenna Rees (Warmmilkwithsugar) unfolds as a warped cinematic universe where painting, video, and sculpture collapse into a single, unstable narrative field. Centered around a fictional 1980s movie star in a meta-perspective of invented lore from parallel storylines, the work drifts between past and present, constructing a world where time folds in on itself and meaning emerges through fragments rather than sequence.

Hybrid airbrush and traditional paintings operate as imagined film artifacts: posters, stills, and visual residues from fictitious movies that are rendered with a hyper-saturated, almost synthetic clarity. Their surfaces oscillate between softness and precision, evoking the tactile nostalgia of analog media while simultaneously referencing the flattened glow of digital imagery. Sculptural interventions punctuate the space with quiet absurdity, grounding the work in physical form while amplifying its psychological tension.

The accompanying video component extends this atmosphere into motion, offering a disjointed, voyeuristic glimpse into the interior lives orbiting this fictional figure. Rather than resolving into narrative, the work lingers in mood—an uneasy balance of humor, longing, and quiet unpredictability.

Drawing from the American south small-town culture and nostalgia for the sensationalized monolithic star style fame of pre-internet times, *Middle of the Food Chain* constructs a world that feels both intimately familiar and fundamentally distorted. It is less a story than a condition—one where fantasy and perception continuously rewrite one another.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Emily Braswell and Jenna Rees are collaborative art partners that work under the aliases Strawberriemilk & Warmmilkwithsugar. Their practice centers on painting, accompanied by video, installations and sculptures. Their lifelong friendship has fueled their collaborations for over a decade. Their creative partnership began at UNCSA, a visual arts boarding school, in North Carolina, that they attended on merit-based scholarships.

They went on to pursue higher education, then reconnected in Atlanta, where they gained recognition for pairing their paintings with conceptual installations. Their work has a performative quality from their joint persona — layered with humor, matching attire and sensory experiences for their audiences. After recently relocating to the Caribbean, they exhibited in the Virgin Islands and Los Angeles. The duo now continues their studio practice in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Welcome to *Middle of The Food Chain*. You are now amidst a completely fictional world: one in which there exists a little bit of time travel, a little bit of looksmaxxing, and a few meat sticks.

