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Illustration, Post-Illustration, and Those Who Draw

Paper given at the University Art Association of Canada, Waterloo, Nov. 2, 2007.

By Jaleen Grove

I'd like to begin by reading a message board thread, from thespot.com, a board used by some of the major illustrators in North America.

John Cuneo

Art, work?

« on: April 17, 2006, 08:56:45 AM »

I like Marcel Dzama drawings. I follow his work in the art periodicals, I've read a little about the canadian collective, the Royal Art Lodge that he's a member of, and enjoyed the work he did for Beck's latest cd, as well as his shows at the Zwirger gallery in the NYC. He did the drawing that's on the cover this weeks NY Times Magazine as well as several wonderful images inside that accompany an article on blood and tissue sampling. The credits for the drawings read : "Artwork by Marcel Dzama". Does this mean that this was previously existing (Art) work, and not specifically commissioned for the article? (Other credits for other work in the issue are the usual : " Illustration by..") - or is there some kind of Illustration Czar who makes these decisions? (i picture some lady in the bowels of the Times mailroom with two inboxes on her desk labeled "Artwork" and "illustration". she opens up a fed ex, takes a long thoughtful look at the drawing, and says to herself, "yup, this one's ART alright", and throws it on top of the short stack" Perhaps somebody out there who has feet in both the gallery and illustration camps can enlighten me? Gary? Laura? -from here at the bottom of the big stack,
john cuneo

Gary Taxali

Art, work?

« Reply #3 on: April 17, 2006, 11:11:10 AM »

Keep in mind that the contact for Marcel was most likely through his gallery. I am positive they acted as a liason, or rep. Very possible that the artwork was pre-existing, could have been from his current show. (Remember, if your work is in galleries and

someone prints it in a publication, it's 'artwork'. If you're an illustrator and someone prints an existing picture in a publication, it's stock.)

Gary

Marc Burckhardt

Art, work?

« Reply #1 on: April 17, 2006, 10:19:14 AM »

Only guessing, John, but I'd venture that having your work labelled "Art" instead of "Illustration" is something you specifically ask for, with your gallery career (and patrons) in mind. Next time, just point out to your client that you're slumming at this commercial stuff and if they could, please clarify that in the credits.

Marc

<http://www.marcart.net>

Drawings like Dzama's are often thought to be demonstrating that we no longer have a high/low division in contemporary art, but I open with this story because this shows two things: that high and low is still keenly felt by many drawing artists, and that it is a policing of language in the contemporary art scene that keeps the distinctions in place. If there is a collapse of high and low in the studio (and this is debatable too), it stops there, because art theory, criticism, curatorial practices, marketing and teaching still inadvertently impose a hierarchy once art leaves the studio.

The recent past has been marked by two systems for evaluating drawing. In what is customarily referred to as Fine or High Art, drawing was of secondary importance: either a planning stage; or the detritus of a conceptual process. But in Applied or Low Arts such as printmaking, illustration, and cartooning, drawing is both conception and finished form, and therefore worthy in itself. In Fine Art, the purposes have been innovation and expression of hidden truth; while in Applied art they have been to inform, heckle, persuade, delight and so on. I will argue that the language of contemporary art systems enforces a concern – still – with Romantic and Avant Garde values of revealing hidden truth and innovation, values that are predicated on the characterization of applied and popular art as being less deeply meaningful.

In the high arts, the act of drawing is theorized as it is being executed, while in the Low arts, it has been supposed, artists do not theorize what they do; they are just “mere technicians”. Accordingly, in an essay for a late modernist exhibition catalogue titled *Drawing is Another Kind of Language* (1996), Dieter Schwarz asserted that definitions of drawing in terms of craft,

technical description, medium, support, format, content, motif or genre have not “proven as enduring as the definition of drawing as a concept and its embodiment.” (p. 12)¹. This suggests that not only have those other craft oriented definitions disappeared, but that they are diametrically opposed to drawing as conceptualization.

This is problematic and outmoded now that contemporary fine art is taking to low art subject matter and drawing as a final medium. The lack of historical knowledge of low arts means that the articulation of low art references in contemporary drawing is often weak in reviews, curatorial statements, and art history. For instance, in a 2004 *Border Crossings* review², Lee Henderson says of Jeff Ladouceur’s work, “What makes his work not simply a reiteration of the cartoon aesthetic is, like in the late-period work of Philip Guston, the constant presence of dark laughter at the frankly unsolvable and rather miserable existential dilemma of mortality.” How odd, considering existential dilemmas of mortality have been the mainstay of many a cartoon character from Krazy Kat to Road Runner to Robert Crumb’s Mr. Natural to Chris Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan.

