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Reflections on Thomas Kinkade, "Painter of Light" and Accidental Avant-Gardist

Thomas Kinkade Company

Thomas Kinkade's "Sunset at Riverbend Farm"

by Ben Davis

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Painter Thomas Kinkade / Thomas Kinkade Company

Popularity guarantees exactly nothing in the way of artistic immortality. In fin de siècle Paris, Puvis de Chavannes was the subject of near universal acclaim. Now he is a footnote to the Impressionists. In the late 1960s, Peter Max was by far the most-seen Pop artist, having invented a technique to produce vibrantly colored posters that were wildly popular with college students. Now Max's work is regarded as schlock. And so it will be with Thomas Kinkade, who passed away at the untimely age of 54 over the weekend, having built a vast empire and reached an unprecedented audience with his voluminous output of luminous Americana.

I do not think that Kinkade is a great artist. I do, however, think that he is an interesting one. How to explain the runaway popularity of his paintings? The ready-to-hand answer is that they are simple images meant to appeal to simple people. This is not, in fact, a line of argument confined to his detractors. "Some people think it's marketing," the owner of one of his Thomas Kinkade Signature gallery franchises told the San Jose Mercury News. "I don't believe any of that. I think Thom just has a gift. He paints the good, and he doesn't paint the negative. Thom paints happy scenes; he paints scenes that people want to go to."

This assessment is not totally fair to Kinkade admirers. His scenes of rain-slicked small town streets and folksy rural cottages conjure a simple time — that is true — but they in fact have a fairly involved symbolism, and those who really love them find in them more than just pleasant decoration. They find in them the confirmation of a worldview.

In some ways, Kinkade's unreal vignettes remind me of the stilted theatrics of Socialist Realism, which also resorted to an aesthetically conservative language in the name of reaching the common man and seeing off baleful intellectualism. Like Socialist Realism, Kinkade's art becomes an unintentional Surrealism in that every detail, though realistic, also seems like an ideological hieroglyphic. As scholar Andrea Wolk Rager puts it in her essay in "Thomas Kinkade: The Artist in the Mall," Kinkade offers his fans a universe where you can always be certain that "birds and eagles represent peace and freedom, boats suggest adventure, clouds are reminders of those who have passed away, and the ubiquitous 'light' emanating from every image symbolizes the glow of family values."

The most important comparison to Socialist Realism, however, is that Kinkade's "happy scenes" are a little creepy to the unbeliever. Their airless positivity radiates the sense of a more complex reality being stuffed down and suppressed. Just as the beaming workers and fatherly Leaders of Soviet painting belied the gray terrors of an authoritarian police state, Kinkade's gossamer arcadia is in reality some kind of fantasy meant to stay off the troubling realities of a contemporary America that does not resemble it at all.

The "Painter of Light" was a political conservative, hardly shocking. It bears remembering, however, that the atavistic Family Values fundamentalism to which Kinkade yoked his fortunes is a very modern — even postmodern — phenomenon,

born out of the backlash to the social movements of the 1960s. Raised in the Church of the Nazarene, Kinkade first studied art at Berkeley in 1976, which was still glowing with the embers of the Free Speech Movement. He found its liberal campus life alienating, and moved south to attend L.A.'s Art Center, living in what he would later describe as “a bombed-out ghetto in Pasadena.” At 20, he found himself “in despair, a great despair.” Salvation came at the Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa, one of the original “Jesus freak” churches, whose pastor labored to reroute the ecstatic energies of hippy culture into religious fervor. Prostrating himself, Kinkade “asked the Lord to be [his] art agent.” (I'm drawing here from Micki McElya's essay "Painter of the Right," also in "The Painter in the Mall.")

The imaginary wholeness and harmony of Kinkade's prelapsarian hamlets is the negative image of that “bombed-out ghetto"; the omnipresent light, the flop sweat of a consciouness running hard and fast from reality. Kinkade would evoke Norman Rockwell often, but at least Norman Rockwell could sometimes rouse himself to social commentary. As Rager's essay points out, Kinkade's bucolic vignettes generally hail from an unplacable earlier time, sometimes the ‘50s, sometimes the ‘30s — but *definitely* before the ‘60s, before such pesky things as the pill or gay rights or desegregation. (African-American faces are conspicuous by their absence in his universe.)

Yet if Kinkade's paintings are ideologically conservative, you also have to give the guy some credit, ultimately, for being an artistic radical of his own sort. His actual practice — producing serial lines of "paintings" that were actually prints, charging customers more for different levels of texture and highlighting, even, in a crazy attempt to maintain intimacy with his audience, embedding his own DNA in the canvas for a special price — makes him strangely in step with the major art of his time.

Elsewhere, I've used the term "superartist" to refer to contemporary figures like Damien Hirst or Olafur Eliasson who embrace their role as boutique industrialists. The Tate put its own spin on theme recently with its traveling exhibition “Pop Life: Art in a Material World,” which gathered together artists from Keith Haring to Takashi Murakami who followed Warhol's dictum that "good business is the best kind of art." Kinkade is not only right in line with this vein of work, but has been out in front. L.A. artist Jeffrey Vallance acknowledged as much when he organized a sprawling Kinkade retrospective in 2004 that featured not only the originals of

Kinkade's paintings, but also every object he had ever licensed, climaxing in the spectacle of a Kinkade-branded credit card presented on a pedestal like a votive offering.

At the end of the day it is not Rockwell, or Maxfield Parrish, or Gustave Caillebotte that he most resembled. It is Warhol, plain and simple (Kinkade himself acknowledged the inspiration). Warhol made serial production licit; wound together his aesthetic values with commercialism; self-consciously built a subculture around himself that reflected his values. Indeed, Kinkade's achievement is to have found an artistic mode that made Warholian aesthetics palatable to an evangelical set that generally thinks contemporary art is a Commie plot (or at least the work of a "emotionally tortured, black beret-wearing, Birkenstock-clopping" conspiracy, as one amazing defense of Kinkade put it). That's quite something, and I'm sure that a man so bent on celebrating a mythical, magical vision of the United States would appreciate that it's also an accomplishment that makes me shake my head, and say: Only in America.

Interventions is a column by ARTINFO executive editor Ben Davis. He can be reached at bdavis[at]artinfo.com.