

AUTRE

AFTER MALEVICH: A Q&A WITH ROBERT LEVINE BEFORE HIS SOLO SHOW @ MAMA GALLERY
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What do you get when you combine the work of Russian geometric abstract artist Kazimir Malevich, Superman, the minimalism of Joseph Albers, and Groucho Marx? – Besides a Pleiades-like connect the dots of near-schizophrenic referencing, you also get a conundrum of contradictions and a strange telling of art history that contemporary artist Robert Levine explores in his uniquely powerful, incongruous and disarming paintings and collages, which will be on view starting tonight at MAMA gallery. Autre got a chance to chat with Levine about his early introductions to art, his technique, his views on art history and art criticism and his solo exhibition opening tonight at MAMA gallery.

Autre: What were some of your earliest introductions to art?

Robert Levine: When I grew up, we had some art...nothing really valuable or anything...but we just always had art at home. That was my earliest introduction.

Autre: Was there a specific artist, or a specific work of art, that really inspired you?

Levine: The first time that I really thought there were possibilities or that things can be different was in Boston, at the ICA, and they were in a very small building at the time, but there was a show of minimal work....there was Robert Smithson, Robert Morrison, Donald Judd and [Dan] Flavin. I've tried to look up the show, but there is scant information about museums from back then. This would have been in 79' or something. I had never seen a group of work like that, up close, and that really changed my mind about what art can be.

Autre: When you first start making art, you were creating sculptures, but then you recently started painting... what motivated you to pick up a paintbrush?

Levine: Actually, when I first started making art, I did a little bit of both. I worked concurrently until I was in CalArts, but after my first semester I stopped making painting and focused only on sculptural work. I mean I was doing these painting that stood in for painting, but it was sculpture. And I recently got back into painting, because I was making these sculptures with broken pencils and I just started doing drawings of them to have something else to go along with them.

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Autre: And then drawing and painting stuck?

Levine: And then I just really started liking the drawings. Soon enough, I was doing paintings of the drawings. And while I was doing some other sculptural work, I was making small little gouache paintings...kind of like product labels and book covers. That's where I developed a technique of tracing the image in pencil... either tracing it from something or just hand drawing with a pencil and just filling in with paint. That is kind of what I still do. I don't really have a sophisticated painting technique.

Autre: A lot of your new works have these distinct pop art references and it's an interesting dichotomy...can you talk a little bit about that?

Levine: That started with the image of the Malevich white painting with Superman holding up the white square. I was doing collage and I needed to do an artwork for a benefit and I was working on a college and somehow in my mind I made the connection between the cover of the very first Superman comic where he is throwing the car. I think it was 1928 or 1930. And he was throwing a car...and the car was at a very similar angle as the white square in the Malevich painting. And I just made a connection and up to that point I had never really used any pop art images in my work. In fact, I just did it as a collage.

Autre: Were you thinking of them as painting?

Levine: You know, I wasn't thinking of them as paintings. I made a bunch of collages. Only later did I think to try to paint them. It grew out of the collage work.

Autre: A lot of artists throughout art history, especially 20th century art history, have declared some form as art dead. Up until the minimalists, arts were declaring that painting was dead. What can we glean from this?

Levine: You know, I am not totally against this idea. You know, maybe it is. It seems like when that happens, it opens the doors for other ways of thinking. Declaring it dead almost allows you to cast aside what was done before. Even if the art looks the same...there is an incredible difference in the attitudes of how paintings are done now compared to how they were done in 1970 or 1960 or 1950. I think because I have done work other than painting, I don't really think of myself as a painter in a way that some other people do...in a way that it as a distinct genre of art. I just think of it as a different form of art making.

Autre: What can we expect from your upcoming show at MAMA gallery?

Levine: I think we decided today that the show will be the collage work that generated the ideas for the Malevich, or After-Malevich paintings. After doing the initial one, I ended up printing out photocopies of as many of the supremative paintings that I could and collaged on to them. I tried to not really limit myself to too many rules as to what I can do in this collages. But when I started painting them, I was limited to only what I felt I could paint for my skill level. But I've gotten much better at it and now I'm not really as limited to what I can do.

Autre: So, you will be showing collages and some of the paintings?

Levine: I will be showing collages and I have a number of paintings that I will also be showing. Through these paintings I deal with the language of talking about art. Sometimes I make it literal or I make a pun or I use humor to make a connection with the images. Or I try to use humor with the way that critics have talked about art, like Clement Greenburg. People who may have been discredited, but there is still talk of what they have done. So, a lot of what's in my paintings is the way that I deal with the language of art and art history. But I try to make them visually interesting. You know, a lot of my most successful pieces have a little bit of a contradiction in them that causes a tension that makes them more and more interesting over time.