

Tom Post: Artist Statement

Absolute merchandise. The idea that making art becomes a mechanical process whereby the end result is a commodity, something to be bought and owned, is the conceptual drive behind this body of work. Within that ideology, it is my intent to visually explore banal common objects, to create re-presentations of that which are highly recognizable, and to place them within the contexts of their individual modes of production, advertising, and/or consumption. In an essay entitled *Absolute Merchandise*, philosopher Jean Baudrillard states, “When the art object takes on the form of merchandise, it loses its *a priori* ideal nature (beauty, authenticity, even functionality). The work of art must acquire all the qualities of shock, strangeness, surprise, unease, liquidity—even self-destruction, instantaneity and unreality—that pertain to merchandise” (Baudrillard 19).

The initial paintings in this series were juxtapositions of forms, meant to explore technological comparisons within the realm of the object. I sought to achieve this by placing common analog objects alongside current technological marvels, but a stronger, more unified concept surfaced as a result of painting “through” this idea. Through the processes of experimentation (and of trial and error), the reclining armchair emerged as the iconic household object that dominated the series, due primarily to its factors of recognition, commonality, mechanization, geographical origin, fetish, and both its use and sign values. The idea of the potency of sign-value in society is riveting to me, and the way it is applied to our everyday objects and surroundings helped shape this body of work. Regarding sign-value, Baudrillard notes, “Prestige is a parasitic function which impedes an objects essential function. Objects are not meant to be owned or used but to be produced and bought” (Baudrillard). Baudrillard sees an object as a “gestural symbol of function”, to which my painted reclining chairs owe their

particular placement. My interest in these types of objects was furthered by Baudrillard's observations that "Complex household objects require mastery, domination, and coordination to use". "Objects are more complex than the human behavior relative to them". "An object's form is allegorical and relates to the idea of nature" (Baudrillard).

To address the condition of use-value within the hierarchy of objects, I looked to Thorstein Veblen, who observes, "from the days of the Greek philosophers to the present, a degree of leisure and of exemption from contact with industrial processes as they serve the immediate everyday purposes of human life has ever been recognized by thoughtful men as a prerequisite to a worthy or beautiful human life. In itself and in its consequences, the life of leisure is beautiful and ennobling in all civilized men's eyes" (Veblen 26). "Abstention from labor is the convenient evidence of wealth and is therefore the conventional mark of social standing" (Veblen 27). The reclining chair seemed to be the object that ideally signified the social hierarchal ascension occurring throughout the processes of production, consumption, advertising and use, and it is a ritual symbol for Veblen's idea of an "abstention from labor" equating to a "mark of social standing".

Through composition and color, I have assigned each object image a place within its own particular realm of industry and production, advertising and abstraction, or purchase and prestige. The concept of these types of portrayals is to show "the whole aesthetic trauma of the invasion of art by merchandise...conveyed in a way both aesthetic and ironic (the asceticism of merchandise, simultaneously puritanical and magically enigmatic, as Marx said)" (Baudrillard 20).

As this series began to emerge, there became an obvious visual lineage rooted in the influence of Modernist and Pop Art in general, and Andy Warhol in particular (the use of a popular, mass produced object whose image repeats throughout the series). I have researched

images by Marcel Duchamp, Warhol, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Ellsworth Kelly, and Roy Lichtenstein, all of whose use of objects, popular culture, and/or visual space were referential for this work. The dominant, flattened spaces are indebted to Pablo Picasso and Cubism. There are also visual acknowledgements from contemporary artists, especially the use of line and glazes by Zhang Xiaogang and the flattened grounds and colors of Richard Prince and Takashi Murakami. Line was also a big part of Warhol's late work, and though used differently from Xiaogang, it becomes a common thematic motif. "By embellishing (the) prints with line drawing, Warhol hoped to enrich and energize them, while also adding a personal touch" (Bourdon 350).

These paintings also comment on the cyclical notion of a consumer society, the social desire to acquire, and to look toward both commercial mass production and the idea of advertising and consumption that is readily seen in images such as Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans*. Through the texts of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's first two books, *The System of Objects* and *The Consumer Society*, this series also explores the concept of the dominance of an object's sign-value (status or prestige) over its use-value (function), and especially its exchange-value (cost) (Marx's terms, applied by Baudrillard). Karl Marx observes, "The product first becomes a real product in consumption; e.g., a garment becomes a real garment only through the act of being worn" (Marx 278). Society sees objects as something to desire, with acquisition comes function, and through acquisition comes prestige. "The object of art, as well as any other product, creates an artistic and beauty enjoying public. Production thus produces not only an object for the individual, but also an individual for the object" (Marx 280).

