

December 24, 2006

LOS ANGELES TIMES

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

The new Pop is everywhere you look

By Christopher Knight, Times Staff Writer

POP art is back. Everywhere you look, from galleries and museums to art fairs and international biennials, the intersection of art culture with popular culture is apparent.

In fact, it's one big traffic jam. Typically the best art engages with the circumstances of its creation, so one might even say most art is Pop art now.

The new Pop is not a style or a movement, as it was in the 1960s. It's a zeitgeist, the spirit of the 21st century. Today's art operates as a distinctive niche within the larger sphere of popular entertainment. Contained by that bigger universe, which I think of as the Cultural Industrial Complex, art ranks among the liveliest, most resonant galaxies.

The Cultural Industrial Complex generates a dizzying range of activity. A fractional accounting includes paintings, movies, reality TV, plays, art museum exhibitions, department store displays, agitprop video, philharmonic concerts, video games, the Cannes Film Festival, the Venice Biennale, the Ultimate Fighting Championship, Chinatown galleries, starchitects, celebutantes, books, iPods, YouTube, digital photographs, light sculpture, runway couture, art fairs, freeway murals, "American Idol," the Turner Prize, the Heisman Trophy, ad infinitum. Its contours are unbounded and, like nature's universe, steadily expanding.

Popular culture used to be synonymous with mass culture, but now it's a vast niche society. When broadcasting has shattered into narrowcasting, 500 cable channels have elbowed aside the networks, Internet democracy is emergent, and Berlin, London, New York and Los Angeles are being joined by Beijing as art-production centers, a winner-take-all attitude doesn't make sense. A niche can remain small, relative to the mass market, while still being big enough and strong enough to sustain itself and prosper.

Sixties Pop was born of the counterculture. It spoke of a democratic hope for social equality through opposition to an aristocratic status quo. That turned out to be a sweetly idealized, even fatal fiction. The myth proposed that it was possible to stand outside society's corrupted network of relations — Gauguin in Tahiti, hippies in the Fillmore — when in fact there was no escape.

The new Pop is different. It wears its social membership on its sleeve, insisting on the centrality of its niche.

Some people refuse to believe what's happened, as if denial will make it go away. Conservative naysayers especially decry the fact of art's standing as entertainment, claiming it's a sure sign of Western Civilization's Decline and Fall. (For a foggy, the adjective "mere" inevitably precedes entertainment.) They pine for an Ancien Régime of insufferable artistic privilege.

But in L.A., of all cities, the truth should be self-evident. Los Angeles is where the Big Bang happened — the primeval, subatomic metroplex where the CIC universe exploded.

The old distinction between art and entertainment used to be characterized as the cultural difference between High art and Low art. Any Jackson Pollock painting was "better than" any Ernie Kovacs television show — as if a sane person could really construct a rational method to compare the two.

When Clement Greenberg — the late, great and profoundly wrong art critic — wrote his seminal 1939 essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," he indulged in just such category confusion. Still, the essay is the foundation document for the High-Low schism in American art.

It also sealed the fate of L.A. art for 50 years. If one believed the critic's formulation — and eventually almost everyone did — the incipient New York School represented the rigorous avant-garde, transplanted to American shores from Europe. Meanwhile, poor Tinsel Town was stuck representing the frivolous fountain of dangerous kitsch, fouling any cultural product manufactured in its shadow.

Notice, however, the date of Greenberg's essay.

"Avant-Garde and Kitsch" appeared just nine months before Hitler's armies marched into Paris. Modern art's capital city is where the concept — and the word — for an artistic avant-garde had been adapted from French military terminology. Culturally it had come to describe art's leading edge. Kitsch — not by accident a German word, loosely meaning trash — was said to be its mortal enemy.

When the critic wrote, Modern European culture trembled beneath the Nazi boot. Kitsch-meisters soon occupied the avant-garde's City of Light.

Greenberg's fierce battle for the soul of art, waged between caricatures of French and German aesthetic concepts, was 20th century America's original culture war. The fight is long since over, but post-traumatic stress is hard to shake. The false qualitative distinction between High and Low — false because it inevitably breaks along establishment lines of class and power — is art's phantom limb.

