

Spotlight Paper by Joe Garcia, 2017

“No Title (Stacked Plates, Butter)” 2007 by Robert Therrien



Robert Therrien:

American, Born in 1947 Chicago, Illinois and currently resides in Los Angeles, Ca.

Artists Background:

Mr. Therrien was born into a middle-class household in Chicago. The family then moved to the San Francisco Bay Area when he was 5, partly to seek treatment for his asthma.

Education:

Because he was always sick and holed up in his house, he honed a talent for drawing. After high school, he did a stint in Oakland at the California College of Arts and Crafts (now the California College of the Arts) but a missed date in traffic court and a pile of neglected warrants led him to flee to Southern California. (“It just became a nightmare,” he said).

In 1970, he enrolled in photography studies at the Brooks Institute in Santa Barbara while also studying painting at the affiliated Santa Barbara Art Institute. “I think things really changed,” he said, “when I met this one teacher” — the painter James Jarvaise, whose work had been shown at the Museum of Modern Art. Mr. Jarvaise his teacher in Santa Barbara remembers Mr. Therrien as “a very quiet fellow, and his paintings followed the same suit.” Mr. Jarvaise describes them as elegant abstractions in the lyrical style then known as Abstract Impressionism. In 1971, Therrien received a Bachelors of Fine Arts Degree at Brooks College. His then teacher encouraged Mr. Therrien to pursue a MFA degree at the University of Southern California where he got one in 1974. Therefore, his background stems from the era of emerging Pop Artists and Conceptual Revolutionaries of the 1970’s.

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While living in LA and in a loft, Therrien gained a small art following in the 1980's for his body of understated, vaguely surreal pieces like the silver-plated snowman and bronzed boater hat. At that point throughout the 1980's he was part of many exhibitions including but not limited to:

-1980: *Sculpture in California 1975-80. San Diego Museum of Art, San Diego, CA.*

-1984: *Aperto '84 XLI Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, La Biennale di Venezia, Venice Italy*

-1985: *Biennial Exhibition. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.*

-1986: *Individuals: A selected History of Contemporary Art, 1945-86. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA.*

-1987: *Small Scale Sculpture LARGE SCALE SCUPLTURE. The Atlanta College of Art, Atlanta, GA.*

-1988: *Skulptur/Sculpture, Material & Abstraction: 2x5 Positionen. Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau, Switzerland. Traveled: Musee Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne, Switzerland: The Swiss Institute and The City Gallery, New York, NY.*

-1989: *Dreams and other Works on Paper. Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, NY.*

-1990: *12th International Biennale of Drawings. Museum of Modern Art, Rijeka, Yugoslavia.*

-1991: *Lafrenz Collection, Hamburg. Neues Museum, Bremen, Germany.*

-1992: *Documenta IX. Museum Fridericianum. Kassel, Germany.*

Therrien's real breakthrough and the magic came in 1992 when he studied photography and started taking pictures of spaces under wooden tables. He was fascinated by the object's underside and by the hidden engineering details made visible in the photos. "It would be perfect just to have that as a sculpture," Mr. Therrien recalls thinking. He set out to make a table that was so big that viewers could get a good look at its details, as they would in one of his photographs. The object he ended up fabricating, which was 10 feet tall, became the first in a series of household goods that he has scaled up to three and a half times their normal size.

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Influences: Mass culture, Cartoon Forms, Industrial Materials and Domestic Objects. Therrien is interested in everyday life and objects. He has repeated this theme in all of his works.

Art Movement: Pop Art, Conceptual Art, Sculpture, Structure and Minimalism and Contemporary Art.

Medium: Plastic, 20 Individually stamped and numbered by manufacturer.

94 x 54 x 54 in –The sculpture is almost approximately 8ft tall.

Technique / Methodology:

Therrien uses real china plates to make “models” of the work and then photographs it. The photographs not only help to frame the sculpture’s perspective but it also determines the size of the piece. The plates were manufactured using a commercial plastic technique. The “style” of the plates derives from the most popular brand name of dinnerware molded from melamine resin most popular in the 1940’s through the 1960’s called Melmac. Like many of his works, Mr. Therrien’s sculpture invites you to walk around the plates as they create an optical illusion and a somewhat “dizzy sensation”. It’s almost as if the plates were spinning. Magic occurs and the line between people and object becomes blurred. The plates actually come to life and the plates then start to animate. The effect also makes this particular piece a bit more fun, whimsical and less serious.

Artists Impact on the art world:

Like Andy Warhol and Lynn Foulkes, Therrien takes familiar elements from daily life or Pop-ular culture and creates something new-An art object. We can also compare Mr. Therrien’s work to twentieth century artists as diverse as Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, and Jeff Koons. He has even shown work alongside newer contemporary artists such as Doug Aitken and older contemporary artists such as John Baldessari in 2007 at the Spruth Magers Munich Gallery. One of the main threads/common factors between some of these artists could be that they all used found objects and integrate them into their work. The shape, the color, the size! They all POP! They are all objects, colors and icons taken from aspects of American life that seem very familiar. There’s definitely an underlying message of a child’s point of view as seen with the “Alice in Wonderland” stories.

