

Students Question Students

More Is More – Maximalist Tendencies in Recent American Painting

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Rosson Crow, *Silent Rooms with Carpets So Heavy All Footsteps are Absorbed*, oil on linen, 77 x 90 inches on two canvases.

1) The Oxford English Dictionary defines Maximalism as “extremism in any sphere.” While surveying the works in the exhibition, determine if this loose definition can be applied to Maximalist painting. What, if anything, would you add to this definition? Would defining Maximalism more in-depth constrict or organize the movement? Why?

2) Lilian Garcia-Roig describes Maximalism with an “onion” analogy, “One should be able to peel back layers of the painting: its balance, the compositional details, and the technique used to execute the painting.” Maximalist painting can be divided into two categories: horizontal and vertical layering. Vertical layering emphasizes formal qualities and technique, as in the description from Lilian Garcia-Roig. Horizontal layering emphasizes multiple narratives throughout a work. Both types of layering are present in works

throughout the exhibition. Can you find an example of each and describe?

3) Many trends emerge in Maximalist painting allowing these works to be grouped under this title. Comparing the formal elements of art (line, shape, space, texture, color, value) and the principles of design (unity, proportion, rhythm, balance, variety, contrast, emphasis, movement) may help you see these common threads. Pick two works and describe the presence of several of the elements and principles of design. Do trends emerge that can be applied to other works in the show, and the theme of Maximalism as a whole? (Hint: look for similarities in the depiction of space, use of color and pattern, and display of painterly lines.)

4) Many of these paintings express narratives within a fantasy or abstract world such as *Self Portrait as Root III* by Julie Heffernan, *Virtual Inferno - Cardinal and Nude* by Masami Teraoka, and *In the pavilion of the Red Clown* by Robert Williams. Would you say that this fantasy narrative quality is a characteristic of Maximalist painting? Do you think that a Maximalist painting can be realistic? If so, how do the abstract works compare to the realistic works? How can you reconcile these different modes under the title of Maximalism?

5) One of the tendencies in Maximalism is to focus on surface and all-over patterning. Lilian Garcia-Roig attracts attention to the surfaces of her canvases with thick paint and loose brushwork that create complex illusions of nature. Does this focus on the surface of the canvas and materiality of the paint enhance or distract from the subject matter? Does it create or mask the illusion of depth? Are you invited to or prevented from visually entering the work? How would you feel in the environment depicted? Also look at the work of Michael Roque

Collins, Reed Danziger, Eric Parker, or Emilio Perez. How does the surface patterning and illusion of space in their works differ from Garcia-Roig's?

6) The work of Loren Munk differs from other works in this exhibition by its use of text. How can these works still be considered Maximalist painting? Notice her work entitled *Clement Greenberg*. Clement Greenberg was a well-known art critic during the second half of the twentieth century. He proclaimed that a painting should be an entity in itself; the fact that it is simply paint on a flat canvas should be evident and the work should be easily absorbed in a quick glance. What aspects of this work coincide with or rebel against Greenberg's proposal? Is this work pro-Greenberg or anti-Greenberg? Why? How does this message relate to Maximalist painting?

7) American society is complicated by a fast-paced lifestyle, bursting with excessive commercialization and commoditization. All the artists in this show are working in America, and therefore influenced by this culture. In the 1960's, American Pop Art elevated these commercialized and commoditized images to the level of art. *Sanctuary* by Douglas Bourgeois depicts commercialization in a nearly suffocating way. How does this piece reflect ideas of excess in American life? Do you think the products in this piece are elevated aesthetically the way they were in Pop Art? Are any other works in the exhibition obviously influenced by life in America?

8) While the paintings of Rosson Crow and Mark Messersmith differ in many aspects, including subject matter, they are both influenced by a similar issue: the development and industrialization of the American landscape. Rosson Crow often paints an empty hotel setting inspired by American cities such as Las Vegas. She describes America as "all about cheap utopias, pleasure, spectacle, [and] the grotesque." Oppositely, Mark Messersmith focuses on a natural landscape that he believes is "still out there someplace, somewhere just beyond the urban sprawl, shopping malls and trailer parks." How do these two artists differ in their responses to development and industrialization in America? Look at a work by each artist. Describe the details and stylistic choices influenced by American urban culture. Are there other artists who seem to be influenced by this issue? Would you agree or disagree that Maximalism is affected by the dominance of urban culture?



Grant Miller, *Untitled*, acrylic on panel, 48 x 48 inches.

9) Since Maximalism involves layering of details, techniques, and styles, it should not come as a surprise that artists utilize disparate styles in one painting. Look at Grant Miller's piece *Untitled*. He presents architectural imagery utilizing linear perspective. This technique, invented during the Renaissance, depicts a three-dimensional object on a flat surface. Along with incorporating this Renaissance method, Miller covers the canvas with an array of modern-looking non-objective components. How does this juxtaposition of a Renaissance method with a modern one affect the overall visual conception of the work? Can you find any other artists in the show who combine unrelated styles and components as well? Do you think this incorporation of other methods makes Maximalism, as a style, less of its own?