I will now critique fine art social apparatus and describe artistic value from the point of view of applied and popular artists. This perspective is derived from interviews, surveys, textual readings and my own experience as an illustrator.

The two objectives of applied and popular arts are that they A) communicate unambiguously and B) are of use to someone other than the artist. Known codes are tapped, which have come down to us from reproduction technologies like woodcuts, engravings, and photography³. But to say that low arts are unoriginal as high art discourse has frequently asserted, is untrue. Communication can be hampered if the known code is so familiar as to be invisible, so the familiar must balance with innovation. Rogue art historian Alan Gowans, the only person to propose a theory of art based on the popular and commercial arts, even went so far as to claim that high art and avant garde trends actually originate in the popular and commercial arts and not the reverse⁴. One of his examples is that Duchamp borrowed from comics the lines and multiple semi-drawn limbs in one frame indicating movement for his *Nude Descending Staircase*. (However, I believe it is more of a back-and-forth, that the “us vs them” aspect is exaggerated – as low arts frequently parody high

¹ Incidentally, also in this catalogue, Harvard University Art Museum director James Cuno mentions that the whole collection contains works by many unknown artists, and that the quality of it all is high. Yet in the exhibition itself, New York school avant gardists predominate: Johns, Kelly, Smithson, Serra, Stella, etc.

² *Border Crossings*, vol. 23 no. 4 (Nov. 2004) pp.36-42

³ See William Ivins, *Prints and Visual Communication*. MIT Press, 1989 (1953).

⁴ Gowans, Alan. *The Unchanging Arts*, Philadelphia: JB Lippincott, 1971, pp. 19-20.

art.)

But no matter the need for innovation, tradition is still important. Tradition reflects the comfortable and familiar, honours the past and anchors identity – such as when Randy Hann depicts a boy lacing skates in *Home Ice*, using highly finished greyscale pencilwork to tap into the language of Realism, and journalistic and amateur backyard photography. Academic standards of draughtsmanship still carry weight with the general public for good reason – they understand it, and what is so bad about that? While it is done according to instruction, it is certainly not done without thought. Contra Lyotard⁵ and others who argue that traditional representation strategies are totalitarian, I submit that it is not your tool - but what you do with it. Language games will be more effectively played with standard syntax than with gobbledygook, no matter how creative it is. Tradition is not limited to academic realism – think of so-called folk art, and non-Western traditions. Consider how a First Nations artist like Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas is subversively combining traditional Haida motifs and story telling with traditional manga.

The use of low art is never neutral and never trivial – it is supportive and disruptive socially, depending who is deploying it. Broadly, applied and popular arts subvert with one hand and support with the other: traditions of crassness and traditions of cuteness; of honour, of ridicule; of objective description, of emotion. There are two visual language groups that have been in existence since at least the Renaissance: the highly finished, bravura rendering (high realism, facile animation; “good” drawing, usually signifying the authenticity of what is depicted); and the hasty, rough sketch (naïve woodcut, DIY cartoon; “bad” drawing, usually signifying the authenticity of the artist’s observations). The polemical strength of either is predicated on the existence of the other; they are complementaries, and there is a sliding scale between them. Together, they can say everything. The gamut is wide and historically long. Anything goes so long as it resonates. To this end, drawing has been valued for how well a line speaks, how well something is rendered (in either rough or finished manner), and how well the picture performs its social duty.

Despite the discrediting of “genius” in contemporary art circles, applied artists still tend to read contemporary art as a discourse of *purported* genius. By comparison, applied art may be said to operate under a discourse of the Master. Fine art traditionally attributed to the genius a special sight, both insight and eye, while the Master got only skill. But artistic tradespeople accord to the

⁵ Lyotard, Jean-Francois. “What is Post-Modernism?” *The Post Modern Condition*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, pp. 74-75.