Through their formal applications and repetition of motifs, these paintings are also meant to explore the concept of reification (obsession with machines and their processes that leads to a de-humanizing effect, making the person more machine-like themselves) as it applies to the

artist; the repetitive, mechanized system of processes that are inherent to the production of a work of art. “When Andy Warhol insists on becoming a total ‘machine’—more mechanical even than a machine, since he aims at the automatic, mechanical production of objects that are mechanical and manufactured already—then he stands in direct line of succession to Baudelaire’s ‘absolute merchandise’” (Baudrillard 20). Andy Warhol expressed his thoughts on his own art-making processes to *ArtNews* magazine, “The reason I’m painting this way is that I want to be a machine, and I feel that whatever I do and do machine-like is what I want to do” (Bourdon 186). Warhol further emphasizes this notion by stating, “The things I want to show are mechanical, machines have less problems (than people)...I’d like to be a machine, wouldn’t you?” (Bourdon 140). Warhol’s system of production employed screen printing to enable a mechanical process and multiple images, but this series relies more on a system of multiple digital reference images to imply these processes. “The lasting evidence of productive labor is its material product—commonly some article of consumption” (Veblen 30).

In an essay that prefaces Martin Schwander’s *Andy Warhol: Paintings 1960-1986*, Jean Baudrillard observes, “Baudelaire hit upon the radical solution. He faced the threat posed to art by a commercial, vulgar, capitalist, advertising society—the unprecedented threat that mercantile value would reduce the work of art to the status of a mere object—and countered it, not by defending art’s traditional status but by totally objectifying art” (Baudrillard 18). “Where aesthetic value is in danger of being alienated by mercantile value, it is no use putting up a defense against alienation; alienate all the way, and fight alienation with its own weapons. Relentlessly pursue the indifference and equivalence of mercantile value; turn the work of art into absolute merchandise” (Baudrillard 18).

“When Warhol painted his *Campbell’s Soup Cans* in the 1960’s...the merchandise object or the merchandise sign was consecrated by the only ritual that we have left: that of

transparency” (Baudrillard 20). “The genius of merchandise invoked a fresh demon in art—the genius of simulation” (Baudrillard 20). The re-presentations of objects in my paintings are referential to this notion in that they are not objects, or paintings of objects; they are paintings of images of objects; they are permeated by the chronic transparency to which Baudrillard refers.

The connection to the idea of “absolute merchandise” is easily made with Pop Art’s infatuation with subject matter depicting “commercial, vulgar, capitalist, advertising” imagery such as grocery store products, comic book characters, movie stars and celebrities, dollar signs, numbers, American flags, and portraits of the wealthy and socially elite, and these types of images remain highly influential to contemporary painting. The “mechanized” use of stencils and screen prints in creating this type of art object is a direct reflection of the idea of reification, where the social emphasis placed upon objects and machinery signifies a more objectified, or mechanized, individual realm. That mechanization surfaces in this work through digital references and image multiplicity.

Legitimacy within the realm of the object-image has replaced vulgarity within the hierarchy of the art community, and representations of popular culture are embraced rather than seen as a harbinger of the “disappearance of art”. “Arts salvation lies in taking to extremes the formal, fetishistic abstraction of merchandise, the magical glamour of exchange value. Art must become more mercantile than merchandise itself; more remote from use value than ever before, art must take exchange value to extremes and thus transcend it” (Baudrillard 18). These paintings are meant to abstract merchandise, both formally through linear perspective and space, and conceptually through their placement as visual components. “Beyond their practical function, objects, especially objects of furniture, have a primordial function as vessels (womb), a function that belongs to the register of the imaginary” (Baudrillard 26).

These are objects that are simulations of the commodity, painted from photographs obtained digitally and printed onto a two-dimensional paper surface, further removing the object as an *a priori* element of the work. Each object within the paintings is hand drawn, whether residing within a single picture plane or as part of a multiple panel image. Yet, (as Baudrillard observes), these simulations and re-presentations of the object as commodity become attainable themselves, the representation of the mercantile becomes merchandise in its own right, as a piece of art, available for consumption and awaiting the assignment of its own exchange-value. “This is indeed why the Pop Artists paint objects in terms of their real appearance, since it is in that way, as ready-made signs, ‘fresh from the assembly line’, that they function mythologically” (Baudrillard 116).

One of the first formal problems to solve in executing these paintings, was how to honor the place of the common object in the canon of the consumer society, without exploiting or dismissing its cultural status. As mentioned prior, each image is a hand drawn representation taken from a digital image. Within this context, I have placed painted, representational objects upon flattened grounds in order to allow the object visual dominance within the composition, and also to negate the idea of any understood environment. Aligning this method with Warhol and commercial art, I referred to a Baudrillard observation, “The idea of positioning figures against arbitrary blocks of color had at one time been a popular device among art directors, who derived it from artists such as Raoul Dufy, Fernand Leger, and Paul Klee” (Bourdon 350). Jean Baudrillard states in *The Consumer Society*, “Just as there is no order of reality in Pop Art, only levels of signification, so too there is no real space” (Baudrillard 120).

