

Everybody Likes “Like Art”

“Like Art,” a type of bright, attention-grabbing work that aims for easy acceptance by servicing screen-tap culture, is everywhere.

by Rob Colvin

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Print



Shara Hughes, “Lake Norway” (2016), oil and enamel on canvas, 60 x 52 in, Rachel Uffner, NADA Miami Beach 2016 (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

You’ve seen it before. It caught your eye. You smiled. Maybe at Frieze, Art Basel, the Armory Show, or NADA. Or it wasn’t there. It was at a gallery

on the Lower East Side, or maybe in Chelsea. But it could've been on your computer. No, actually it was on your phone. Facebook? Wait, it was Instagram.

It's everywhere, actually, and it's called "Like Art." It is art that looks very much like art you've already seen, that you know very well, and that you already like. Who doesn't like Henri Matisse? Those sensuous curves and colorful overlaps of otherwise flattened planes. Pablo Picasso, too, and his architectonic forms and bold exaggerations. There are also the elegant anthropomorphisms of Georgia O'Keeffe. Run through 20th-century art and hit the high points, especially the most chromatic ones — like Judy Chicago's work, or Ellsworth Kelly's. If it's a recognizable style, motif, or gesture, it's probably in the database from which Like Art — or work that merely looks "like" art — is generated. It gets shipped from a Brooklyn studio to an art fair booth in Miami Beach, possibly still wet, but priced just right. That price is two digits shorter than the secondary market painting the work is derived from and gets curated next to. It's "the look for less," with no greater aesthetic aspirations. It lives for heart taps, thumbs-up clicks, and space on people's walls — digital or brick-and-mortar.

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But before we look at rainbow vaginas and pretend Picassos, let's exhume Zombie Formalism. That was the line of recycled abstraction out of your budget; it was monotone and pretentiously boring. Critics killed it. John Yau's "What Happens When We Run Out of Styles?" woke the art world from its dogmatic slumber. Martin Mugar coined "Zombie Formalism" and framed the phenomenon philosophically. Walter Robinson, who may have used the term independently, outlined the target in "Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism." Jerry Saltz then brought down the house with "Zombies on the Walls." Artists including Jacob Kassay, Wade Guyton, Dan Colen, Josh Smith, Oscar Murillo, Charline von Heyl, and Lucien Smith hit the floor.

Like Art is Zombie Formalism resurrected. It's a market transfiguration. It's a "simulacrum of originality" (Robinson) to "look like paintings, act like paintings" (Mugar) and to be sold as "a good-looking product" (Yau). It's "decorator-

friendly” but “offers no insight into anything at all” (Saltz). If Zombie Formalism tended toward minimalism, Like Art is maximalist: bright colors, attention-grabbing, and romanticizing. Zombie Formalism was self-serious and mumbled about the death of painting. It appropriated appropriators. Like Art, by contrast, texts with its friends, orders shots, dances to remixes, and stays upbeat.

Alexander Herzog, “Single-hip toss” (2016), oil on LDF panel, 45 x 45 in, Jack Geary, NADA Miami 2016

What does Like Art look like? There are a variety of forms, but most are in painting, the medium most distributed in galleries and fairs, and sometimes sculpture. Take, for example, Justin Adian, Daniel Boccato, Austin Eddy, and Genieve Figgis. These artists infantilize other art. Adian makes marshmallow versions of Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, and Robert Mangold. The colors are more confectioned and his pastel pieces appear seasonal, like Easter candy. Boccato also makes puffy pieces pulling from post-Minimalism. Eddy endlessly rejiggers jigsaw puzzle pieces made out of Hans Arp’s and Picasso’s shapes. Art can be a game — just ask Wittgenstein — but there are no unexpected moves here. Figgis chooses famous works or iconic subjects and remakes them. Her fluidic paint makes the scenes appear melted, a childlike kind of reverence gone awry. In December, I gave a presentation titled “Crapstraction to Like Art” to students at the New York Academy of Art, and they defended Figgis, persuasively, for having a vision beyond her application style. Maybe this type of work is more than likable after all.

Respectable Like Art exists. John McAllister and Loie Hollowell make paintings that, however blunt (or seemingly gendered) their influences are, hold their own as self-contained, compositionally solid works. They embody sensibilities unique to their makers. McAllister doesn’t seem interested in walking very far out of Matisse’s shadow. But his reduced color palette, pleasing still, is both a compliment and complement to Matisse’s, rather than being the same. Hollowell is happy to sit between Georgia O’Keeffe and Judy Chicago, taking motifs from both. (There are, incidentally, lots of vaginas in Like Art.) Yet, by virtue of her formal rigor and compositional efforts, Hollowell’s work is appreciably more than the sum of its parts.

Alex Chaves, "Fitch" (2016), oil on canvas (left), Alex Chaves, "Keke" (2016), oil on canvas (right), at Martos Gallery, NADA Miami Beach 2016

It is very difficult for an artist to make work dissimilar to that of the artists who inspire them. To make a work that is truly one's own there must be several layers of transformation from the initial inspiration. For instance, Donald Judd cites

Lee Bontecou as important to Minimalism, but her work doesn't leap to mind when seeing his. Like Art is different. It has no pretension of moving past its own influences, better seen as appropriations. Doing so would risk its likability, its dependency on pre-established tastes. It would take on the very challenges the art it borrows from once took.

The art of Shara Hughes, Alex Chaves, Alexander Herzog, Denise Kupferschmidt, Daniel Heidkamp, Max Maslansky, Scott Olson, and Adrian Ghenie is up front about its influences and impulses. Hughes likes David Hockney and Edvard Munch, whipping them into pictures that are hard to not like. Chaves goes full Crayola with his palette, a recurring feature in Like Art, but can't he do more with his interest in Picasso? Herzog hearts Jonathan Lasker, as Kupferschmidt does Matisse. Heidkamp likes Fairfield Porter as much as I do. Maslansky likes Ed Paschke's faces, especially that signature bright red nose. Olson manages to synthesize Picasso, Joan Miró, and Robert Delaunay. Ghenie makes pricey omelettes out of Francis Bacon and Vincent van Gogh. Add more names to the list of influencers and the influenced at this week's art fairs. If you're staying home, tally a few on Instagram with @whos____who.



Denise Kupferschmidt, “Shoes (Blue)” (2016), acrylic on canvas, 72 x 50 in (left), Denise Kupferschmidt, Sumi ink on paper (right), Halsey McKay Gallery, NADA Miami Beach 2016

One reason to be critical of Like Art is its unwillingness to take artistic risks. It aims instead for easy acceptance by servicing screen-tap culture. Quick affirmations run counter to the treacherous work of self-reflexivity and the uncomfortable experiences — even failures — that generate art worth holding onto. “What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity,” Matisse said, “something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.” Like Art isn’t dreaming, it’s sitting in other artists’ chairs.