Master not just skill but ALSO an eye, as well as aptitude in business and in problem-solving. They, however, do not recognize genius – but rather talent, the difference being that talent is inborn ability and genius is pretension and persona. Numerous examples of low artists' poor opinion of genius exist – an early one is Rowlandson's 1812 cartoon *The Chamber of Genius*, of a reckless painter bent on his mediocre work while his family suffers in poverty, captioned with, "Want is the scorn of every wealthy fool, and genius in rags is turn'd to ridicule". The genius is encouraged to be a style specialist, to refine his "unique" vision; but the Master can master anything he chooses, and often turns his hand to various things – the exemplar is William Morris, who was a master pattern designer, engraver, illustrator, typographer, book designer, furniture designer, weaver, historian, writer, poet, business man, public speaker, and theorist.

The Master has a strong work ethic and feels the genius does not. "Who has time to wait around for inspiration? Just draw!" I have heard. Speculating on a future society of excess leisure, William Morris said, "Are all of us going to turn philosophers, poets, essayists – men of genius, in a word? ...Nay, I think we have already got in all branches of culture rather more geniuses than we can bear... hapless, pessimistic, intellectual personages and pretenders to that dignity"⁶. Illustrators I have interviewed have told me they would be ashamed to take a government grant because they feel that a deserving mature artist (fine artists too) should be able to support themselves.

The Master does not work alone on his own project. Being team oriented the mark of the Master is humility and friendliness, not aloofness and aggrandizement. They often play down honours they may have received, recognizing their accomplishments are indebted to their peers and clients. Technical manuals for illustrators often admonish the young commercial artist to set aside airs of superiority. *Line Drawing for Reproduction* of 1933 cautions: "The client must feel he is dealing with a sensible individual who behaves in a rational manner, not with a "mad artist" ...We all know the kind of artist who considers working for commerce as prostituting his art." In the tradition of apprenticeship and mentorship, senior commercial artists often consider it part of their duty as professionals to nurture the next generation.

Genius is suspect because every master knows he or she can match or surpass the supposed genius IF they themselves had enjoyed the same luck or privileged social connections and university education, and IF they too believed in the social value of the contemporary art market. There is a higher purpose for applied art. It is in mastery of a medium, and service to society

⁶ "The Revival of Handicraft" 1888.

within a tradition. Genius is a term no one uses any more but it still informs the current definition of a contemporary artist. Applied artists whom I asked why Mowry Baden's sculpture titled *Pavilion, Rock, Shell* constitutes suitable public art for a veterans memorial site, spoke derisively of a value system that allows the fine artist to express himself at the expense of appropriateness and of the public pocket, made possible by the lingering idea that the artist's supposed genius ought not to be compromised by any outside concerns.

As John Sloan implies in a 1913 cartoon for the socialist magazine *The Masses* depicting a cubist who "found a cubic sixpence upon a cubic style", inventions of artistic genius are just a sixpence novelty, just another way to make a buck out of art. Skilled in marketing, they view artspeak as an elaborate salespitch, clothing a naked emperor. In this, they are not far removed from theorists who have drawn comparisons between the avant-garde and capitalist economy, where new (unnecessary but fashionable) products are constantly in demand in order to keep the money rolling in. In the eyes of applied artists, "Contemporary Art" is nothing but a construction of class and an advertising strategy, a false category that elides *real* contemporary art.

And what art is that? I will now list trends since about 1990 that have contributed to the recent rise of drawing in contemporary art, an emergence that was mystifyingly called "autonomous" by Emma Dexter in the authoritative 2005 book, *Vitamin D*. Let me emphasize, drawing as finished art form is not new, only its acceptance as high art is.

Illustration

Since the 1960s the field of illustration has undergone extreme pressures that have injured its self-identity and the passing of the generational baton. Factors which contributed to this have been photography, stiffer editorial interference, new media such as Flash and videogames, stock art companies, and the mainstreaming of comic books and zine culture, all of which were exacerbated by the onset of the world wide web. In the last ten years several things have occurred that are repositioning illustrators. These stem from outright activist interventions organized by illustrators themselves, and include the establishment of the ICON conferences, an industry wide campaign to stop unfair stock art practices, copyright enforcement, education of designers and illustrators to encourage using illustrators as problem solvers rather than as servants, the repositioning of illustration as a custom solution rather than a generic one, the salvaging and writing of illustration history and theory, and the establishment of new societies and online communities. The activism is resulting in a newfound solidarity and purpose, and it is connecting via the web with younger artists coming in from DIY and comic book circles. Significantly, illustrators began banding together in collectives to promote both their commercial practices and

to sell finished art objects in art shows. Two examples are Vancouver's Jupiter Project, who frequently have shows in Chicago and elsewhere, and Toronto's Sketch Motel.

