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Annabel Osberg
Artist, writer

Recontextualizing Pieces of Art History and Scraps of Everyday Life

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In his first show at Mark Moore Gallery, **David Klamen** masterfully appropriates and manipulates art historical images, molding their flatness into new spheres of meaning. The show's title, "Meta-Paintings and Remixes," evokes superficial comparison between visual and aural arts. Were music parlance further applied to the Chicago-based artist's paintings, his exhibition could be likened to an album of rearranged covers of a surprisingly eclectic array of artworks selected from various museums and art history books.

Each of Klamen's paintings depicts a well-known work by an iconic painter such as Picasso or Van Gogh. In most of his "Meta-Paintings," the angle of the depicted painting is tilted with respect to Klamen's picture plane, as if it were viewed from oblique perspective. The sidelong angle emphasizes the mediation involved in the creation of the painting, highlighting the uncanniness of being in a gallery and looking at a painting of a photograph of a painting on the wall of a museum. The uncanniness is heightened by the fact that most of his paintings within paintings are bordered by gold frames that are again framed by gray wall; the illusionary shadows and reflections on the painted wall are echoed by real shadows cast by Klamen's painting on the actual gallery wall.



Images (left to right): Untitled (Van Gogh), 2014. Oil on canvas, 32 x 38 inches; Monet Remix, 2014. Oil on canvas, 34 x 48 inches; Mother and Child Remix, 2013. Oil on canvas, 70.5 x 77.5 inches.

The feeling is reminiscent of Thomas Struth's Museum Photographs, a series of photos of people looking at historic paintings in museums. In both artists' work, the viewer becomes hyper-aware of the act of viewing a painting thirdhand. Struth, however, works from the outside in with respect to the painting: he positions his viewer behind the viewers depicted in his photos. Klamen works from the inside out: in copying an artwork with his own hand, he positions himself between his viewer and the depicted painting. In Struth's photos, each painting is mediated by the camera and by the depicted viewers standing between the painting and the camera lens. Klamen's paintings are more spatiotemporally disorienting because they present the viewer directly with a picture in the same medium as the depicted artwork: the viewer has the rather uncomfortable feeling of being a participant in the painterly recontextualization, not just a bystander.

Klamen's "Remix" paintings are even more jarring than his "Meta-Paintings." In his "Remixes," painting, frame, and wall are blurred and liquefied with effect reminiscent of image-distortion software popular in the 1990's and early 2000's but low-tech by today's standards. Each of the remix paintings exaggerates a quality well-known in the copied artist's work. The Impressionists, for example, were known for using loose brushwork to evoke specific atmospheric conditions and capture elusive moments in time. Klamen's Monet Remix waves like a mirage, evoking a dreamlike feeling of instability. The painting within painting is bordered by a slithering serpentine gold frame whose distortion hints at the slipperiness of context and recontextualization.

In *Mother and Child Remix*, Picasso's already-distorted 1921 depiction of a tender domestic moment is dissolved into a grotesque painted puddle. Physical features abstracted in Picasso's original are in Klamen's rendition doubled and distended nearly to the point of unrecognizability. Limbs wriggle like worms; fingers are deformed; holes open up in areas of the painting where there should be none. Picasso was known for reducing forms to distill their essence; Klamen further reduces his painting into a gooey splatter of stretched flesh and twisted fabric. Snippets of frame and painting begin to secede from the main mass as if to form new paintings. The museum information card appears in danger of phagocytosis by the amoeba-like painting. Everything has gone awry. Yet paradoxically, Klamen's forms and shadows are painted with precision, as if copied from a digital image.

As a work of art ages, it travels further and further from its original cultural context, inevitably leaving behind original meaning and intention. Art history can preserve knowledge about this context; but the knowledge is continually revised as new opinions are introduced, new interpretations attributed. Thus, the meaning of any given artwork fluctuates over time. Klamen's "Remixes" portray historic paintings in a literal state of flux. *Monet Remix* vibrates as if the original picture were run through an oscilloscope. In *Mother and Child Remix*, Klamen rearranges Picasso's painting as if it were a malleable piece of putty.

