

RL Fine Arts: Contemporary art project

Victor Rodriguez

Chat Noir

Exhibition curated with Alberto Barral

Exhibition March 21 to April 30, 2012

Victor Rodriguez/ Manet in multiple reflection

Victor Rodriguez is a contemporary Mexican artist living in New York. His work amalgamates appropriation and pop aesthetics, but with the intensity of repetitive obsession in his use of the same feminine model in different reincarnations. This selection of works inspired by and integrating iconographical features from two important Manet masterpieces, very well demonstrates a contemporary discourse of repetition and borrowed images.

Without doubt the idea of multiples in Contemporary culture has been forever ingrained in the public eye since Andy Warhol, the undisputed king of Pop Art, amply demonstrated in his work a strong inclination for not only repeating the same image within a canvas, for as he himself declared, six is better than one, thus equating the magical number, derived from the industrial packaging of beer bottles with his depiction of universally accepted images of art history's canon such as the Mona Lisa or the Last Supper, applying the same methods to popular culture's movie gods and goddesses like Marilyn or Elvis as well as to his iconic representation of the 20th Century Still Life, which morphed into his Campbell soup cans; but also in repeating the same image/group of images in long series of canvases in different colors and sizes that forever changed the value and prestige traditionally associated with the 'unique' in fine art production.

Victor's present series of contemporary Olympias also bring to mind current concerns with gender issues and representation, such as Cindy Sherman's fixation with creating images all based on transformations of her own face. His meditations on the repetitive image also place his work within the context of a larger cultural tendency, expressed, to name one example, by his contemporary fellow artist from Brazil, Vik Muñoz, who has extensively appropriated the Warholian canon of images to create his own 'diamond' series of movie divas. We also can include this as part of an earlier move towards appropriation and the recycled pop imagery of older artists like Richard Pettibone, as well as noting other contemporary extensions and developments of the theme, such as the reproduction of classical art works in world famous museum settings as shown in Thomas Struth's well known series of large scale photographs.

Victor's variations on Manet's scandalous *Olympia* (1863) which shocked 19th century Paris with an overt and unequivocal depiction of a well known courtesan waiting for a customer that remains outside the picture plane is here given a contemporary twist and tease as the model holds a lap top to cover her bare chest that perfectly reproduces the famous Manet masterpiece, giving the viewer ample room to imagine her relationship or interpretation of this traditionally 'immortal' female femme fatale. Other paintings in the series more openly take a cue from the Olympia's relaxed pose that diffuse an overt sensual and sexual meaning to the series that can be interpreted

39 West 19 Street Suite 612 New York NY 10011(between 5 and 6 avenues)

Tel: 212 645 6402 • Fax : 212 645 6401 • Web: www.rlfinearts.com • Email: info@rlfinearts.com

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as shocking within the context of the present's culture corporate pursuit of propriety, and the censorship that pervades all forms of visual culture today as it pertains to the nude.

The waitress at the *Bar of the Folies-Bergere* (1882) is a modern depiction of the banality and alienation associated with post industrial social settings. Victor's interpretation is an exploration into the illusionism of looking, juxtaposing mirrored images and the waitress in an equally artificial reality that is very familiar to us through the internet and photoshop technologies that have established such great influence on our perception of images that they now appear to be natural products of photographed realities. Victor's work explores the camouflage of this reality in the images that convincingly recreate it in great detail, thus adding new layers to the reproduction of forms pertaining to other art works and the delusions of reflection.

Alberto Barral, New York

Everything looks bigger in 3D!!

Victor Rodriguez immerses himself in the art of looking. His looking is his painting. Developing his career during the 1990's when he moved to New York, a decade when once again painting was presumed to be dead, he dedicated himself to the art, believing that painting does indeed have the power to record history.

When photography began to take hold in the mid 19th century, it was believed to have replaced painting as the documenter of the 'real'. The photograph was the true real. As photography, being an easily used tool, continued to take hold, we have been inundated with a flood of images, all supposedly documenting a real moment. Baudelaire complained that, though useful to record certain things, he feared that photography would cause the disappearance of 'history' as it was a "cheap method of diffusing a disdain for history".¹

In our modern world with our endless culture of looking we are all voyeurs – of ourselves and of others. What are social networking sites but a massive display of showing off. With dating sites one of the fastest growing areas of the internet, second only to porn sites, the camera or any image capture device, allows all of us the ability to become a sex object or an amateur porn star. We bask in the approval. At any rate it allows us to show off and play a role

Victor uses his camera to guide his painting. Formally though he can be aligned in the school of photo realist or hyper realist painting, which developed in the 1970's, another reaction to abstract art, and an off shoot of Pop Art, there are fundamental differences in Victor's use of the camera to that of the photo realists.

¹ Baudelaire, Charles, "The Salon 1859" included in *Art in Paris 1845-1862: Salons and Other Exhibitions*, Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1965

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The photo realists, using the photograph as source material, were concerned to replicate exactly the photograph in all its two dimensionality. It was self-referential and demanded only that it be copied. The resultant painting was, in many ways, just an abstract painting that happened to coalesce into an image that looked like a photograph.

Victor has always taken photographs, often utilizing the flash to flatten depth and spread out the light source. But in transcribing the image onto the canvas, that is where his journey begins. Shifting planes and light sources, often utilizing tools that some artists deride, such as the air brush, Victor transports us into the amazing world of painting, where as we travel across the canvas, we luxuriate in his dedication to this art.

Manet's *Olympia* shocked 1865 Paris when it was first exhibited. The image of a prostitute or courtesan, as she obviously was, was scandalous. Centuries of nudes, under the guise of historical paintings or mythological tales, had fed the voyeuristic eyes of the male species, and was blissfully unnoticed by the ladies. Indeed Manet's *Olympia* was directly related to two earlier paintings, Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538) and Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* (c 1510), two lovely nudes at the disposal of the voracious male gaze, and subservient to it. But here, right in front of bourgeois Paris, was an example of something that polite society pretended did not exist. His iconic work, *The Bar at the Folies-Bergere* (1882) was another example of the real: a spaced out looking girl behind the bar at the Folies-Bergere, staring at the viewer (client?) showed the empty space in the bustling metropolis, where lonely people still need to connect. Her reflection not being accurately placed in the picture plane was the starting point of the decline of the old school of painting and the birth of the new, where painting was liberated to express the real world and real feelings.

This art of dispassionately 'looking' was Manet's great genius. To this day, these works continue to excite our intellect. His *Olympia* was perfunctorily painted in flat tones with sharp outlines – as if the flash on the camera had whitened out the subtleties.

Victor takes his cue from these masterworks and continues his ruminations on the subject.

His model in the painting *Chat Noir 5 (Olympia)*, showing us the copy of the painting *Olympia* on her laptop, is enjoying herself in the role of Manet's model. We are all role players. Her sensuality and sexuality is almost as shocking now as it was then, but why that is, is what we need to ask ourselves. We are always surrounded by looming billboards of scantily clad models in advertisements, so what shocks us? Manet's painting appeared 150 years ago...have we not grown accustomed to the nude, even after all this time?

In the painting, *Chat Noir 6 (Smile)* the image of his model standing in front of Manet's painting smiling directly at us, and wearing 3D glasses, puts us in the position of the subject...we know that she is seeing us in three dimension...doesn't everything look more real in 3D? Her amusement is infectious as we ponder on the theme of looking and reflecting and being looked at... great painting continues to look at life and life imitates art as much as art imitates life...