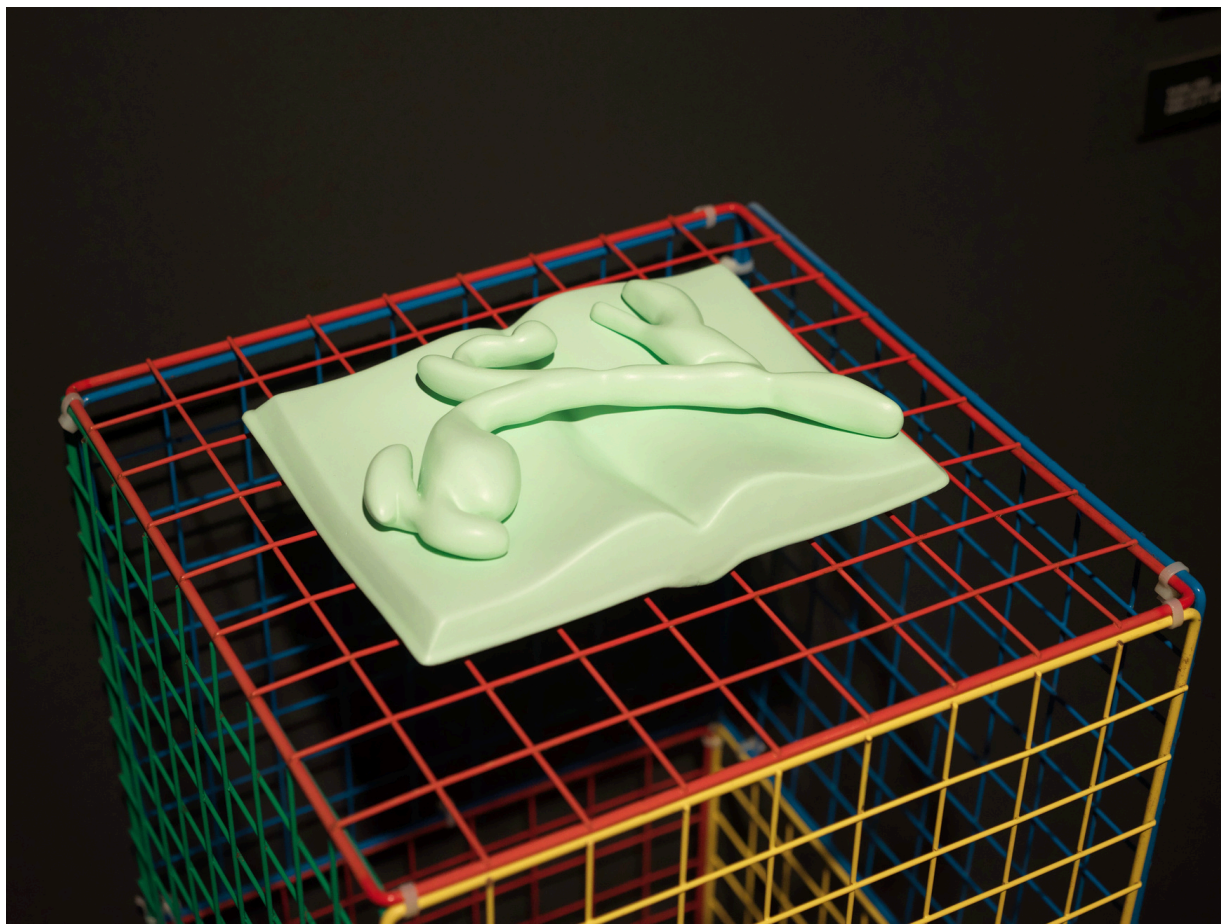
There are three characters in this world that you need to know about. First, there is Krankie, an iconic '80s movie megastar. Then there is Libby, an anxious, bug and amphibian obsessed girl who religiously eats soft serve ice cream and pines away for her celebrity heartthrob. Lastly, there is Sparks, a brute tomboy who works in an auto body shop, collects baseball cards and dreams of a different life, one more lavish, like their infamous idol's.

It's the year 1989. Krankie is at the height of his career in Hollywood, living glamorously within the madness of his monolithic fame. Across the country, somewhere in the rural South, Libby and Sparks both live in the same small town, faced with mundane lives and typical hardships. Though they are unacquainted, they share a parallel escape in their fandom over Krankie.

It's 2026. Krankie has aged out of stardom. Nearing the end of his life, his celebrity lifestyle left him no family to bestow upon, blockbusters and accolades collecting dust, and his once chiseled physique, tired. Desperate to revive his fame, he turns to the internet, where he falls down a rabbit hole of streaming subculture. Hell-bent on resurrecting his legacy, he reopens his old fanmail, spawning unsuspecting heirs to his fortune: Libby and Sparks.

Determined to become free from his current likeness to a dinosaur, he becomes fixated on reattaining a masculine appearance. Driven to bend time, he finds a way back to 1989, where he plants cryptic clues leading to hidden cash that would forever change the lives of his superfans.

Motivated by ego and devoured by pride, Krankie *goes live* as both predator and prey.



Book & Rose, 2026
Epoxy clay, found ceramic, acrylic, and wire pedestal
7 x 10 x 1.5 inch

\$3,000

Strawberriemilk + Warmmilkwithsugar

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Positioned at the start of the exhibition, tucked close to the Artist Statement, this piece symbolizes the very essence of Middle of the Food Chain: the drama and the fiction. The rose is a nod to the theatrical elements within the concept and the installation itself, like a rose tossed on stage to an actor at the end of a performance. While the open book declares to the viewers that this series is an ongoing story, opened up right in the middle of a fiction, not to be taken too seriously.



Krankie, 2026
Single-channel digital video + audio

Not for sale

Strawberriemilk + Warmmilkwithsugar

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Shot on iPhones, utilizing voyeuristic povs, with the artists alternating as filmmakers and actors — a nonlinear story of Krankie and his two superfans unfolds. Time warps between 1989 and 2026: Krankie is depicted as a dinosaur to highlight how he has aged out of his stardom and feels almost extinct amidst new age fame on social media and streaming platforms. His two superfans symbolize the simple life of the lower middle class in the late 80s, as they fawned over Krankie on the silver screen during his prime. The video piece plays on loop and is designed to accompany the paintings and sculptures as a driving conceptual force. The audio is available on the dated orange headphone sets.



