

Roger Brown—Grappling with Authorship and Acceptance in the Pop Art of Roger Brown

June 6, 2017

Sara Rose Sharp
Hyperallergic

HYPERALLERGIC



A pair of exhibitions at Kavi Gupta gallery places the artist's paintings and sculptures in dialogue with arrangements of objects from his personal collections.

CHICAGO — The tendency of Pop artists to collect objects makes perfect sense: their practice is rooted in absorbing and remixing the available culture. At Kavi Gupta gallery, a retrospective pairs Roger Brown: Estate Paintings, a selection of paintings and sculptures by the seminal Imagist artist, with Collecting came quite natural for me, a series of recreated assemblages of objects in Brown's personal collections from his home in La Conchita, California. Brown was a voracious collector of outsider art and cultural ephemera, and the eclectic tableaux on the second floor at Kavi Gupta contain a great deal of information that bears directly on his playful and cartoony

paintings on the first.

With recurring themes of political alliance and espionage, callouts of celebrity culture, and a motif of tall buildings populated by indistinct figures, Brown's visual lexicon feels remarkably prescient of our current moment. Perhaps this is because, as a queer man living through the devastating 1980s AIDS crisis, Brown witnessed many of the failures and intentional cruelties of the systems of US governance that are only now being recognized by mainstream society. In this way, art made by artists who come from marginalized populations might be treated as a prognosticator for issues that will become central to society. It's impossible to look at such late works by Brown as "The War We Won" (1991), with its quartet of grinning politicians, or the environmentally pointed "Landscape With Dollar Sign" (1991) and not see the hot-button issues of our era — to say nothing of the haunting echoes in his repeated images of burning or crumbling skyscrapers.

Looking through his collections, one wonders if Brown used the work of outsider artists to presage his own. One of his paintings, "Veronica's Landscape" (1988), contains the easily identifiable visage of Jesus embedded in a farm-like grid of brown and green rows; it also mirrors very closely a concave portrait, "Jesus," made by an unknown artist in slip-cast ceramic, glaze, and paint, that's included within Brown's "Jesus Table" arrangement upstairs. Arguably, many portraits of Jesus bear common characteristics, but equally possible is that Brown drew inspiration from or perceived a kinship with the work of makers who were left nameless and considered outside the world of "real" artists.

As someone who struggles with the schism between outsider and insider art, I found the tandem shows of Brown's created and collected objects to be at once deeply validating and vaguely infuriating. An appreciation and understanding of art can of course be cultivated through dedicated practice and study, and Brown's aesthetics are unimpeachable. His capacity to digest and deploy the visual languages of advertising, celebrity culture, and cartooning puts him in the company of a cohort including John Baldessari and Andy Warhol — a comparison made in detail in Kavi Gupta's gallery guide.

But, like Warhol, Brown was awarded recognition and monetary compensation for identifying and uplifting commonplace objects as art, as though no one had previously made aesthetic choices about them. Warhol's Brillo Boxes (Soap Pads) (1964) were designed by artist James Harvey. Brown's "Rosa California" (1994) might be likened to or directly lifted from the "El Nopal" card, number 39 in the Lotería decks that can be purchased from any mercado (Lotería was invented in 15th-century Italy, and its original artist is unknown, as are the countless creators who've since executed their own variations). The repeating cloud forms and other background patterns and motifs in Brown's work come from a lineage of ornamental and heritage arts, so often attributed to unnamed craftspeople.

Standing in the midst of Brown's exhibitions, I couldn't help but question the politics of who gets to be an artist and who's considered the art world equivalent of a noble savage. Those unknown makers were not blindly groping through their choices; they relied on the same base components of intuition, inspiration, and learned knowledge that guide much creative output. There's a longstanding bias toward recognizing that which consciously references and leverages the canon as art, without much acknowledgement that the canon has always been slow to accept anything that's not Eurocentric and produced by men. It's the art world equivalent of having an idea ignored and then stolen through reiteration by a male colleague at a meeting.

That Brown chose to surround himself with such a mix of objects, flattening the hierarchy between a “fine art” piece purchased at auction and one bought off a serape laid out by the roadside, suggests that he acknowledged them as belonging to the same whole. That he further flattened the usual distinctions by creating “collaborative” compositions — in which his own paintings serve as backgrounds for sets of found ceramics — implies that the question of artistic acceptance was central to his late practice. In this sense, his Virtual Still Life series (1995) might be seen as the ultimate synthesis of his work as a painter and as a collector. The exhibitions at Kavi Gupta offer not only a compelling survey of that work, but an opportunity for visitors to examine our own prejudices regarding artistic authorship.

