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Lester Monzon

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Let's look at what Lester Monzon does – he paints a found surface, culled from recognizable design patterns ranging from abstract paintings to tee-shirts to tabletops, and then articulately brushes and stains on top of the surface, sometimes accumulating a great number of marks (dense color packed brushstrokes falling like leaves, piles, or puddles) and sometimes leaving his physical trace (as in a fingerprint) on the surface like a smear, smudge, or stain (think of Jasper Johns setting his paint can on his canvas, leaving a ring in the paint). Monzon makes marks on top of a programmatic surface. Sounds simple enough.

Or maybe not so simple. I admit that the more I looked at Monzon's work, the deeper the small works became. The paintings exist in an interesting place, in a fertile zone nourished by both the last thirty years of abstract painting as well as by some of most essential questions about how and what we see, how what we see is determined on how we see and what we believe we are seeing. For me and how I see the world, the paintings are split between the cynicism and critique of recent art history (sometimes a game of artworld insider wittisms which threatens to shut most of the human race out of contemporary art entirely) and what is really may be really at stake in the arts, the willingness to see the human as expressive, meaningful creatures. They are smart and tricky works.

The first thing to notice in Monzon's work is that visual design (which I will call form, order, or a plan) is equivalent wherever it is found. To Monzon, design is simply a surface. For instance, Bridget Riley's op art designs have the visual equivalency of a Venice Beach blacklight poster. The design is the background over which Monzon does more lyrical activities like brush strokes and random streams of paint. The interplay between the surface and what apparently on top or concurrent with the surface is what creates something interesting for me. It is not as easy as it sounds, let me explain.

The question is whether or not these lyrical activities are somehow different from the background design. Does a so-called "human mark" have any more purchase in a painting than a programmed or machined one? Are not Monzon's human marks still made with a brush, just like the surfaces of his found designs? Is Monzon expressing himself in spite of rules and order (humanity atop rigorous design) or can we just say that everything on Monzon's surfaces is equivalent, that all is surface, that all the colors and shapes fall in the so called trap of representation where there is nothing really human but there is instead just a performance inside of a system that does not allow true humanity or any further thoughts on what it means to be one. Maybe that is all being a human is, fooling yourself into thinking that you are unique or expressive (you find this latter belief in the paintings of Sarah Morris for example where design is all encompassing and, though intuitively arrived at, is pervasive and overbearing).

Monzon is definitely not the first to toy with fact that human marks and designed surfaces have few visual differences. This is a major question in painting extending from Picasso, through Johns, and into the painting of today (to some, it is the question that killed painting for good). Think of Picasso's ripping of Seurat's pointalism out of optic theory and placing it as a pattern on an armchair, think of Lichtenstein transforming each "style" from German Expressionism to Cubism into his system of painted Ben-day dots, think of Warhol's comparison of a Rorschach drawing to the flowing fields of Morris Louis and Taaffe using snakes from field guides to mimic Pollock's paint skeins.

Monzon, as well as each artist mentioned, plays on an anxiety found at the heart of painting. If a painting looks like wallpaper, where does it derive its value? If two things look exactly the same, then where does the meaning come from? Is it just pretension that separates one from the other? This was particularly troubling to modernists, people like Kandinsky who believed that to leave content out of painting and to pursue pure form was to leave the physical world entirely or like the critic Clement Greenberg, who thought painting's internal logic and the manifestation of that logic in history literally gave painting a guarantee and purpose. In a world where painting rolled a hard six on its value (literally staking the physical and spiritual world), to compare a Rothko to Grandma's bathroom floral print was tricky and anxiety inducing experience. The artists mentioned above were willing to take on that anxiety to see where it went – they were willing to be funny, ironic, cynical, or even mean spirited. They deflated so called "high mindedness" in favor of what maybe the harsher truth -- that human expression through painting maybe impossible or merely self-indulgent and therefore useless to the wider world. These painters get both catty and gossipy in their work, but, and this is more important, they also get at the big issues of what art is, what it should do.

Monzon's work initially bothered me because it seemed to be running too closely with Lichtenstein, Taaffe, and the many other artists in the lineage of raising questions about painting. Was Monzon's painting just another game in an ongoing series of artworld games or this there something more there (for me, there has to be something more or that which I am looking at is thin)?



With Monzon, I literally faced an fork in the road -- some of Monzon's brush strokes want to be the mere representations of brushstrokes like Lichtenstein's but other brush strokes call out for a deeper lyricism, something beyond the dated battles between the high and the low, abstraction of conviction and vapid design, the clerics and the philistines. Literally, Monzon's strokes, for me, flicker on his surfaces somewhere between the self-congratulatory feeling of being on the inside of an inside joke and the feeling of sitting on a cold modernist patio and then being unexpectedly charmed by a piece of graffiti or a leaf falling, the feeling that something important is happening. Both views are important and both make you better in some way, but the second has the potential to produce joy and aesthetic meaning, meaning that is both intellectual and sensual -- the good stuff.

For this reason, I think Monzon's work exists in a cozy but vital space which has conviction and importance. To me, much contemporary painting (and art in general for that matter) is torn between a belief in design (wouldn't it be great to have the power to aesthetically arrange someone's life with the objects that we love so much to make them a better person, wouldn't it be great to make the ultimate painting) and the horror of design being totalizing (that a human being could really be just a matter of design). This is an absolute rat's nest if you think about it -- we need to believe in design as somehow helpful to give conviction to what we do but if design is totalizing, something dies. Monzon's work seems to exist somewhere between the two, his brushstrokes and designs threatening (at the same time) to both ennoble and debase the design it finds itself involved with. These are genuine surfaces where things are not simple, where things are not set for sure -- they may look familiar but I recommend spending some time with these works. They will surprise you.