Mystry, 2025
Acrylic on panel
40 x 30 x 1 inch

\$10,000

Strawberriemilk + Warmmilkwithsugar

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Titled after an unusually spelled name, Mystry, not to be mistaken for “mystery”, is the artists’ take on an ’80s sci-fi movie poster. She’s a sweet ceramic cookie jar sitting on a shelf behind a bone-like grate. Graphically branded with text establishing the era from which the Krankie series is set: 1989. This piece is the first in a series of four paintings designed to the scale of classic movie posters. They are meant to exist as fake archives of films Krankie starred in — each one representing a different genre.



Tale as Old as Tuey, 2025
Acrylic on panel
40 x 30 x 1 inch

\$10,000

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This second piece, in the Krankie movie poster series, reimagines an '80s Disney romance. Although it can be viewed as abstract and atmospheric, if you look closely, it depicts a Princess and Prince about to have a dreamy first kiss. Inspired by the collage-like flat qualities of a vintage paper doll, you can see the side profile of Sleeping Beauty and her Prince with a rose stem between them. The green balloon animal-like shapes frame the scene as vines and thorns to the orange and blue flowers. One of the thorns has come to life and is stirring the water pond, predicting the fate of their romance. Above them hangs a metaphorical key to her heart. The title is a play on the phrase "tale as old as time" with an idiosyncratic twist that reflects the fictional world in which this poster exists.



Mario, 2025
Acrylic on panel
40 x 30 x 1 inch

\$9,000

Strawberriemilk + Warmmilkwithsugar

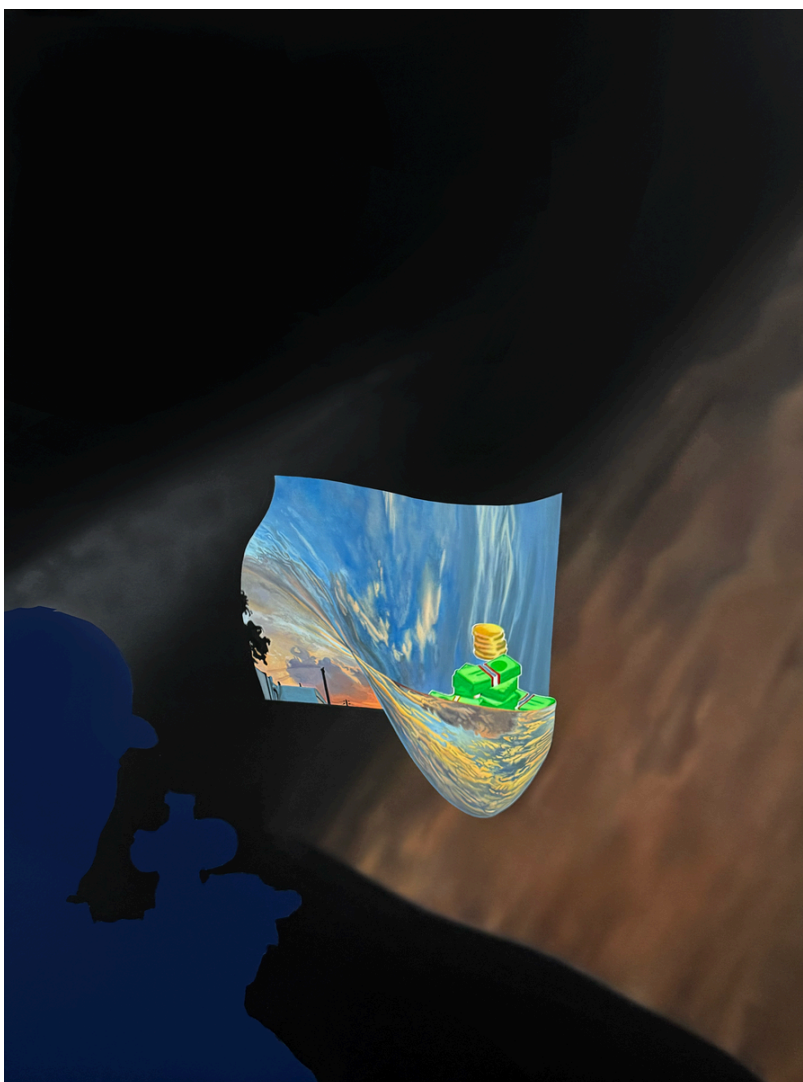
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Representing an imagined 80s psychedelic comedy, this piece plays on absurdist and surreal humor present in many cult classic style films of the time. With nods to the trippy party culture in Los Angeles during the 80s. Undertones of a dream-like or drugged state imply a warped reality with an angelic looking woman laying in what could be a park surrounded by blooming flowers and elements of the natural world. The piece has many layers, meant to feel like a weathered poster peeling off an urban wall. The bordering frame appropriates a vintage baseball card design from the era. This was chosen to represent the character Sparks' collection of baseball cards and the eccentric, colorful graphics used in even sporty collectibles at the time.



