

BLOUINARTINFO

Walter Robinson's Arresting "Americans" at Vito Schnabel

by Nicholas Forrest
August 21, 2017



Installation view, Walter Robinson, *The Americans*, Vito Schnabel Gallery, St. Moritz, 2017
© Walter Robinson; Courtesy the Artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery; Photo by Stefan Altenburger

Walter Robinson has been at the forefront of the American art scene for decades, both as an art critic and artist. But it's only in the last few years that his role as an artist has begun to be given the level of recognition and attention that it deserves.

"Walter painted Nurse Paintings before Richard Prince and Spin Paintings before Damien Hirst. He has long been at the center of the art community but his modest manner and his disdain for aggressive careerism have left his work less recognized than it should be," art dealer Jeffrey Deitch has said.

Doing its part to celebrate Robinson's important contributions to the fabric of contemporary American art history, Vito Schnabel Gallery is presenting a solo exhibition of Robinson's work at its space in St. Moritz Switzerland until September 2.

Titled *The Americans*, the exhibition includes new paintings from Robinson's critically acclaimed "Romance" series, which features depictions of scenes from the covers of paperback romance novels painted on bed sheets, as well as two works in the same series from 1986.

Robison emerged in the 1980s alongside the likes of Cindy Sherman, Julian Schnabel, and Richard Prince as a key figure in the Pictures Generation - a group of American artists who were known for appropriating images from the mass media as a way of critically analyzing media culture.

He describes the central theme of his work as being at base level about appetites, from the sexual to the culinary, which are at the very core of the mechanisms of desire and seduction that are throughout popular culture and the mass media as a way of attracting consumers.

WALTER ROBINSON

Describing the patterned bed sheets he paints on as “a metaphor for the continuous field of consciousness,” Robinson says that “Bed sheets serve as an almost universal accessory to elemental manifestations of desire.”

“Also amusing is the thought that bed sheets are horizontal in the dark and hung vertical to dry in the sunshine,” he adds. “Nature is horizontal and culture is vertical, and a patterned bed sheet introduces the whimsical curlicues of the social imagination into the horizontal biological realm.”

The genius of Robinson’s work is the way it elucidates the mechanics and dynamics of the way we perceive and interpret the visual stimuli that we are fed every day through the outlets of popular culture and mass media that shape our actions as consumers and users.

By filtering recognizable and familiar contemporary imagery through the prism of a “high art” painterly tradition, Robinson recontextualizes the subject matter to generate an entirely new and fresh frame of reference, prompting viewers to reconsider the way they process visual information.

As the works in the *The Americans* reveal, Robinson prompts and evokes his viewers to reanalyze and reevaluate their interactions with consumer and mass media imagery by confronting them with an entirely new image making convention.

He does this by cohesively combining the seemingly incompatible traditions of popular culture and high culture, which although aesthetically and conceptually divergent, are actually both essentially products of the desire and seduction.

To find out more about his exhibition at Vito Schnabel Gallery, *BLOUIN ARTINFO*'s Nicholas Forrest got in touch with Robinson and asked him a few questions.

What are the works you are showing in *The Americans* at Vito Schnabel Gallery?

We have 16 paintings, mostly melodramatic close-ups done in acrylic paint on patterned twin bed sheets, typically measuring 96 x 66 in.

How does the exhibition represent and reflect the primary philosophy and methodology that defines and characterizes your unique aesthetic?

The idea here is to create a spectacular environment that



gives an impression of the passion and violence at the heart of the American delirium.

What are the main motivations and inspirations behind your work?

Impulsive desires and idle appetites, I would say. Some days it's cheeseburgers, other days it's salads. Sometimes it's striped shirts, others it's swimsuits with polka-dots.

What made you put down your paintbrush in the '80s and then take up painting again in the mid-2000s?

Oh, I never stopped painting, I just shifted my focus to adventures in art criticism. You know, working in the studio is a monogamous practice, you're devoted to one person, yourself, while writing criticism is polyamorous, like going with somebody different every time. Around 1986 art criticism came onto me in a major way. I'm a gentleman so I was polite and gave it what it needed.

How and why did you come to use covers of paperback romance novels in your work?

Well do I remember the inspired contrariness that had me start painting these simple scenes of languid passion. But even more important was the good impression my tyro daubs had on visitors to our SoHo loft. People liked what I was doing. Before long word got to my old friend Helene Winer, who had just founded Metro Pictures, and she phoned up and asked if I had anything to show her. At that point my fate was sealed.

You describe the central theme of your work as being "about appetite." Could you elaborate on this and explain why appetite is such an intriguing and relevant subject to you?

Well, we begin with biology, don't we, with nature and evolution and all those real, material, concrete things we describe with the natural sciences. All this, the life force that makes the world what it is, manifests in our own appetites, common and multiple and ordinary though they be. Animal spirits flow through these very conventional images and give them a pre-linguistic emotional presence that somehow constitutes consciousness. It's a good project, I think.



WALTER ROBINSON



Installation view, Walter Robinson, *The Americans*, Vito Schnabel Gallery, St. Moritz, 2017. © Walter Robinson; Courtesy the Artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery; Photos by Stefan Altenburger