Comics, Comix

Comix became Graphic Novels and gained respectability.

Underground commix congealed as a movement in San Francisco in the 1960s, indivisible from the music scene and political activism of the era. Robert Crumb is the undisputed star. Among Canadians who imported comix is Rand Holmes, who, after some time in San Francisco, returned to Vancouver and began illustrating for the *Georgia Straight*. Comix began going mainstream with the popularity of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and his magazine *Raw* by the late 1980s, but it is only the last five years or so that more comix artists have become art world stars, such as Chris Ware, who was included in the 2002 Whitney Biennial. When the AGO purchased work by Seth in 2005, journalist Murray Whyte quipped, "Small step for cartoonist, giant leap for cartoon-kind." Some of the Canadians with international reputations are Dave Sim, Julie Doucet, Seth, David Boswell and Chester Brown, and famed comix journal *Drawn and Quarterly* just opened a store in Montreal.

Japanese Toy Culture, Rave Culture, Pokemon, Anime, Manga and Otaku

Until the 1990s, Japanese popular art was present in the American/Japanese hybrid the Transformers, but was consumed in undiluted form only by a few comic book aficionados and fans of "Japanime", as it was then called. Then the web made more things available, and underground rave culture cultivated a taste for the Japanese. When Pokemon was introduced to American kids in 1998, it was soon followed by Powerpuff Girls, Dragon Ball Z, and other Japanese-inflected material. Meanwhile, Takashi Murakami created a new contemporary art scene and published his "Superflat Manifesto" in 2000, arguing that the most important and indeed genuine art of Japan is now in the popular arts. Yuka Yamaguchi is a Canadian with affinity to this trend.

Lowbrow / Pop Surrealism

Lowbrow is a term that originated with American artist Richard Williams, and has come to include all artists operating outside of the usual contemporary art circles and who use popular culture and media as their inspiration, especially underground commix and custom hotrod culture (where Williams got his start), but also Hollywood, cartoons, tattoo, porn, vintage advertising and graffiti. Another name for it is Pop Surrealism. Lowbrow really congealed with the publication of Juxtapoz magazine and the establishment of a few key galleries like La Luz de Jesus, and has its

own books and documentaries. There are now Livejournal blog communities as well, and the top artists in this vein are beginning to sell at astronomical prices. Vancouver has a well established lowbrow community, the best known practitioners being Jim Cummins, 12 Midnite, and Andrea Tucker.

Outsider art

Outsider art came inside as cheaper publishing technology made it possible to recoup unknown artists such as Henry Darger and AG Rizzoli, and with the major 1992 show and book *Parallel Visions* at the LA County Museum. The definition of “outsider” is notoriously rife with controversy and vagueness, as well as being problematic regarding its position in relation to the avant garde. Many artists have been labeled as “outsider”, when in fact they are more in touch with mainstream society and art than has been recognized – the case of Jean-Michel Basquiat being only the most notorious. Nevertheless, improved visibility of artists working outside the usual systems has contributed to many artists of a more educated sort adopting the visual languages and methods associated with the unschooled.

Graffiti Writing

Graffiti has gone from an undistinguished activity to full blown art form, with its own heroes and subculture. There is a strong Master discourse at work among graffiti writers, with a loose etiquette of when it is OK to cover or amend someone else’s work, and use of academic terminology like ‘piece (short for masterpiece). There is also a custom of trading black books (sketchbooks) where artists contribute a sketch in each other’s books. Practitioners are avid connoisseurs (and brutal critics) of typography and design principles in their field, and consider their work calligraphy.

DIY and Zine Culture

Zine culture of the 1970-90s, made possible by the photocopier and the political aspirations of punk rock, enabled anyone to become a published artist. In fact, the rougher the drawing the more it connoted the authenticity of the author-artist as a bonafide rebel, unschooled and therefore polemically “pure” in terms of visual rhetoric – which is of course the most powerful rhetorical device of all. No sir, there ain’t no propaganda here, we’s telling you the truth! The scratchy tradition of drawing, therefore, has continued as code for counterculture, leftwing politics – except of course that it is now co-opted and economically exploited as is anything. This has its roots in socialist press such as *The Masses*, where unpolished drawing by Sloan and others came to signify freedom, in the Daumier tradition.