Damned If I Do, Damned If I Don't, 2025
Acrylic on panel
40 x 30 x 1 inch

\$8,000

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The final piece in this series represents a classic action movie poster. Time warps in a breathless moment as a sniper aims. Contemplating his damned predicament, the universe blurs and his eye fixates on a video game-like prize poised in the horizon. 80's action flicks typically starred the most famous actors at the time, the most chiseled, handsome, hyper-masculine lead roles in the industry. With Krankie hypothetically cast as the main role, this box office success is meant to depict the explosive, top-grossing blockbuster peak of his career.



Angel Babies, 2026
Epoxy clay, found ceramic, and found plastic
12 x 48 x 3 inch

\$5,000

Strawberriemilk + Warmmilkwithsugar

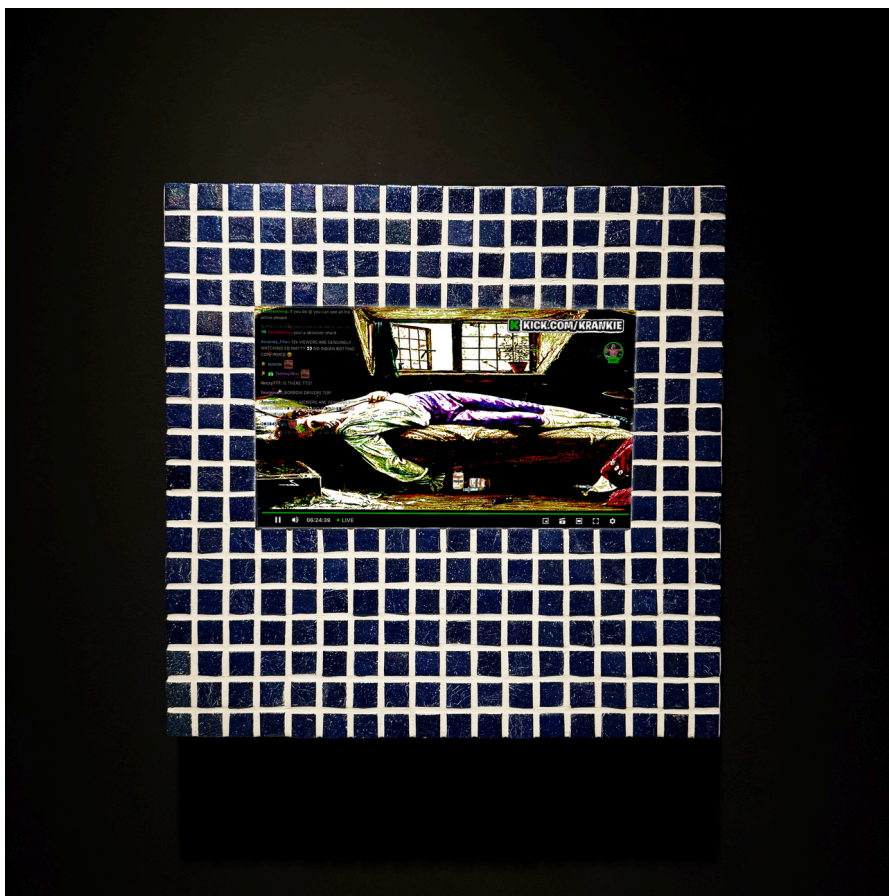
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This sculpture serves as a relic symbolizing the hidden treasures that Krankie left for his superfans. The concept of the enlarged necklace came from a found ceramic cherub relief, dated from 1989, the year the story is set. The found piece was manipulated and added to, becoming a pendant accompanied by its bail, jump hoop, beaded chain and clasp. The pendant was then finished with a custom two-toned candy car paint. One of the angel babies was given a small, realistic tongue sticking out, meant to tease and taunt the viewer with a playful sense of humor.