The main reason why I chose “the plates” is because I instantly knew that they were influenced heavily by the 50’s and 60’s design. I also genuinely enjoy happy and POP-py art. I love the feeling when a person sees “the plates” for the first time and you cannot stop from smiling or having a quick laugh because you know what they are, what they remind you of and what era they can possibly be from the minute you see them. I personally love everything Disney and in further researching Mr. Therrien, I also found that he was heavily influenced by old cartoons (animation) from an early Disney era and

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how they worked with the idea of iconography & the world of objects as if you are viewing his artwork from a “fun” cartoon perspective and landscape. How fun is that??? One can say that the similarities between how Disney and Therrien saw the world thru the child “lens” is spot on.

Joe’s Analysis on the artwork at PSAM:

The viewer can picture themselves as “Alice” traveling into a world of whimsy, then falling into a hole and landing in a land where everything is GIANT but yet recognizable. “Hey, I know that chair. I recognize that table! I love those plates. I *KNOW* those plates. That reminds me of a cartoon or when I was just a kid...” Just as Alice entered this mysterious world with giant objects think of the emotions she felt as she saw each thing. One can say the same about **No Title (Stacked Plates, Butter) 2007** and the fun yet humorous emotions you feel as you stare and go around the plates. The plates become a sort of blast to the past!!! Also in talking about the word Kitsch and describing “the plates” there’s no way you cannot read the description of it’s meaning and not use the word. Kitsch refers to a mass produced design used in popular culture such as the plates. One can also say that “Kitsch Art” is closely associated with sentimental art. There is a strong emotion and sentiment on first glance at “the plates”. Kitsch is a humorous way of describing something and it’s aesthetic. For example, the color of the plates-I always look at color and try to analyze what the intent of the artist was behind the colors of the piece. The color of the plates is also something to point out and the name related to the piece, butter. Butter has a pale yellow color, but varies from deep yellow to nearly white. Yellow is a color that evokes amusement, gentleness and spontaneity. In other parts of the world it is seen as the color of happiness, glory, wisdom, harmony and culture. As an adult you may be instantly connected to the piece because the plates are a “nod” to the plate design used every day by ordinary people using ordinary objects during the 1950’s-1970’s. As we explore deeper in the plates, we can say Mr. Therrien’s **No Title (Stacked Plates, Butter) 2007** celebrates the values and elements of modern pop culture just like other works in the Palm Springs Art Museum. Ask yourself? For example, isn’t *Yoshitomo Nara’s Your Dog* in the same pop realm? It’s an oversized simple dog with fun humorous colors that plays with *scale and proportion* just like the plates. One can also relate *Erwin Wurm’s “Fat Car” 2001* and its humorous point of view on an everyday object, a car. Interestingly the colors are somewhat on the same yellowish-white hue. Erwin Wurm’s philosophies have a fun side along with sarcasm as he plays with form. The everyday objects used by Wurm are not only familiar but they manipulate reality. The similarities end because one can say that Wurm displays more of a disturbing and distorted view where as Therrien’s view is much brighter with a sense of happy playful physical associations. Another piece in the PSAM collection that one can compare to “the plates” is *John Chamberlain’s Bees Knees, 1988*. Chamberlain’s sculptures are made of crushed sheet metal that is used in everyday automobiles. An automobile is an everyday found object just as a plate is and Chamberlain’s artwork is also known to use plastic, foam rubber, collage, drawing and painting just like in Therrien’s aesthetic. Chamberlain’s works of art recall an era of American pop culture where there is a “tongue in cheek” ideology involved yet playful

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narrative that plays with the viewer's perspective. The similarities continue because Chamberlain's sculpture also plays with "size" and piecing together elements that embody dynamic movement.

In conclusion, Mr. Therrien continues to exhibit and make art today. His latest works in 2017 are shown at the Gagosian in New York. He also had a solo exhibit last year, Robert Therrien: Works 1975-1995. Parasol Unit Foundation for Contemporary Art in London, England. The Broad in Los Angeles, California is also shown one of his more recent works, Under The Table, 1994.

Quote: "I try to stay with themes or objects or sources I can trace to my personal history. The further back I can trace something as being meaningful to me in some way or another...the more I am attracted to it."

Museum Owned:

Museum purchase with funds provided by The Contemporary Art Council, Donna and Cargill MacMillan, Jr. and funds derived from a previous gift from Mr. and Mrs. Samuel H. Maslon

Bibliography/Resources:

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