

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Mirror images

By making copies of existing works, artists are reflecting on the nature of originality, creativity, and the art market

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | May 13, 2005

When a writer lifts whole passages from someone else's work, it's plagiarism. When an artist replicates the image of another artist, it's forgery.

Except when it's high-concept contemporary art.

Only in the art world can a replica of an Andy Warhol or a Jasper Johns be considered bona fide art, worthy of a museum show. To anyone else, such a thing would be a lark, a prank.

But step inside this unique universe, and it can be thrilling -- and Boston is now the place to do it. Two local exhibits capture a 40-year trajectory of copycat artists, and a locally born painter is making work that might be the next wave. Such work raises provocative questions about the nature of art, originality, and the workings of the modern art market.

Forty years ago, Elaine Sturtevant, the original replicator, made her name by re-creating the art of her New York contemporaries -- to the horror of many, and to the delight of those whose works she borrowed with permission. Sturtevant made paintings that looked almost exactly like those of Johns and silk screens almost identical to Warhol's.

Today, at nearly 80, she is enjoying a booming career. "Sturtevant: The Brutal Truth," at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, is the first major museum show of works by the artist.

What is original art? That's the question she pokes and prods at, and one first raised by Marcel Duchamp, who back in 1917 put a urinal in a gallery and called it "readymade" art, raising a lot of ire.

"It's the idea that there is no firm concept of the original," says Bill Arning, the List's curator. "Duchamp took objects and said, 'This is an art work.' Warhol and Rauschenberg and Johns took the entire world of picture-making -- dollar bills, American flags, soup cans -- and did the same thing. Sturtevant then pushes that and applies it to art."

"The work is a catalyst," Sturtevant says by phone from New York. Her early background was in Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, which was "all about the surface," she says. "That brought me into thinking about the understructure of the art. What invisibilities are under that surface?"

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The resulting work is not about the image. That's why it ticks people off, and that's what's exciting about it: It's not about what you see. The List displays several Sturtevant pieces based on Warhol's "Flowers" series, for example. They push viewers beyond the edge of their expectations. They baffle and subvert. They're designed to make us uncomfortable. To force us to think in fresh ways.

In the 1960s and 1970s, her art was met with such hostility that she quit making it for a decade. Then in the early 1980s came a group of young artists known as Appropriationists. Most of them riffed rather than replicated. They borrowed images and ideas from the art-history canon to spark debate or to subvert the power of the original image and its maker.

Mike Bidlo, however, took a page from Sturtevant's book and made replicas, or as close as you can come, working by hand. Bidlo, who shows internationally, produced his own Jackson Pollocks, his own Duchamps, Warhols, and Brancusis. He's called himself "an absorpitioner" of 20th-century art.

Bidlo's works entered into a heated dialogue -- both admiring and transgressive -- with those of his predecessors. With Bidlo, the question of authorship became a hall of mirrors. When he remade a Warhol, for example, the title stated "Not Warhol" -- it is Warhol's image funneled through him.

For both Sturtevant and Bidlo, the copy's less-than-perfect exactitude is part of the allure: Even if the image is a replica, the brushstrokes made by another's hand create a different fingerprint.

Sturtevant started making art again in 1985, in part because Bidlo and other younger artists opened the door to understanding her work. Even so, she distances her art from theirs. "They were talking about loss of power in art as a political act," she says. "I talk about the power of thought. . . . Now I'm a precursor, and that's not a bad place to be."

"Knock-Offs," a show at Green Street Gallery, represents a third wave of replicators, one that reflects more recent changes in the business of art.

For "Knock-Offs," younger artists have re-created, often almost exactly, the works of more established artists -- without authorization. Some of the artists have worked as hired assistants to the likes of John Armleder, Sol LeWitt, and Barry McGee. They've followed those artists' instructions to make officially sanctioned art in museums and public spaces. Now they've come to this nonprofit gallery to re-create it. Like Bidlo, they're questioning the power of authorship, but they're coming from a novel perspective.

"Is this visually different than the piece Sol LeWitt officially made?" asks Green Street curator and LeWitt impersonator James Hull. "We're looking at the broadening of who is the artist, and what it means to create, and how that affects the monetary value."

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Suzannah Sinclair, who helped install Barry McGee's show last year at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, re-created one of McGee's Op-Art patterned works for "Knock-Offs." She was intrigued but unnerved by the process, and declined to send McGee an invitation to the show.

What next? One artist, who grew up in Woburn and attended Massachusetts College of Art, may represent the next wave. Ann Craven, now based in New York and showing nationally, makes copies of her own paintings. Craven is an expressionistic, painterly artist who portrays natural subjects such as birds and deer with a candy-colored palette. They're romantic, sentimental images.

In some ways, Craven closes the circle that began with Warhol: Like him, she depicts her subjects over and over and over, but with an Abstract Expressionist's delight in hand-painting instead of Warhol's mass-printing. And, as with Sturtevant and Bidlo, Craven's works aren't exact replicas. "The difference is in the midst of exactitude," says Craven.

She's received her own shocked reactions. "I repeated the show I had in 2002 in 2004, only I doubled the size. Every painting hung in the exact place it had hung before. I'm still feeling the repercussions," Craven reports. "People still don't know what to think about it."

"Sturtevant: The Brutal Truth," organized by Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, is at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, through July 10. 617-253-4400; web.mit.edu/lvac. "Knock-Offs" is at Green Street Gallery, Jamaica Plain, through May 15. 617-522-0000; www.greenstreetgallery.org. ■

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