Fresco, 2026
Acrylic and tile on panel
16.5 x 16.5 x 3 inch

\$5,000

Strawberriemilk + Warmmilkwithsugar

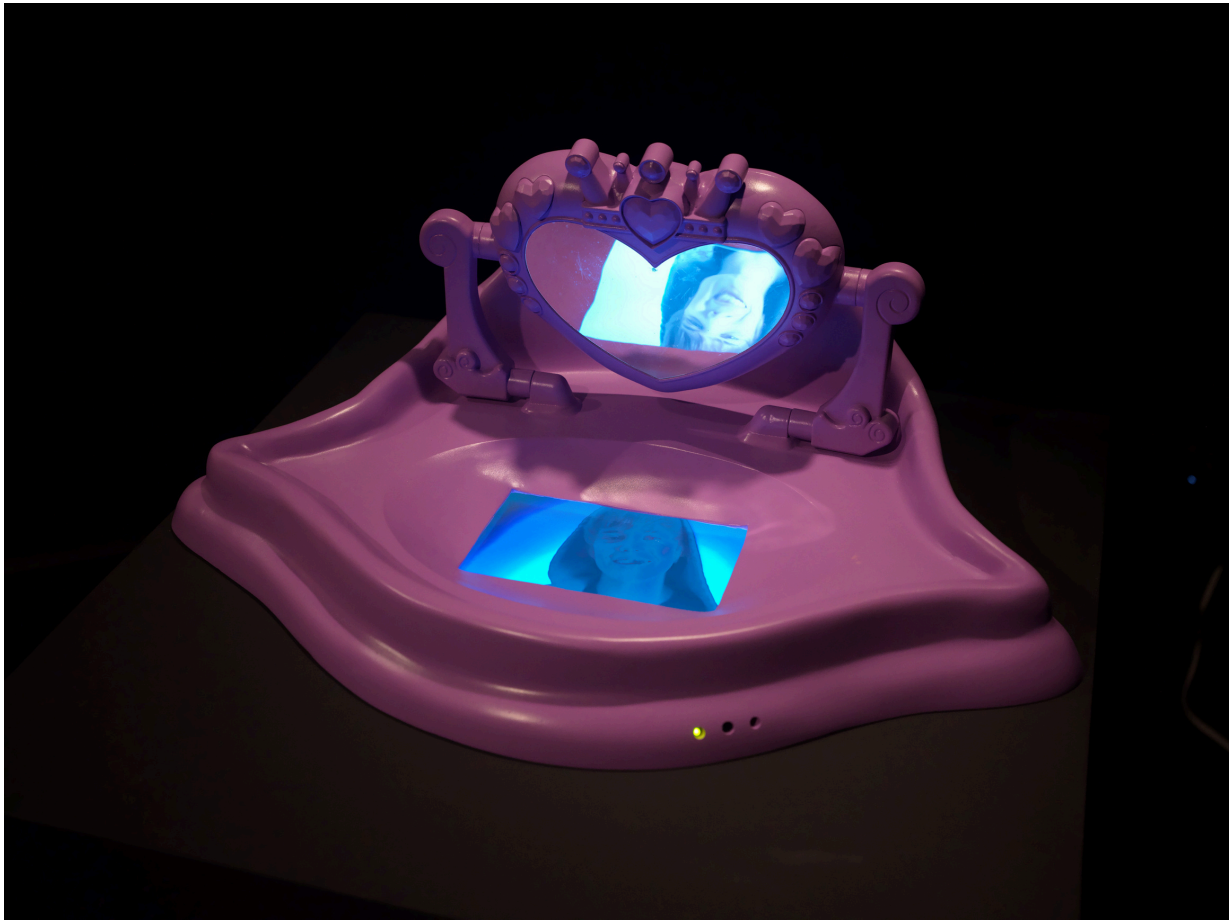
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*Tiled like an 80s interior, this fresco-style work leans into the time jumping elements of the exhibition's concept. The choice to paint within the small confines of this miniature wall that is plastered to be level with its surrounding tile work, was done to evoke a timeless quality to Krankie's tragic story. The composition reinterprets the famous Renaissance painting, *The Death of Chatterton* by Henry Wallis. The choice to reference this moment from art history, was due to the male figure in Wallis's painting having poisoned himself with arsenic. By replacing him with Krankie, it suggests that Krankie metaphorically poisoned himself with his own ego, vanity and pride. The reinterpretation goes a step further, by framing the scene within the context of a live stream on Kick and replacing the arsenic with a syringe of peptides, the story reveals how Krankie surcame to chasing relevancy in the digital age.*