Meta-Paintings 2, a salon-style installation of small "Meta-Paintings", is perhaps the most successful work in the show, for it most eloquently and complexly encapsulates his ideas of decontextualization and recontextualization. In this piece, Klamen co-opts paintings by a diverse group of famous artists from different time periods, and places them all onto the same wall. When paintings become canonized in museums and art history books, they are effectively placed on a linear timeline subclassified by categories of movement and style. Klamen pulls paintings off the continuum and flattens them all onto the same plane into a new curatorial state, promoting new associations between them. Taken as a whole, Klamen's entire show operates in much the same way as this single work.



Images (left to right): *Meta-Paintings 2*, 2013. Oil on Multiple canvases, 90 x 135 inches; *Untitled (Monet 3)*, 2014. oil on canvas., 28 x 42 inches.

Individually, Klamen's smaller paintings read better from a variety of distances than his large pieces, which look best from afar and lose a bit of their magnetism when viewed up close. It isn't just because of size or detail; the smaller pictures seem to encompass more evidence of Klamen's own hand. Klamen is more concerned with the idea of representing each painting than with the ideas the original paintings themselves represented, so a certain degree of impassiveness is appropriate to the meaning of the work, but the content wouldn't suffer from a little more tactile subjectivity; in fact, it might be all the richer for it. He is, after all, a painter himself; if his personal voice were a little louder, it might better harmonize with that of the painters whose work he appropriates.

This isn't to say that Klamen's large paintings don't reward the attentive viewer. On the contrary: they contain many subtleties that can only be seen up close. From afar, the informational museum wall labels beside some of his internal paintings appear to be meticulously detailed; closer investigation reveals them to be completely illegible. Given the painting's size and detail, it would easily have been possible for him to readably paint each letter. By intentionally rendering the labels indecipherable, Klamen denies access to the ideas they impart, erasing them in his quest to create new meaning. In so doing, he also calls into question the veracity of such information, as if to ask: **Do we really know any of this? Is it really important?** The museum wall label is reduced to a mere relic whose ideas are unimportant with respect to Klamen's painting.

Another key detail is in the bottom left corner of the picture within *Untitled (Monet 3)*. The signature reading "Monet 1909" is parallel to the actual picture plane, yet off-kilter with respect to the depicted internal painting, drawing attention to the deceptive nature of Klamen's picture.

Klamen's "Meta-Paintings" speak of the spuriousness of sensory experience and representation. Each of the "Meta-Paintings" is a two-dimensional portrayal of a three-dimensional scene involving another two-dimensional portrayal of a (usually) three-dimensional scene. As Walter Benjamin wrote in his seminal 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."

On its most fundamental level, reality itself is mediated by conscious experience; phenomenologists such as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty devoted their lives to the study of its mysterious mechanics. Klamen's "Meta-Paintings" lead the viewer to wonder: how much information has been lost in translation between the original scene, the original artist's depiction of it, and Klamen's depiction of his already subjective depiction? Many painters feel burdened by the baggage of art history. Others feel a sense of responsibility to further its academic progress and expand its continuum. Still others choose to ignore it. For someone who is so engaged with art historical imagery, Klamen has a remarkably laissez-faire attitude towards it. In Klamen's hands, art history is a pliable tool, an inexhaustible resource for creating new meanings. Few artists possess his ability to appropriate others' work with such deadpan conspicuity and arrive at such inspiring results.

In the room adjacent to Klamen's show is a concurrent exhibition by **Joseph Hart**, a New York-based artist engaged with art history in interesting contrast to Klamen. Hart's paintings and collages vibrate with expressive lines and colorful snippets of paper in compositions reminiscent of Twombly, Kandinsky, and even Miro. The title of his show, "KISS IDIOMS," bespeaks Hart's autobiographical painterly language. In his collages, he juxtaposes idiosyncratic marks with bits and pieces of cut paper, paint chips, and fabric. Many of these collaged scraps are of personal significance to him: they are pieces of his work pants, his daughter's stickers, studio detritus, scraps of deconstructed drawings. The result is engagingly diaristic and lyrical.



Images (left to right): Untitled (K.I. 01), 2014. Oil on canvas, 72 x 52 inches; Untitled (K.I.04), 2014. Collaged paper, work pants, acrylic, oil, cayon and graphite on paper, 50 x 38 inches.

"Meta-Paintings and Remixes" and "KISS IDIOMS" are on view from May 10-June 24, 2014 at Mark Moore Gallery, 5790 Washington Blvd., Culver City, CA 90232.

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