Animation

Animation got a new lease on life with the advent of *The Simpsons*, a show that has employed a few Canadians, incidentally, by inspiring many spinoffs. The increase in cable TV specialty channels also enlarged the gamut of animation. Animation got another boost as video game graphics improved and when software such as Maya, Softimage, 3D Studio Max and Flash were introduced, precipitating an enormous exodus of traditionally trained illustrators from print over to web and new media. Canada is home to some of the best animation schools and companies, such as Nelvana, Studio B, and Electronic Arts. Artists in these fields tend to be well versed in both mainstream and underground comix and manga. They frequently have their own subculture, attending comic jams and private life drawing meetings.

Those Who Draw

The confluence of these master-oriented fields (DIY excepted, in that it is consciously anarchistic) has resulted in an umbrella identity of *those who draw*, one largely held together by web communities like Deviantart, or the highly influential Toronto based Drawn.ca, which made a top 100 list in *PC Magazine* in October 2007. The many, many people sharing a love of drawing and ambivalence towards high art – indeed, for their creative processes terms like fine, applied, high or low are irrelevant – have now become highly visible. Not only can those who draw now think of themselves as part of a movement, but gatekeepers of high culture now see them.

Laura Hoptman observed in the 2003 MOMA exhibition *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions*, “This kind of drawing has borrowed from other types of drawing not necessarily welcome until now within the precincts of fine art... Drawing can no longer be categorized by old criteria having to do with form, finish, and manner of execution, or by designation of fine or avant garde art.” It can, however, be called “contemporary art” so long as certain artworld proprieties are observed. And I argue contemporary art proprieties subsume the old values of fine and avant garde art, complete with some “lady with the two boxes” sorting art from non-art – by criteria that has little to do with the art itself, as will discuss.

The turn to drawing supposedly exemplifies a collapse of high and low. But if equality were true, artists would not be reclaiming the insulting term “lowbrow”, nor would we have defensive curatorial statements such as that issued by the AGO when they purchased Seth’s commix panel *Hush*. Calling it a “unique piece”, curator Ben Portis wrote, “To be sure, this is being proposed as a work of art and not an example of material culture. This is an important acquisition for the AGO as it recognizes for the first time one of the most creative spheres of contemporary artistic

endeavour as fully achieved and does so on the comics' own terms.”⁷ *Hush* was thus elevated to contemporary art status, on the condition that low material culture must not breach the AGO's collection. Rather uncoincidentally, *Hush* features winter landscapes from coast to coast, fitting in with the stereotypical Canadian art canon. Recontextualizing artifacts is an old habit employed whenever any institution has to admit new blood (think of “primitive art”), but it erases genealogy and simply makes art a bigger circle, rather than addressing the power plays of the of art / non-art dialectic. Although I praise the AGO for this acquisition, I'd like to counter that “comics own terms” would not leave behind identity with material culture, nor do they aspire to being elevated to art. In fact, Seth's comments were “The origins of underground cartooning have been pretty anti-establishment anyway. So there wasn't a great cry to get into the museums ...I'd like people to be able to flip through [my comics], but they'll probably be behind glass [...]”⁸

If one suggests – as I did – to a curator of contemporary art that the contemporaneous straightforward landscapes of a certain professional artist be considered under her purview, one finds out quickly what non-art is. Miffed, the curator spelt out that contemporary art does not mean just “made today” but that it must critique its conditions of production, and reflect new visual explorations currently being explored in contemporary art circles now rather than those that originated in the past. The age-old veneration of insight and innovation as mandatory and the privilege of a closed circle of fine art discourse is thus preserved, and by that, an unspoken assertion is made that *contemporaneous* art made according to traditional values by people not privy to this circle has nothing grant-worthy to offer. Therefore, contemporary drawing has been presented as “something new”, when in fact it is indebted to the disciplines I have just outlined. As an example, the book *Vitamin D* is proud to “document the art-historical *moment* when artists are *redefining* and *pushing the boundaries* of drawing in *fresh* directions...*never before* has drawing as an art form been more *dynamic*” (Emma Dexter, p. 5, emphasis added).