Vanity, 2026
Epoxy clay, found plastic, acrylic, and video monitor
11 x 24 x 16 inch

\$7,000

Strawberriemilk + Warmmilkwithsugar

EMILY BRASWELL & JENNA REES

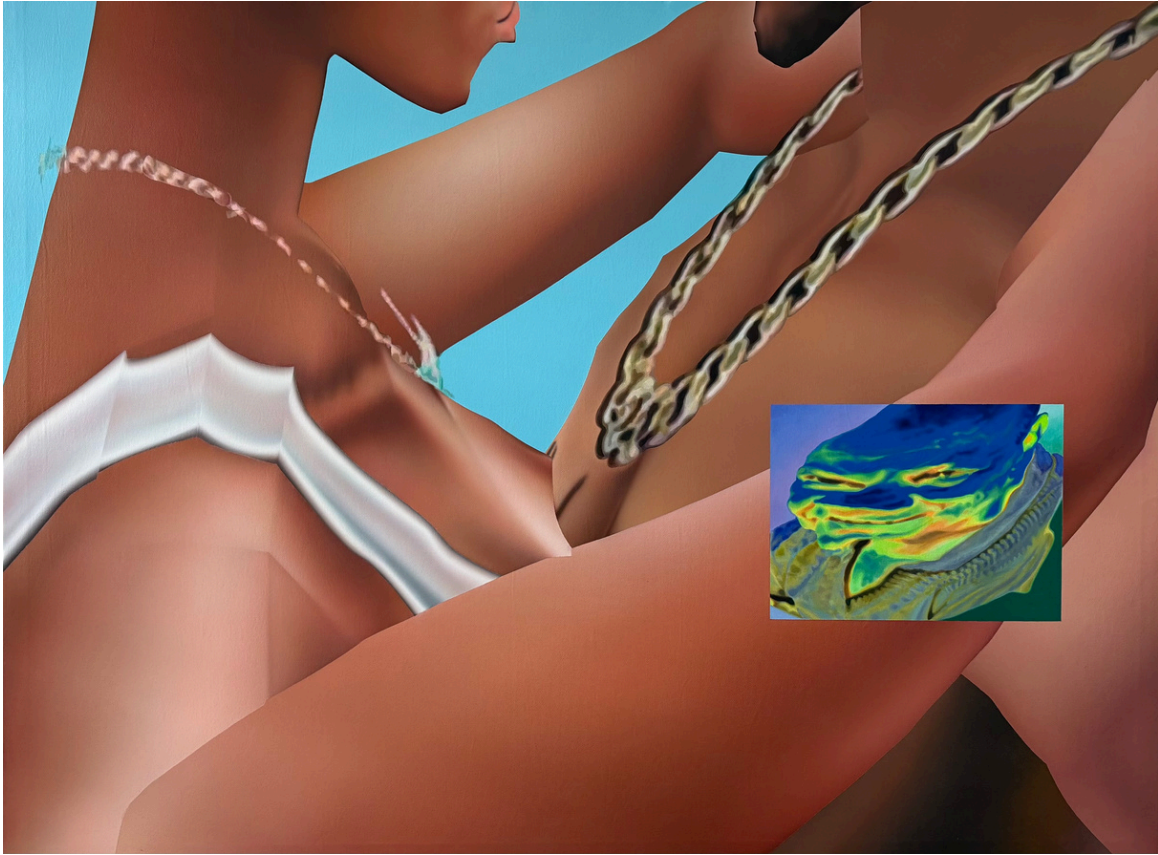
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This piece celebrates the idea of the megastar as a heartthrob. With its smooth, curvilinear basin, heart mirror motif, and pinkish-purple hue, it feels both timeless to girlhood and like dated futurism — serving as a fictional artifact from the past, that's design was predicting a vision of the future. The intent behind the choice of a Justin Bieber music video was to highlight an iconic megastar of the early-2010s and compare his stardom to the Krankie character's hyper fame in the late 80s. The goal was to get the viewers thinking about the evolution of how fame exists culturally. How has it stayed the same and how has it changed with the presence of the internet and a more globalized world? Could Justin be the last of his kind or will there always be the presence of a megastar?

