

*Artwrit*

“Robert Russell : Masters”

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May 2011

To adapt, borrow, sample or appropriate images, texts, sounds and ideas has long been a strategy used by artists. Here lies an intriguing question: What is it about the works of others that artists find ripe for reinterpreting and representing? It is not for lack of subject matter that artists turn to art, but for want of a subject matter that is already grounded in the canon of art history. Art about art has an elevated point of departure. Its referents are coded and therefore the level of inquiry must begin with the source of quotation. Richard Pettibone made a career out of making small replicas of works by artists including Frank Stella and Roy Lichtenstein. Deborah Kass mimicked Andy Warhol using women like Barbara Streisand as subject. And Rachel Lachowicz recreated minimalist sculptures in lipstick.

Robert Russell paints the covers of art books. His beautifully rendered works are oils on canvas in which the books are centered in either a dark or light ground often suggesting a reflective surface, as if placed in the center of a table. These large paintings are presented as a frieze around the gallery wall that ranges from books on Rembrandt to Warhol to Twombly to Courbet to Sargent to Leonardo to Freud. The one exception to the strict subject matter of the monograph is a book entitled *This is Not to be Looked At*, also accounting for the only reference to conceptual art included in the sequence. Russell’s choices are specific. He titles the exhibition *Masters*, a subjective valuation of the artists whose monographs he presents. He pairs predictable, canonized masters—Leonardo, Rembrandt—with less obvious choices, such as Courbet, Freud and Sargent. Twombly, Warhol and Baldessari are even less comfortable fits for such a tradition-bound mausoleum category.

Sometimes these book titles (or the names of the artists) are readable, other times they are blurred almost beyond recognition, sometimes necessitating a consultation of the checklist. To those in the know, the books and their contents resonate. In this sense, they congratulate the educated viewer.

In this body of work Russell acknowledges the educating role of books specific to the context of the visual arts, that it is through reproductions that most people experience many touchstone artists and their works. In so doing, he raises the ever relevant questions of the original and the copy (and in turn, its artisanal copy). For there is no doubt that these works are hand-painted originals (of a copy).

In today’s world of infinite reproducibility what constitutes an original? The artist’s hand? By making paintings of these monographs Russell elevates their worth. Russell’s paintings state that the books and the paintings depicted on their covers are images to be remembered, reproduced and preserved, and he does so with the ennobling and historicizing embalmment of oil-paint renditions.

The misfit catalogue with the words “This is Not to be Looked At” on its cover has no image. It is a painting of a catalogue from the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles’s permanent collection that ironically uses a text from a painting by John Baldessari that reproduces a copy of *Artforum* magazine that features a Frank Stella painting, making the circle complete. Russell makes representational paintings of art books and happens to include an imageless book cover of a painting that originally depicted an art magazine. He includes this in an exhibition entitled *Masters* to imply that masters need not paint. It is difficult (especially in the digital age) not to conjure Walter Benjamin and his work on the relationship between the real and its image, the copy. Russell’s work teases these clean distinctions. He makes artful facsimiles, charged with their own aura and the excitement of true originality.