

# Lester Monzon's Falling Leaves

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It would be easy to agree with Dave Hickey, writing in that knowing and jazzy style of his, that Americans love to steal. Specifically, American artists love to pillage the over grown gardens of history, till facts and thoughts into the dirt, and grow their own mongrel plants in the moldy fertilizer. An artist like Roy Lichtenstein, in his elegant brushstroke paintings, was a savvy American, who knew that, in Hickey's words, "the perpetuation of mass culture had created a sort of 'image wheel' upon whose turning spokes defunct beaux arts practices, rather than disappearing from sight, cycled down into the compost of popular culture from which they might be retrieved as needed." Lichtenstein's brushstrokes were one of his many thefts from the "warehouse of popular culture" where all culture, from Jan Van Eck to Daffy Duck, goes to be turned over and reused, redeployed unmoored from its original meanings. Whether the brushstrokes were long, Abstract Expressionist existential groans in the wake of World War II, or thick but flickering attempts of Cezanne to

record a decaying apple, they are now stencils or ready made ideas re-hung in galleries for new purposes.

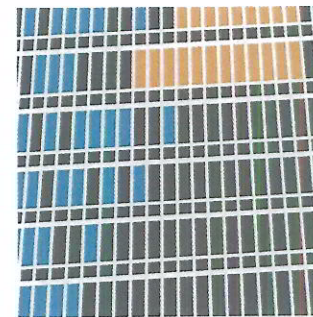
I mention Hickey, Lichtenstein, and brushstrokes for a reason, namely because this trio is present when you view the works of Lester Monzon, works that, at first glance, seem to come right out of Hickey and Lichtenstein's playbook. For years, Monzon would paint the patterns he found on the shirts in his closet, which he often wears, and adding to these patterns, he would position brushstrokes – not just brushstrokes but various ideas of brushstrokes. In a painting, Monzon can employ a straightforward "sincere" stroke (brush loaded with paint), a trompe l'oeil reconstruction of a stroke that is "rendered" rather than simply allowed to flow from the brush, brushstrokes that flow to a point then become rendered, and brushstrokes that play hide and seek with the designs they interact with, sometimes really in the background, sometimes pretending to lie underneath the pattern.

“Last Call,” 2010, for instance, is hundreds of tiny decisions and gradations of surface design, rigorous in form (graphite lines easily mark the boundaries), yet full of intuitive aesthetic moves. On top is a single brushstroke. However, the brushstroke is an emphatic expression of Monzon’s method, mixing reconstructions of brushstrokes with the passages of consistent flow of pigment. In details, we see the brushstroke playing games with the background patterns, sometimes on top, other times on bottom, and perhaps most fascinatingly sometimes consistent and congruent with the surface, the brushstroke becoming another color move inside the grid, just like the gradations of white. The single brushstroke in this painting then is not simple, but more a brushstroke on trial, a brushstroke questioning itself, existing with competing ideas of itself fighting inside it.

These competing ideas of gesture, expression, reproduction, simulation, authenticity, and surface continue to inform the state of contemporary painting of which Monzon is a vital part. Such ideas mimic the human drama that endures the same battles, the questions of what a self is and how a self exists inside of larger systems. Painting has become such a good metaphor for the self because many contemporary theories maintain that the self is just a surface. Questions abound. Is a self just a set of images and ideas which form a shifting surface or is the self a more vital, substantive thing? Is it at all helpful to think of a person living a “sincere” existence or is sincerity an illusory wish, a window dressing for the cold fact that we are animals living an objective animal existence, or for the even colder fact that we are simply a set of patterns and performed types? Since 2-D art deals with a literal surface, its activities have become metaphors

for what the self does, what the self is. How fitting, for instance, is Lichtenstein and Hickey’s image wheel in a world that views a self as a set of surfaces that can be reconfigured at will.

So if what I say is true of painting, Monzon’s negotiations with sincerity and surface mean a great deal and come across as quite important. The questioning brushstroke and the hide and seek game that Monzon plays with systems and design seem to suggest a self doing the same, a self questioning and resisting the terms in which it finds itself. A Monzon painting is not merely the appropriation game of Lichtenstein shifting and redeploying their rote, image bank components in new ways. Monzon’s paintings contain doubts about whether the image bank and its limited surfaces are the whole story.



