

M. Lit Tour by Amy Woo

TOUR TITLE: 21st Century: Beauty and Vanity

DESCRIPTION: Learn how the use of uncommon materials is exemplified in beauty and vanity through art.

LOCATION: Mid to Late 20th Century and 21st Century Galleries

INTRODUCTION: Hi there! Good evening. Welcome to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts! My name is Amy Woo and will serve as your docent tonight. I am a participant in the VMFA's Museum Leadership Training program. Our tour theme this year is Social Trends: Beauty and Vanity. This evening I will be taking you on a tour discussing how the use of uncommon materials are exemplified in beauty and vanity through art.



OBJECT 1:

Untitled (No.25), 1960
Lee Bontecou, American
Welded Steel, Canvas

We're going to take a look at a piece by Lee Bontecou in the Mid to Late 20th Century Gallery. In some of the darker, more ominous works, Bontecou was very influenced by memories of World War II, as well as the Cold War. A lot of the violence that was going on in the 60s were a huge impact. (Now, this piece is has no given titled. What associations can you draw from this work? Why do you think Bontecou chose to untitled her piece? *Audience*). Leaving things untitled allows us to engage more associations with her work. One of the things that is interesting about Lee Bontecou's career is how successful she was as a woman artist in the 1960s.

There really were not that many women who had her level of fame and critical acclaim. She really was selling out every exhibition there, MOMA was buying her work, museums all across the country, and everyone was buying her work. She's an extraordinary pioneer and one of the most important women artists and most important artist of the generation, period.

The wall mounted sculpture in this gallery uses really interesting materials that are typical of Bontecou's early work. (What materials do see in this piece? *Audience*). If you get close to this piece you can tell it's made out of canvas, which is the traditional material for painting - but, she's using it for sculpture. She's already blurring out the line between painting and sculpture. However, this is not the traditional canvas that is expected for a painter to use. When you look at it, it's really soiled.

These interlocking beige patches that are a palette of dirtied army fatigues. There are small holes, rips, and tears in them - and the reason that is, is because it's not painters canvas, it's actually canvas that she scavenged from the Laundromat that she lived above. There are these great gaping cavities in her work. The black hole is a signature motif for Bontecou.

In the opening of the wall mounted sculpture is made out of black velvet. It's the kind of velvet that is actually used for theatrical curtains. She picked it because it's matte and doesn't reflect light. It creates this incredible magnetic center for her. If you look at the black hole, you can't tell how far it goes.

Transition: This piece consisted of nontraditional materials. The next object incorporates the use of technology!



OBJECT 2:

Buddha Watching TV, 1997

Nam June Paik, American

Stone sculpture, soil, video monitor & camera, tripod,
remote control, cable, outlet box with cord, and wood base

Here we have a 20th Century media based piece by Nam June Paik titled Buddha Watching TV. The Buddha head is an 18.5 inch sculpture with dimensions of 12x12. Paik's use of neutral colors gives off a time-based mood of the 20th Century. Nam June Paik reinvented his "TV Buddha" sculpture many times to reflect the era. This is his most recent sculpture of the Buddha series, which was done in 1997. It consists of a stone Buddha head, partially covered by dirt on a set of simply-made unpainted plywood base. The body of the Buddha is eliminated and is left with a mere stone head on a mound of soil. What is the Buddha watching on television?

Audience.

The Buddha faces a television monitor with a video camera mounted behind it on a tripod. The top of the Buddha head gives off a bumpy texture, while the soil varies on the size of each grain. The lines in the wood are horizontal which suggest calmness. The use of natural, organic materials softens this composition against the harshness of technology. The lines on the wood base are naturally curved. The space in this piece is 3-dimensional and is exemplified by sculpture. The balance in this work is asymmetrical, while Paik draws emphasis of the Buddha head and the television.

Paik often used the television as a fetish symbol representative of society and its relationship with technology. It's debatable that you could call this meditation, but maybe you can see it as "selfish" or "self-centered."

If you were in the position of the Buddha watching yourself on television, how would you

react? *Audience*. Paik is suggesting that those who are watching it, are simply watching themselves. What makes Paik's work fascinating and timeless is that instead of simply critiquing the television, his sculpture suggests there is a strange Zen awareness or energy that is part of the technology.

The harmony in this piece is shown through the use of culture and technology. Paik's varieties of objects are balanced. Technology does not overpower the use of culture in this piece. Metaphor, humor, and irony are tools that Paik often employs in his work. He uses them here to make a fascinating meditation that touches on key subjects of contemporary society, including tradition and technology, nature and culture.

Nam June Paik is the single most influential figure in the development of video as an art form. He is often credited with finding the medium of video art when, in 1965, he began making free wheeling outdoor videos with New Sony Portapak equipment. His work dramatically altered the conventional understanding of television and video, opening them up to creative exploration by his peers and generations of artists after him.

Transition: Let's step out of these neutral colors and head on over to the 21st Century! The next object has a rich blend of vibrant colors.



OBJECT 3:

Woodpecker, 2008

Fred Tomaselli, American

Acrylic, gouache, collage, and epoxy resin on wood

Fred Tomaselli's "Woodpecker" is a 2008 work in acrylic, gouache, photo collage, and resin on wood panel measuring 6x6 feet. "Woodpecker" belongs to a series of magnificent birds that Tomaselli painted as surrogates for humans. They derive from his deep interest in nature and love of ornamentation.

His work embraces both high and low culture and combines intricate, ornate, and exquisitely rendered images with what he calls "artificial, immersive, theme-park reality." Tomaselli is an American painter and sculptor, who expresses abstraction and decoration in his art. He describes himself as a maximalist artist.

From looking at his work, what do you think a maximalist artist is? *Audience* Tomaselli tries to throw as much information into an object that it can physically handle. The fact that he grew up close to Disneyland is often cited to explain his preoccupation with fantasy, while the legacy of 1960s drug culture has contributed to his use of popular imagery of the period.

These layered paintings combine cutout images of plants, birds, smiling mouths, and hands

(clipped from field guides and magazines) with passages of paint and in other works, actual prescription pills and hallucinogenic plants to create highly stylized, eye-popping compositions. What do you think Tomaselli is trying to achieve with the use of these materials? Why is he using these materials?

Audience.

A lot of Tomaselli's objects in his work - the pills, the pot, the shape of psychedelic are influenced from a milieu sense. Hundreds of collaged beaks from the bird's own beak and thousands of flowers make up his body, thus providing the bird out of his own sources of nourishment. He is trying to get a certain reaction from the viewer, perhaps re-awakening a sense memory when their minds were once scrambled. His images range from utopian visions to apocalyptic events.

Fred Tomaselli has this experience in working with resin from making surf boards in Southern California. He thought resin might be a material that encapsulate or stabilize these objects overtime. He loves the seductive finish of the resin. Tomaselli would ideally like his viewers to have a Transcendentalist perspective of his work. He is suggesting that his work is a window into another world and a mirror to the world we live in - much like a surreal, hallucinatory universe.

CONCLUSION:

In the three works of art we have walked through this evening you have seen how the use of uncommon materials is another way artists can express ideas of beauty and vanity. The artists we have discussed offer us a new perspective based off of that you do not need traditional materials in order to successfully portray ideas of beauty.

Thank you for joining me and I hope you all have a pleasant evening!

REFERENCES:

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