

M.LiT Tour by Jack Miller

TOUR TITLE: Process over Object: The Beauty of the Random

DESCRIPTION: Learn how modernist sculptors of the mid to late 20th century changed what makes three-dimensional art beautiful.

LOCATION: Mid to Late 20th Century

INTRODUCTION:

Hello everyone and welcome to the VMFA! My name is Jack Miller and I'm part of the VMFA's Museum Leaders in Training program where our theme for the year is Social Trends: Beauty and Vanity. This tour will help demonstrate how artists challenged our notions of beauty during the 20th century.



OBJECT 1:

Johnny Bird, 1959

John Chamberlain, American (1927-present)

Enameled Steel

85.370

The introduction of abstract expressionism allowed artists to reinvent what made art beautiful, particularly in sculpture. By 1959, *this* piece by John Chamberlain was accepted as artistic. It pioneers an art movement called assemblage. Can anyone guess what “assemblage” could mean? ...

This is all true. Assemblage is also three-dimensional art that is made out of bits and pieces of found objects. This particular piece is called Johnny Bird and it's made from the metal of old cars. The cars that are incorporated into this piece were probably still functional, but they were still discarded. Why? ...

You see, throughout the 20th century technology was improving faster than manufacturers were. Even a car that's made today will be outdated in five or ten years. People in 1959 saw cars as status symbols to satisfy their vanity, and once that symbol became obsolete, they stopped seeing beauty in them. Johnny Bird shows us that the “detritus of American consumerism” can be beautiful even after it loses its utilitarian value. John Chamberlain saw how cars were being robbed of their inherent beauty and tried to give them some of that beauty back.



OBJECT 2:

Torso, 1972

Armand Fernandez, American (1928-2005)

Cast Acrylic Resin with Plastic Dolls

85.512

Twenty years after Johnny Bird, assemblage and references to pop culture had evolved into pop art. Pop art destroyed the idea of “high art” by referencing things that were hip and contemporary. Who are some of the most famous pop artists today? ...

So, most of those artists were American, but this piece was made by a French man named Arman Fernandez who moved to America only later in life. He believed that “you are what you throw away” and that people often equated bigness with beauty. This sculpture, called torso, is assemblage because of the arrangement of dolls inside of the plastic woman, but deals with a rather different issue. Who can guess what this sculpture is trying to tell us? ...

And all of those things deal with what made a woman beautiful in 1972. Arman is creating a caricature of the then contemporary view of women that they were no more than vessels for children. Feminism challenged what people saw as beautiful in order to bring about a social change.



Object 3:
Untitled, 1970
Robert Morris, American (1931-present)
Grey Felt
72.47

Around this same time, a more economical approach to art was being developed that would take our notions of beauty to an all new conceptual level. It's an untitled piece by Robert Morris and it's one of the first successful examples of minimalism. Somebody tell me if this is hanging on the wall like a painting or resting on the ground like a sculpture. ...

Both answers are correct! Morris wanted to bridge the gap between the wall and the floor with this work. To achieve it he hung a piece of thick roofing felt on the wall and cut eleven slits into to let it fall into place. The result is simple and non-objective, as opposed to the vain objective work of previous art movements. What about this piece makes it still beautiful? ...

All of this is true. The shape, volume, shadows, and mass are still beautiful! The boring, neutral colour of the felt means that it's gravity that makes it beautiful, not the object alone. Morris believed that order was more important than aesthetics and that the process was more important than the object.

CONCLUSION:

In fact, all of these pieces try to focus on the process being beautiful rather than the object. The use of found objects: the bits of car metal, the dolls, and the felt, rejects traditional ideas of what makes art beautiful. It's not the material that makes modern sculpture beautiful, it's the way that those materials are put together. Would any of these pieces have been more beautiful if they were presented in a more traditional way? (What if Johnny Bird had been made of shiny new metal or *this* piece were put in a frame?) (Any other reflections?) Thank you for joining me this evening! I hope that you've come to understand more about modern sculpture and that you will take the time to listen to other M.Lit tours tonight as well.

REFERENCES:

- NB 237 C43 A4 1989
- NB 237 C43 A4 1986
- NB 198 C35 1998