When thinking about the self and painting along these lines, it is useful to compare Monzon’s “Whistle Blower,” 2008 to Sarah Morris’ “Paine Webber,” 2001 (above). The Morris subsumes individuals and networks of their decisions and offers little resistances to unapologetic assimilation into a larger system, the

system in this case being the corporate branding of investment giant Paine Webber (now UBS). "Paine Webber" contemplates "the awfulness of being part of a system that is larger than you," as Morris once said of her paintings. Morris wants to show the stifling of systems and their potential to drain the individual character from life, turning life into a finite set of images and stock footage where gesture, for all intensive purposes, is a meaningless thing. Notice how the colors are determined by the corporate logo of Paine Webber and how the brand maps itself onto the paintings. The lines of an office building and the depersonalized orange, blue, and black become the organizing grid of the painting. Corporate culture is embodied by the surface of the painting, and that is what everything is, merely a surface. Morris

admits this can put the viewer into conflict, describing the experience best herself, "There is some element of repulsion in front of my paintings. There is something very all-encompassing and dominating about the paintings . . . Depending on your point of view that can be extremely empowering or incredibly alienating; I think having both experiences and the struggle between the two is what I find to be motivating."

Monzon's much smaller canvas "Whistle Blower" (above) contemplates a different surface and a different self. I would argue Monzon offers the same struggle as Morris, the struggle between the personal and the alienating effect of systems, but the affection and care that Monzon pays to his surface, his ability to

weave his personal strains, residues, and questioning brushstrokes, perhaps gets at a more generous truth – the truth of an embedded, concerned, non-surface self that cannot help but impact the systems and alienating structures in which it finds itself. Monzon's "Whistle Blower" is a wonderful encapsulation of this idea, with an organizing grid virtually identical to "Paine Webber" except without the corporate colors and the subsuming of self into surface. Your eye

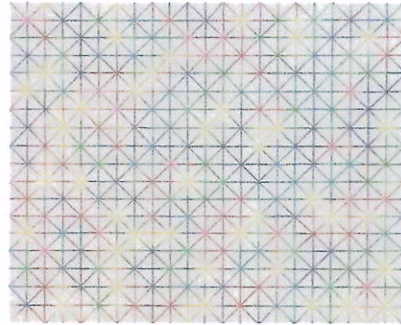


works right to left, and as it works to get a handle on the colors and organizing structure of the grid, it becomes apparent that Monzon's colors are an intuitive practice which counters any alienating effect the grid might threaten. Stains and blotches and all sorts of human traces "mar" the surface, and then adding to

this, the brushstroke, a Trojan Horse inside the image bank, plays sincerity against its opposite and lets the struggle validate itself. This is not a painting that has succumbed. This is a painting that fights.

With Monzon, even at his most programmatic, you cannot imagine the painting being executed by anyone but Monzon himself – the color choice, the interventions in the pattern, and the touches that unfold during the act of painting itself. The grid threatens, but Monzon is present, and I would argue that the viewer has more of a capability of being present due to this fact. On the contrary, Morris' paintings are actually organized on a computer first and then painted, quite sharply on a canvas using

masking tape for straight edges. In a way, they could be painted by anyone – once the computer diagram is completed, it becomes a set of instructions just like the wall drawings of Sol Lewitt, continuing to be completed after his death. It is the plan rather than the implementation that matters with these works of art.



Even in the most extreme example, Monzon can't help himself. He lives inside of his implementations. "To Press Upon or Against (White)," 2010's pattern is almost authoritarian, a strict grid of squares and triangles made with a ruler that Monzon has had for years. There is something cold in the grid and in how Monzon deploys it, saying simply that the ruler's width alone determines the distances of the lines, as in the rigorous deployments of Frank Stella's brush in the 60s where his answer to what determined the painting was simply the size of his brush and unmixed factory colors. Monzon, on one hand, takes the same deadpan angle that Stella did, but Monzon's strict objective system only lays the groundwork for an interesting, humanly clumsy optical event. In "To Press Upon or Against (White)" there is no way to determine why and how the colors are chosen and how they interact.

In the end, you feel the heat of human interaction and the painting is neither reducible to the hardness of fact that compelled Stella or the alienation that marks Morris' canvases.

After staring at Monzon's small canvases and panels and watching the forms and ideas dance in front of me for years, I once wrote that, "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." I still think this is true. There is something seductive and enthralling about how Monzon handles surfaces, surfaces that are beyond surface. They are not without irony, nor without questioning, but old fashioned ideas of personality, flavor, and residual traces of touch are allowed to make things human.

- i. Dave Hickey, "Brushstrokes," Roy Lichtenstein: Brushstrokes, Four Decades (Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, 2001), p. 12-13
- ii. Sarah Morris in conversation with Alexander De Looz, "China 2008 and other Power Plays according Sarah Morris," Sarah Morris: Lesser Panda (White Cube, London, 2008) p.25
- iii. Ibid, p. 26
- iv. Author, <http://icallitoranges.blogspot.com/2009/03/lester-monzon.html>, March 31, 2009