The palette for these pieces had its inspiration in Baudrillard’s assessments of interior spaces and design. He observes that black reflects “dignity, distinction and culture”, white is “distancing”, pastel colors “aspire to signs of painting and recognized moralism” and finally that

interior colors had been “liberated by painting”. Baudrillard states that bright colors on functional objects signifies “liberation, freedom, leisure and plasticity” and that color can be used to “corrupt advertising”. As I planned the palette for each individual painting, I took these observations into consideration. The inherent “personality” of each object was designated by its color scheme. The “industrial” themed images reflect dignity and distinction, whereby the “consumption” themes look toward liberation and freedom.

The color of the negative spaces has generally been chromatically grayed to allow the colors employed in the representation of the object to further dominate the picture plane. The paintings that most refer to industry and production are more neutral in color, and often feature mechanical gears as spatial motifs that allow the viewer to make the connection with the object as a mass produced commodity. This employment also speaks of the idea of reification, as mentioned above. “Just as furniture loses its specific functions so much that at the logical extreme its value resides solely in the positioning of each moveable element, so likewise colors lose their unique value, and become relative to each other and to the whole (functional color)” (Baudrillard 35). The paintings that represent advertising and abstraction feature more saturated, dominant colors (such as those used by Warhol in his celebrity portrait series). “Color is now one more or less complex factor among others—just one element of a solution once again, this is what makes color ‘functional’—that is to say, reduced to an abstract conceptual instrument of calculation” (Baudrillard 37).

There also is a shift in paint application from the “production” paintings to the “consumption” paintings. The former is painted more directly, with opaque blocks of color conducted in a more “painterly”, or “gestural” fashion. The latter feature delicate glazes of color placed over achromatic under paintings that reference the painterly application of the “production” pieces. The intent here is to progressively depict the inclination of the sign-value of

the object as merchandise, to allow the viewer to imagine consumer desire, and to treat the object as a “portrait”, all of which increase the signification of the object within a consumer society. There is a sense of “off registration” in some of the paint application, which is intended to reference the use of screen prints to create multiple images (Warhol), and also to infer a mechanized process of art making.

These paintings also employ design elements taken from advertising images and internet websites. The additional design elements in these paintings are often depicted in neutral values and hues, creating almost a “ghosted”, specter-like image. French philosopher Jacques Derrida observes, “If there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt this reassuring border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it: absence, non-presence, non-effectivity, inactuality, virtuality, or even the simulacrum in general” (Derrida 48). All of these elements I have tried to visually portray or make reference to within these paintings. Baudrillard connects the visual and spatial elements that reside within the picture plane to popular culture, and provides reason for subject matter and formal considerations, “The work of art aligns itself absolutely with fashion and with advertising” (Baudrillard 19). With both fashion and advertising as points of reference, the components of subject, space, color, form and line all seem to fall into place. It is my intention that the viewer is able to see both elements of fashion and advertising within the boundaries of this series of paintings.

The painted objects deploy from the picture plane to confront the viewer, but are not necessarily intended to be confrontational, or menacing by any means. The viewer is faced with the mechanical functionality of an object reaching out to embrace the victim of social homogenization, alienation and exploitation (the subordinate). Baudrillard observes in *The System of Objects*, “Chairs no longer gravitate towards a table; these days’ seats take on their

own meaning, while tables—typically low coffee tables—are subordinate to them” (Baudrillard 45) (as is the viewer to the painting). I have attempted to visualize this concept by the use of positive shape against negative space, coupled with the use of exaggerated linear perspective to immediately engage the viewer with the depicted subject of the image. The dominant use of the square format is a direct reference to Warhol, but it also allows for compositional dominance of the subject. Warhol’s influence is also seen within the repetition of shapes, recurrent themes, and motifs. Repetition throughout the series is important to me as a signifier of mass production, mass marketing and mass consumption. Commodities are laid out for the consumer in multiplicity, whether in the linear rows of a car dealership or across the shelves of an end cap at the local supermarket. Objects of consumption are presented in multiple for visual effect and to allow the consumer to regard the array of choices. Repetition is also significant to the idea of reification, the machine-like individual performs a daily routine, mechanically enabling a series of functions that determines one’s accessibility to social forums.