The materiality of Vanity is important to note: the basin structure was sculpted by hand out of epoxy clay and sanded smooth, the heart mirror was sourced from a vintage plastic kids toy, the screen was customized to fit the piece — to play on loop continuously and to be remote controlled via its lights and sensors.



Love Island, 2026
Acrylic on canvas
48 x 64 x 3.5 inch

\$13,000

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Anchoring the exhibition, this painting's scale and digital pop attitude signify the present-day arch in the conceptual story of Krankie.

Krankie is watching an episode of Love Island, the popular reality TV show, on his computer, when his webcam accidentally turns on and pops up on his screen — revealing himself as a distorted dinosaur-like old man, rendered in thermographic, color mapping the body temperature of his face as he sees himself with shame and embarrassment. Meant to be like a familiar moment when someone picks up their phone and the front camera is on and they see themselves from an unflattering angle. The warmth of blood rushes to his cheeks and a goofy grin appears on his face — we are reminded he is still human.

The two lovers depicted are embracing in what looks like a moment just before a passionate kiss. Their chains are hand painted with digital details and glitches caught in this screenshot-esk moment. The meeting of their two chains is meant to symbolize the show's title, Middle of the Food Chain.

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EXHIBITION PARTNERSHIPS

Middle of the Food Chain expands the evolving Krankie universe into a dual-location experience spanning 81C in historic Charlotte Amalie and to the XIID Research and Strategy Innovation Center at the University of the Virgin Islands, St. Thomas campus.

This two-part presentation deepens the narrative and physical experience of the work—bridging gallery and academic environments to create a layered, immersive encounter with contemporary art in the Virgin Islands.

At 81C, the exhibition unfolds as a fully realized environment, where painting, sculpture, and video merge into a cohesive sensory installation. Visitors enter a world shaped by reimagined retro visuals, nonlinear storytelling, and abstraction executed with realistic precision—an uncanny space where narrative operates more as atmosphere than linear story.

At the UVI Innovation Center, *Middle of the Food Chain* activates XIID's Zen Room as a dedicated cinematic environment, highlighting the exhibition's cinema components and offering viewers engagement with multi-screen moving-image. Accompanied by a selected sculptural element positioned within this academic and research-driven setting, the activation invites students and the public to encounter the work through curiosity, reflection, and shared viewing, ultimately driving visitation to the full scale show at 81C in Charlotte Amalie.

Together, this dual-location experience reflects a shared commitment between 81C, XIID, and UVI to advance student engagement through arts production in the VI. The show highlights the role of creative immersive experiences as an incubator for intellectual infrastructure—capable of constructively shaping how we observe, engage, and relate to fine arts.

EXHIBITION SPONSORS

Foundation For Contemporary Arts, XIID, UVI, VI Museum of Art, One Communication, VICA