

PAINTERS ON PAINTINGS

Lavar Munroe on Folkert De Jong and Expansive Painting

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Lavar, Munroe, Boys, 2018, Acrylic, spray paint, fabric, cigarette buds, rubber, string, feather and makeshift ball on cut canvas, 64" x 80"

What constitutes a painting? Is it possible to create a “painting” that occupies space, has actual volume and is made with unconventional materials? These questions point to an expansion of the definition of “painting” as it relates to the action of painting.

I have been an avid fan of the work of Folkert De Jong for many years, in particular his works that occupy space and are three-dimensional. I was privileged to see a few of those pieces in person at UNTITLED Miami Beach a few weeks ago. Although I am not a huge advocate of viewing and appreciating works in such spaces (Art Fairs), the works on display gave me some visual and intellectual insight into his working process.

Immediately, I was drawn in by De Jong’s color and painterly gestures in *The New Deal*, 2012, most of which seemed to be achieved with unconventional, non-traditional painting materials. His clever use of materials and color to achieve a sense of painterly gesture instantly compelled me to look closer, to inspect his choices, consider the conceptual underpinnings of those choices and attempt to digest the grouping of objects. Evidence of deconstructing form and then “healing” those breaks was apparent in the yellow and pink adhesive substrates bleeding through the crevasses of incisions. The rigor by which color was excavated through the subtractive process of carving coupled with the “chemical” color of various adhesives he used, strategically accented with what seems to be conventional house paint, in my opinion, pointed to a beautiful expansion of the definition of “painting.”

Intellectually, much of the work points to specific and substantial histories — art historical representations of both painting and sculpture — while simultaneously straddling imaginative territories. I am reminded of

Picasso's Harlequin paintings from the early 1900's (Blue and Rose periods) in combination with the grotesque figuration of Goya, when confronting De Jong's work. The Harlequin paintings point to a darker history — of circuses, world fairs and human zoos — that are today suggestive of our fraught racist and bigoted political climate, among many other things. I am also reminded of those themes of darkness and evil associated with childhood fairy tales and fables.

The grotesqueness of encrusted materials in De Jong's forms forcefully compel the viewer to associate that ugliness with its opposite — beauty, elegance and suaveness — in how he handles his materials, specifically the “natural” colors of wood that are revealed in the process of excavating the materials used to construct his forms. Though initially created to serve as “sculpture,” the multiplicity and manipulation involved in the making process “cries” painting, both from a visual and technical standpoint. To redefine and expand on the notion of painting is, for De Jong, to break rules and defy conventional boundaries.

Whether the viewer is convinced that these works are paintings, or are even in conversation with the practice of painting, is very subjective. But I myself find comfort and feel confidence in this work that is so multi-lingual in terms of its making. It speaks the language of many practices, but resonates, for me, most fluently with painting.

Lavar Munroe was born in Nassau, Bahamas and currently lives and works between Bloomington, Indiana and Nassau, Bahamas. He received a BFA from the Savannah College of Art and Design, an MFA from Washington University in St. Louis and was later awarded a Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Exhibitions include the Liverpool Biennale, 56th Venice Biennale, 12th Dakar Biennale, and Prospect New Orleans 4.