Though the square is the dominant format throughout this series, there are variations within the scale of the shape and also an introduction of rectilinear constructs. The large square paintings, presented singularly and in both diptych and triptych formats, are balanced by series of smaller squares (which can also feature grid patterns and multiple panels). As mentioned above, the repetition of format and shape is referential to both mass production and mass marketing, but also to Warhol’s interpretation of them. The presentation of the paintings then becomes equally important within these conceptual constraints, “His unique use of repetition—his reiteration of representational images to create seemingly abstract grids...his grid compositions enabled him to ‘abstract’ his ready-made pictorial subjects and make them comply with the formal requirements of a ‘flat’ painting style” (Bourdon 418).

Color intensifies as the size is reduced, to emphasize the idea of the painting as “absolute merchandise”. Small, more intimate sizes executed in current color themes, are intended to be relative to consumer desire, as opposed to the larger, more neutral, industrial pieces. “Just as shifts to shades (warm, cool or intermediate) means that colors are stripped of their moral and symbolic status in favor of an abstract quality which makes their systemization and interplay possible” (Baudrillard 39). The small paintings are tactile, decorative, and familiar. They speak to the consumer as if they were advertisements, or had been placed in a catalog, with a variety of options in colors, line and pattern, and other elements of design. Baudrillard observes, “the prestige of advertising and consumption serves to ensure the spontaneous absorption of ambient social values and the regression of the individual into social consensus” (Baudrillard 189).

Conversely, the use of the rectilinear format allows for the addition of abstract motifs that reference different elements of the consumer society. These include digital icons for a shopping cart (online shopping), repeated object motifs (catalog, showroom, internet reference), mechanical gears (methods of production and labor-value), and color choice swatches. These symbols are intended to identify and separate the specific arena of advertising/consumption or industry/production. Throughout the subtle shifts in the visual employment of the object, it is my intention that the viewer be constantly reminded that the object (the reclining chair), serves the consumer by more than just its declared use- value, it is a sign, a signifier of social and familial status and rank.

The reclining chair is a piece of furniture designed to enhance the home interior (although, originally designed to be used outside of the home, on the porch or patio). It is made to seat an individual and allow the individual to attain a heightened sense of relaxation by providing a near horizontal position through the employment of a mechanical process. Baudrillard observes, “Modern seating—wall-sofa or easy chair—invariably lays the stress on

sociability and conversation, promoting a sort of all-purpose position, appropriate to the modern human being, which de-emphasizes everything in the seating posture that suggests confrontation” (Baudrillard 46). The same solitary compositional placement that engages (or re-emphasizes confrontation with) the viewer also elevates the inherent use-value of the object, denying them the satisfaction of simply being “seated”, and creates the need for a new element of use within the basic function of a chair. The consumer, enthralled with new mechanics and function within the object, is then able to elevate the status of the object consumed by being offered a variety of styles shapes, colors, patterns, materials, and accessories; equal to the variety and choices available when selecting a new automobile, kitchen appliance, or any other mass produced commodity. The form of the chair can also be seen as a visual metaphor for the human form; it has arms, feet, a back, legs etc. Does the object take on qualities of the individual, or through the process of reification, does the individual take on the qualities of the object?

The formal elements of these paintings are intended to describe the same types of stylistic choices. They offer a variety of shapes, models, colors, patterns, lines and textures. The images elongate and compress, always seemingly able to dictate their assigned visual space. “They dictate a relaxed social interaction which makes no demands, which is open-ended but above all open to play” (Baudrillard 46). The recliner has been made gender specific, with skirts and flower patterns for the matriarch of the home, or muscular and clad in leather for the patriarch. “Advertising is a plebiscite whereby mass consumer society wages a perpetual campaign of self-endorsement” (Baudrillard 198). An object becomes available for everyone through the employment of the target demographic.

The research and the execution of this series, for me, was an unprecedented pleasure. As reclining chairs became the dominant motif for these paintings, they reinforced my desire to create contemporary American imagery, and through Grand Rapids’ history with the furniture

industry, there even emerged a local element to the work. Research shows that La-Z-Boy, a Monroe, Michigan company, partnered with the American Chair Company to produce recliners in Grand Rapids during the height of furniture production in this city. To me, the paintings have always demonstrated an inherent “personality”, they seem to me to be portraits, even without the intentional references to Pop’s infatuation with the celebrity image. Each one maintains a certain type of individuality, and even through the pictorial abstraction that occurred through the process of repetition, each painting seemed to maintain that individuality.

My hope is that the viewer finds within the arena of the familiar object, images that are comfortable and yet uncomfortable, decorative and inviting, intentional, serious and resonant with an underlying humor and cynicism. The paintings should stand for themselves as works of art, and be welcomed as contemporary images. The idea of the simulation in art, and the effect of simulacra on the social consensus in which we all reside, hopefully allows this work to be regarded beyond just its artistic and philosophical influences, and to be seen as paintings that are both pleasurable and enjoyable as formal and decorative works of art.

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