

Daniel Rothbart: But I'm An American

Curated by Boshko Boskovic

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The Cultural Centre of Belgrade
Knez Mihailova 6
Belgrade, Serbia

A body of digital collage prints that Daniel Rothbart created in the mid 1990s critically explores the international dissemination of American art and values. With irony and humor, the artist uses his collages to “promote” his country’s art using elements from American popular culture. Rothbart carefully chooses signifiers to examine American myths such as the expansion of the Wild West, the unity of the American family and patriotism. Borrowing from the logic of commercials, slogans and political and party pamphlets, Rothbart creates satirical, tongue in cheek propaganda stories about commerce and American art.

The American avant-garde was born after the Second World War, shifting the cultural center of the West from Paris to New York City. According to Serge Guilbaut, the author of *How New York Stole The Idea of Modern Art*, the avant-garde succeeded because its values, articulated in the painters’ writings as well as images, coincided closely with the ideology that came to dominate American political life after the 1948 presidential elections. Guilbaut further discusses the emphasis placed on New York art as crucial to the development of all art and how it emerged as a final expression of the long march toward the pure ideal of modern art. This theory is embodied in the formalist analysis of Alfred Barr of New York’s Museum of Modern Art and was championed by Clement Greenberg throughout his career.¹

The terms “buying” and “merchandising” are important slogans, which Daniel Rothbart continuously weaves into his work. Early on in his career, the artist actually set up a fictitious enterprise called “Semiotic Street Situations” to reinforce his belief that American art was desperately entangled in the market values of American capitalism. By inserting catchphrases like “Buy American Art,” Rothbart wittily comments on how much stress the United States of America puts on consumerism. In *Liberty*, Lady Liberty, probably the most archetypal symbol of the United States, enjoins collectors to buy American art alongside an actress holding a gun who does the same.

The idea of the frontier is one of the core defining qualities of the United States and its significance is deeply rooted in the American psyche. Beyond Art showcases the rugged landscape of the Wild West

¹Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983)

with its freely available land and the sense of unlimited opportunities, optimism and growth. This manifest destiny can be easily translated into the current trend of American contemporary art expanding into other parts of the world by way of art fairs. In order for the art market to survive it needs to continually conquer new territories.

In *Red Glare* the artist appropriates imagery of the Cold War through a family at prayer before a meal juxtaposed with an illustration of a love scene from a 1950s Western B movie. *Mother and Daughter* projects the dynamics of the Red Scare, a period in US history from the 1930s to the late 1950s that focused on native and foreign communists influencing and infiltrating the federal government. In a humorous way the artist pairs images of astronauts landing on the moon with a perfectly coiffed and dressed mid-century mother and daughter who stand in front of their suburban house. Yet something is not quite right in the scene since the mother is holding a shotgun in her hand. It is only recently that certain art historians discuss how Abstract Expressionism was used as a propaganda weapon during the Cold War. In the words of Serge Guilbaut, "Because of avant-garde art's self-proclaimed neutrality, it was soon enlisted by governmental agencies and private organizations in the fight against Soviet cultural expansion."²

Hollywood has been and remains a big part of American culture and is a source of inspiration for Rothbart. *Seven Veils* and *No Victors in the Arena* take scenes from classic Hollywood movies like *Ben Hur* and *Samson and Delilah* out of context, representing stars Charlton Heston and Hedy Lamarr in unlikely ways. Certain parallels can be drawn between the Hollywood studio system and the approach of some New York galleries. During the early years of film production, studios would invest a great deal of money to recruit, groom and contract those stars who possessed the greatest box office potential. In the art gallery system there is a similar dynamic where certain dealers invest large sums of money into lavish productions of art, in the hope of making their artists into commercial stars. In 1935 the emergence of the "talent scout system" came into being in Hollywood. In an effort to find undiscovered talent, scouts would constantly monitor Broadway, vaudeville and radio. At times they would discover a potential star out in the general public based on first impression, style or good looks. An example is how the actress Lana Turner was discovered drinking root beer on a bench outside a diner. From the year 2000 on, gallerists have been picking young emerging artists from Master of Fine Arts programs at such universities as Columbia and Yale, offering them solo and double shows after meeting them at a party. The Columbia classes of 2000 and 2001 were the first to elicit this kind of feverish market speculation, with superstars David Altmejd, Ryan Johnson and Dana Schutz at their vanguard. Zach Feuer, director of Zach Feuer LFL gallery in Chelsea, became one of the biggest promoters of this group.

Rothbart is very aware of the mechanics of the art market, which at times exploits the concepts of authenticity, originality, and uniqueness. His body of work was produced about a decade before the art market boomed in 2006, as if Rothbart could foresee the purchasing craze of American collectors during that period. When the global financial markets crashed in 2008, the art world felt its ripple effects and certain economic, ideological and symbolic systems collapsed all over the world. Nowadays contemporary art is closely tied to the circulation of capital and private property, joining an industry of artificially produced needs, conceived to please and fascinate at the same time. A perfect case in point is the newest magazine from Monaco *Luxe Immo*, which was promoted heavily during the 2011 Armory Art Fair in New York and blends the topics of luxury real estate and contemporary art from around the world.

²Ibid, p. 11.

The cultural history of the last half a century was dominated by America. The current economic changes in the world are affecting the sociopolitical landscape of the United States and we have yet to see whether New York City will retain its place as a center of cultural production. Rothbart's frontiersmen, Lady Liberty and stable of stars may or may not suffice to bolster a new American century.

Boshko Boskovic

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