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Issues in Contemporary Art

Professor Gelburd

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Museum Review

For my critique of Contemporary art, I visited the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, CT. This marked my third visit to the Wadsworth; it helped me to grow as an intellectual and artist from the works I have seen from each visit. I followed a map given to me by the receptionist in the lobby to locate where the Contemporary art exhibit was, and found that they had a great variety of work, with a couple of notable contributions.

The first artwork that I noticed immediately was that of Robert Rauschenberg; I recognized it from images on the internet, but it was thrilling to see it in person. This artwork is *Retroactive I*, the first of Rauschenberg's silkscreen experiments, dating back to 1963. His use of oil and silkscreen ink on canvas intentionally conveyed fragmentation in the selective placement of each element; this was the signifier of the simulacrum of Postmodernism, as it begins to emerge with mechanical reproduction. Under the premise of the simulacrum, there is a continuum of art replication that is comprised of multiple styles of the past, and that the concepts behind the styles had no originality; they are eternal. According to Benjamin, the recurring theme of what constitutes the essence of contemporary art rests in a dual function. In the form of artistic expression, the exposure of the masses to the true nature of social institutions is diffused, and the dismantling of cultural ritualism occurs. My sense of excitement upon observing the work in person was none other than the recognition of the cultural "aura" at the time it was produced.

Rauschenberg is reflecting on the aura of the Cold War mentality, and the subsequent response in the form of the space race as a means of bringing an end to the war. He communicates this to the viewer by use of a silkscreen image of President Kennedy in a skyward gaze, symbolizing a commitment and obedience to divine providence, while the images of the astronaut and oranges indicate a reinforcement of the promises of peace and prosperity that the space race would bring. The ultimate message of what Rauschenberg was trying to convey with the fragmentation of images was that of perpetually diminishing vital resources, where the country that obtains control over these resources in turn controls the world. The true enemy of the Cold War was not the Russians; it was the false paradigm of divine providence espoused by those in power in both the Russian and American governments. This false paradigm has led to the overconsumption of vital resources, which in turn initiates subjugation and oppression of a nation's population to its own government and incites war, both within and among nations. We have a symbiotic relationship with each other through natural resources, which the next artwork I observed seems to explore.

The artwork that I subsequently noticed was Willem de Kooning's *Montauk I*, which dates back to 1969 and consists of oil on canvas. The pink blob in the center of the composition has been suspected as being that of a human figure at one point, which leads me to believe that a latent connection with the archetypal "essence" of human nature is being emphasized. Like Jackson Pollock, de Kooning was an "action painter," where the adjacent blobs resembled the outlines of trees, reminiscent of a country landscape. Écriture is very evident in the fragmentation of form to facilitate communication; according to Jameson, it is the clinical term for diagnosing schizophrenia. He cites that the signifiers of Modernism form a utopian ideal that is actually a mirage, due to an inherent homogenous relationship among each signifier that

constitutes a definitive concept, but that concept is engrained to the point that it negates other streams of consciousness. In Postmodernism there is discord amongst the signifiers, where other streams of consciousness come forward to fill the voids in between them and enhance communication of a concept, in turn negating the previously held interpretation due to its limited supply of information. With this in mind, each fragment of the composition ultimately points to an expansion of space, not time, as a reference point. In sum, the archetypal “essence” of human nature is a part of the simulacrum, endowed with an enhanced communication of meaning through the fluidity of action painting and choice of color palette. Knowing the differences between Modernism and Postmodernism enabled me to analyze the next artwork that caught my attention.

I detected some humor in Alfred Jensen’s *The World as It Really Is*, which dates back to 1977 and uses oil on canvas. This is because Jensen indirectly criticizes the “uniqueness” and “purity” of Modernism with the mathematical precision of the equinox, where consecutive groups of equations focus on certain quantities of numbers within each group. The checkerboard patterning of each group is symbolic of distinct periods of time, with a clear beginning and a clear end. The coloration in pattern and repetition emphasizes uniqueness in that it is monotonous when juxtaposed with the equations, and the color palette is hindered by the boundaries of the numbers themselves. I was reminded of Gelburd, who metaphorically depicts this fundamentalism as coloring within the lines of a coloring book and as storing information in the labeled drawers of a file cabinet. The following artwork I observed reveals the world as it was becoming known in its entirety, through the simulacrum of Postmodernism.

Boldness was immediately present in Elizabeth Murray’s *Slip Away*, which dates back to 1986 and uses oil on canvas. Like Rauschenberg’s *Bed*, Murray disproves Socrates by

manipulating a bed's form and color to be associated with a harrowing ordeal of emotional and physical proportion. The bed was portrayed at an angle and warped at the head and footrests to exude the sensation of bending in a medium green hue, while a stark red blob in the center of the composition is constricted in the middle and has a sculpted, three-dimensional appendage, alluding to anxiety and stress. Prior associations of childbirth have been made, but it is also indicative of oppression in the black void of solitary confinement or of a menial, fixed position in social order; dominant cultural tradition is consecutively squeezing common sense from the psyche that is leading to radical, but ingenious, dissent. The rise of digital media further amplified ingenious dissent in the next artwork that I was fascinated with.

The final artwork that fascinated me the most was Andreas Gursky's *Tote Hosen*, which dates back to 2000 and uses Adobe Photoshop and chromogenic color print. The use of digital photography enabled Gursky to produce a seamless blend of the audience, where stark divisions would have been noticed in an original film version. This blend is indicative of the presence of the postmodern simulacrum; Gursky uses it to bring attention to individuality, but the seamlessness guides the eye to a cognizance of a common purpose, that being a love of the musicians performing on stage. The simulacrum is the new methodology of Humanism, promoting the spirit of enlightenment and enrichment.

To conclude, Postmodernism exists because it can initiate what mass protests cannot – true social reform. Jameson points to mechanical reproduction as the means through which Postmodernism operates today. Benjamin summarizes this in an analogy of original art being represented by a magician, and mechanical art as represented by a surgeon - the magician is remote and ineffective, whereas the surgeon is close and precise.