The only distinction that truly matters is the one between good art and bad art, accounting for all the shades of gray in between. Jackson Pollock's paintings are better than Robert Motherwell's. "The Ernie Kovacs Show" is better television than "The Adventures of Superman." Arguing the reasons sharpens perception.

By contrast, ranking a painting against a TV show is just dumb — not to mention undemocratic. The measure of moral and intellectual status does not derive from hereditary social station, as if painting is for princes and television is for scullery maids. I'd as soon look at a "Six Feet Under" episode as a Lucian Freud painting any day.

Speaking of Clark Kent, Pop art in the 1960s turned out to be Greenberg's Kryptonite. Edward Ruscha and Andy Warhol, Depression-era babies from Omaha and Pittsburgh, brought their hardscrabble pasts with them when they high-tailed it to opposite coasts as young men. Both knew something crucial: In American art's democratic lexicon, every avant-garde idea could be represented in kitsch terms of popular entertainment.

In a famous 1943 letter to the New York Times, budding Abstract Expressionist painters Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb wrote "only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless." For Greenberg's avant-garde, the tragic and the timeless meant abstract painting. In Warhol's hands it would mean the numinous mystery of Marilyn Monroe's shocking suicide and the national trauma of Jackie Kennedy's widowhood, chronicled in the tabloids.

Ruscha employed unvarnished commercial-design techniques — the sleek stuff of Madison Avenue, not the scruffy downtown art scene — to make poured maple syrup illustrate "drip painting," while ketchup, egg yolk and fruit juice made for nifty "stain paintings." He set the brand-new Los Angeles County Museum of Art on pictorial fire, burning down the latest palatial American country house erected to hold remnants of art history's European aristocracy.

Forty years on, those who still refuse to accept art as entertainment blame "the '60s," just as conservatives blame the era for most everything they dislike since America lost the Vietnam War. Then as now, a refusal to face facts brings disastrous consequences. But America's conservative tilt since 1980 is giving way, and populism is rising up to defy establishment power.

So there's hope. If you doubt it, drop in at LACMA today. A clearer, more visceral articulation of the Cultural Industrial Complex would be harder to imagine than the current exhibition. It chronicles relationships between the Belgian Surrealist painter René Magritte (1898-1967), whose lifespan exactly coincides with popular culture's emergence, and a wide variety of current art. It also includes a display of record album covers inspired by Magritte's paintings.

There were, generally speaking, two kinds of Surrealist painting. The abstract kind, typified by Joan Miró and Jean (Hans) Arp, was instantly revered among the avant-garde; the illusionistic kind, typified by Magritte and Salvador Dali, was greeted with skepticism.

The two kinds of Surrealism had two different audiences. The abstract version spoke the patois of the avant-garde, but illusionism was the lingua franca of the masses. Dali, not

Miró, was the obvious choice to design the dream sequence in Alfred Hitchcock's 1945 film "Spellbound." (Magritte disdained psychoanalysis, the movie's theme.)

William Golden's 1952 logo for the CBS Television network — a cloud-filled eyeball — recalls the Surrealist's earlier canvas, "The False Mirror," not in the show. (CBS Chairman William S. Paley was president of the Museum of Modern Art, which owns the work.) Part of the art-world skepticism toward Magritte and Dali, which didn't apply to Miró or Arp, derived from this distinction — from the opposition between art culture, perceived to be serious and principled, and popular culture, seen as frivolous and unscrupulous.

But for all of them, the line in the sand once drawn between art culture and popular culture — or between High art and Low art — was very real. The tides of history have now washed that line away. In the windows of the global chain of Louis Vuitton stores right now, the Danish artist Olafur Eliasson has installed a magnificent edition of intense, abstract light-sculptures, which look something like a cross between a fashion photographer's light stand and an enormous, mechanical eyeball.

Magritte to Golden to Eliasson — art finally matters in the Cultural Industrial Complex. It's one small step for artists, one giant step for art.

christopher.knight@latimes.com