
Pro Rege

Volume 42
Number 2 *Fine Arts Issue 2013*

Article 26

December 2013

Thoughts of Matthew Drissell at the Opening Reception for the Show Shelf Life

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Recommended Citation

Drissell, Matt (2013) "Thoughts of Matthew Drissell at the Opening Reception for the Show Shelf Life," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 42: No. 2, 31.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol42/iss2/26

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My family and I were about to enjoy an ice cream sundae last summer when my wife, Becky, pointed out the beautiful spirals made as the caramel sauce oozed onto the scoops vanilla ice cream. We began to wonder if it would be possible to somehow preserve these artistic marks. In the past, I have encouraged my painting students to pursue alternative painting methods, so I decided to take my own advice. As I gathered materials from Hy-Vee, Walmart, and Fairway, I noted the way the ingredients of the treats (poly-sorbate 60, TBHQ, sodium hexametaphosphate) and my fixative, polyurethane, even sound like linguistic cousins. Dripping, smearing, splashing, and painting the materials onto panels, I created, unsure of what would happen, what would result— but some did survive, as you see here.

The Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis has just opened an exhibition called *Painter Painter*. This show features a variety of abstract paintings created by contemporary artists. One of the curators for the exhibition, Eric Crosby, considers the significance of painting in the 21st century when he says, “There’s ...something about the resolute materiality of painting that continues to attract artists. These are objects that follow deeply subjective and individual ways of thinking, as expressed through specific materials.” Also, “Painting offers a frame for contact with this very physical presence. It’s a vivid contrast with our daily routine, where we experience so many images by using a cursor, linking to them, altering them, navigating away from them. Painting resists this kind of experience. A lot of artists today embrace that notion to an extreme. They go where the materials take them, not where the history of painting tells them to go” (February 2–October 27, 2013).

I too, seek to explore with paint. Though I have trained using venerable oil paint, I do not believe that paintings should be limited to only traditional understandings of media or method. That is not to say that I have turned my back on tradition or my illusionistic representational abilities; instead, I want to be creatively flexible.

I also wanted to explore these mediums as they allow me to bring together two disparate sensibilities from the mid- 20th century. The 1950s were the peak for abstract expressionism, an American modernist art movement that sought universal connection through the abstract use of formal artistic elements and principles (line, shape, color, balance, harmony). The renowned art critic Clement Greenberg epitomizes this belief. Arthur Danto summarizes Greenberg’s legacy in his essay titled “Abstraction,” where he writes,

Modernism, so understood, is the progressive unconcealing of the material truth of paintings as physical objects.... Modernist art in general was about its material conditions, while the mere physical objects that works outwardly resemble were not about anything at all. Modern art was ultimately about itself; the subject was art. (195)

Celebrating the physicality of paint is worthwhile, but when form became supreme, the works’ content was often

cast aside as irrelevant. My paintings are reminiscent of the formal explorations of this modern era, yet I hold their content just as essential as form; thus my medium is the physical and symbolic processed food product.

Post-war America, along with the heyday of modern art, also saw the rise of the modern food industry, with numerous developments in both the chemistry lab and on the farm that allowed food to become a quick, easy, and inexpensive affair. Certainly we live with this legacy today – the following is from the Arthur Daniels Midland (ADM) website:

Think about your favorite meal, and there’s an excellent chance that something you love about its taste, texture, nutrition or convenience comes from ingredients produced by ADM.

That’s because for generations, we’ve processed crops — such as corn, wheat, oilseeds and cocoa — into a vast array of ingredients our customers use to satisfy people’s desire for quality and variety in the foods they love.

Whether it’s savory, sweet, tart, tangy, tender, chewy, crispy, satisfying, rich or simply delicious—we make the ingredients that make foods taste great.

According to the 2009 USDA Economics Research Data, via the *New York Times*, Americans eat 31 percent more packaged food than fresh food, and they consume more packaged food per person (787 pounds per capita) than their counterparts in nearly all other countries. This shift has dramatically changed the American lifestyle – it certainly is much easier to turn to prepackaged food, though this ease has driven out some of the tradition and effort previously welcomed in the kitchen.

I see similarities with both of the modern tendencies. On the surface, both are appealing, as they are accessible, less messy, and more efficient. But with both, there is a deliberate disregard of the externalities, a tendency to push things aside, hoping to ignore them—whether it is the artist’s intentions, the viewer’s unique experience, or the rise in diabetes and the degradation of the environment. My *Shelf Life* paintings reflect upon the two legacies, exploring their attraction and decadence. And I wonder: just what kind of existence does a shelf life offer?

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