I also take a curatorial statement by Jenifer Paparao for the recent *There Are Those*⁹ exhibition of drawings at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver. In discussing Shannon Oksanen's drawings of Sartre, de Beauvoir and Camus, Paparao asks if they “offer new insight into how these philosophers' writings intertwine and inform each other”, but she leaves unmentioned what Oksanen's shaky draughtsmanship does in the way of lionizing yet caricaturizing them. The

⁷ Quoted in article by Murray Whyte, *Toronto Star*, June 25, 2005. Available at <http://www.drawnandquarterly.com/newsList.php?st=art&art=a3dff7dd55a576>

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ The title of my talk is coincidental; I submitted it to the panel chair Christine Lalonde in May, before the CAG show opened, June 29, 2007.

discourses of masterliness that could have brought relevant readings of the history of fan culture, portraiture, satire and documentation are completely absent.

Because contemporary fine artists are implicitly mandated with finding something new, they appropriate from outside of current fine art – as Picasso did with African sculpture, as Andy Warhol did with commercial art. But in order for it to work, the original appropriatee must be kept outside, so that the genius-discourse of the fine artist's special sight is preserved and so "contemporary art" can maintain stability as a category separate from other art made now. The division of high and low and willful ignorance of the applied and popular arts must be maintained in order to protect the political economy of the fine art system, where the currency is cultural capital, counted up according to how alienated from its lowly roots the artwork in question can be made to seem.

Post-Illustration

Now for post-illustration. Post-illustration epitomizes the supposed meeting of high and low, is typical of the sort of art that museums may have a hard time categorizing, and is a label foisted upon some of those who draw by contemporary art scenesters, excluding roots and non-high-artists in the process. The term was first used in print by Shana Nys Dambrot in *Artweek*, in 2006¹⁰. It has been employed principally to refer to artists in LA's Richard Heller gallery such as Americans Brendan Monroe and Edward del Rosario. The term post-illustration appears, I argue, to be used purely because there is a lingering fear that gallery artists might be mistaken for actual illustrators, and thus lose prestige.

The art characterized by post-illustration artists is not conceptually or formally different from that made by others who draw. But the way their work is read and received is hugely different, because of contemporary art scene barriers. Of a selection of images shown without the artists' names, it is not possible to tell just by looking at style or subject matter who is barred and who is not. Canadians associated with post-illustration are Neil Farber, Jeff Ladouceur, Marcel Dzama and Jason McLean. Canadians NOT associated with it are Duncan Weller, Gary Taxali, Marcos Chin and Jillian Tamaki. The who is in and who is out game is one of institutional dubbing rather than the individual's actual skill or cultural relevance, which for all here is roughly equivalent. But Weller, Chin, Taxali, Tamaki are commercial illustrators who do not and are officially not

¹⁰ "Brendan Monroe at Richard Heller Gallery". *Artweek*, vol. 37 no. 6 (17-18 JI/Ag 2006)

allowed (as per Canada Council grant rules, and by unspoken custom as well¹¹) to participate in Canada's nonprofit contemporary art gallery culture.

The barriers are evident in several ways but I will focus here on how word choices reinforce Romantic/avant garde expectations. For example, Dzama would never be called “derivative”, even though his style and subjects are clearly taken from popular sources. Instead he is “referencing” or “informed by”. Furthermore, reviewers often reveal an expectation that art should question appearances and reveal hidden truth, where irony and ambiguity are valued over sentiment and communication. An unidentified writer says of Dzama's book *The Berlin Years*, “[The interviewer] draws frustrating answers from [Dzama], answers that are not especially illuminating: Dzama says, ‘I wish I could tell you that the tree people came from the seventh circle of Hell, those who committed violence on themselves, but the truth is that I grew up with them. They were ominous and dark figures in my favourite stories and fairy tales that I loved and loathed in equal parts’.” The writer continues that it is in a facsimile of one of Dzama's notebooks where “it is probably the closest you may come to the inner workings of his head, the hidden meaning of his art”¹². In an *Art Review* article, Kim Dhillon also complains, “You can make of [his drawings] what you will, and he's teasingly evasive about their meanings: [Dzama] says ‘They're just images that pop into my head. I don't really know what they are.’”¹³

In a review of Neil Farber's work, *Border Crossings* refers to Farber's simple statements as “apple-innocence”, like “I like snakes” and that he draws with diligence “Because I like the way they look when they're finished”¹⁴. It is difficult for these authors to think that Dzama and Farber might indeed have made something with no particular care for insight or innovation, but rather for entertainment, as homage to popular art, or for sentimental reasons. I am not saying work by Dzama and Farber doesn't have complex, hidden meaning – maybe it does. Nor am I saying we shouldn't think deconstructively or deeply. My point is, we must be wary of doing so at the expense of discounting straightforward interpretations, which are equally valid, according to traditional low-art priorities like communication, sentiment and entertainment.

¹¹ Visual art grants explicitly disqualify “commercial” art. What comprises “commercial art” is apparently decided at the discretion of Council staff, but even when “commercial” gallery art – such as floral paintings – make it to peer review, I am told by a juror that jurors implicitly understand that it is “contemporary art” they are to reward instead. Jurors are predominantly “contemporary artists” themselves.

¹² – “Review: The Berlin Years” *Dogmatika*, accessed Oct 8, 2007.

http://dogmatika.com/dm/books_more.php?id=2833_0_3_0_M

¹³ “Tree With Roots: Marcela Dzama”. *Art Review*, no. 2, 137 (Aug 2006).

¹⁴ “Pretty, Gross Stuff”. *Border Crossings*, vol. 24 no. 4 (16 Nov. 2005).

When trends like post-illustration and before it, pop art, are mistaken for low art elevated, what is lost is not only the transparency of the contemporary art gaze, but also the dignity of the straightforward, what-you-see-is-what-you-get image, such as the ability to take in a cartoon or greeting card at face value. We must not neglect to *sympathetically* understand why and how images are important to the average non-deconstructing viewer, who looks to bond emotionally with an image meaningful to him or her. Knowing why a sentimental, communicative picture is appreciated – the social, psychological, and spiritual reasons – will reveal as much to us about culture as our more familiar critical methods. But we cannot develop this line of inquiry so long as our scholarship is ensconced in the high art biases that remain ignorant or intolerant of low art values. Because fine art discourse has systematically shied away from these approaches, an enormous amount of contemporaneous art production – that which is usually yet often mistakenly dismissed as amateur and/or purely commercial, and that possibly comprises the majority of all imagery being made and sold in Canada – is going on without the least bit of scholarly study at all. This blind spot is perpetuating us-and-them thinking, and is in return alienating the average person from taking “contemporary art” seriously.

As well, irony disempowers images. Brackets like post-illustration are predicated on a disavowal of their own history. When the sincerity of an image is undercut in this way, it wrecks the artist’s use of drawing as a plausible voice – it prevents us from believing what Dzama and Farber say, which means they are effectively unheard, unseen. I think that the ironic gaze is now so entrenched in contemporary art that all viewing of images in a gallery are affected by a disbelief in them – and the communicative properties of images are compromised. What good, then, is any humanistic or political intent in contemporary art? This could be construed as a crisis for contemporary art – and it perhaps explains why an “authentic” artistic voice is attributed by Murakami and others to popular, outsider and applied arts, and why contemporary artists are interested in them.

Ideas for improving the understanding and practice of drawing:

1. Critique the category of “contemporary art” – who do we silently include and exclude, and why?
2. Examine how jargon excludes some and includes others, and bestows assumptions of value: an artist is “derivative”, “traditional”, or “referencing” depending who is doing the describing.

3. Consider the downsides of ironizing art production (distinguished from an ironic message in the art) for the way this could disempower art as a political or meaningful voice
4. Make technical and conceptual drawing important again in the curriculum of art schools.
5. Teach drawing techniques from commercial art traditions, as well as experimental and academic techniques. Let us not stifle creativity by censoring what approaches we expose students to, or by imposing taste.
6. Supplement standard Introduction to Art History texts such as Jansen and Gardner with a history of print, books, craft, and communication arts.
7. Encourage interdepartmental collaboration between studio practice and design departments.
8. Recover theorists of the applied and popular arts: Morris, Ivins, Gowans, Bogart.
9. Teach students and the public ways of valuing the commercial arts, crafts and popular arts as expressed by practitioners themselves (Kricfalusi, Heller, Arisman, Dowd); not by what art historians and critics have said about them.
10. Educate about the impact of institutions, curating, criticism and historical writing on the direction art movements take, and on the artist's renown; be self-reflexive
11. Show applied and popular arts alongside the fine arts
12. Rethink access and exhibition strategies in Prints and Drawings departments, to get away from medium based and therefore inadvertently hierarchical categorization and the impression that P&D are secondary, only a specialist's interest.
13. Open up Canada Council grants to applied and commercial artists wishing to pursue research in their fields.
14. Establish the national gallery for the applied and commercial arts recommended in 1981 by the Applebaum report.