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REPRODUCTION AS A SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH METHOD: "NUDE IN A HAMMOCK"

Abstract: Visual studies firstly encompass an aesthetical component determined by form, color, compositional balance and secondly a semiotic component when it comes to perceiving images. Their message can be understood and assimilated on both levels, formal and content-related with the help of deconstruction.
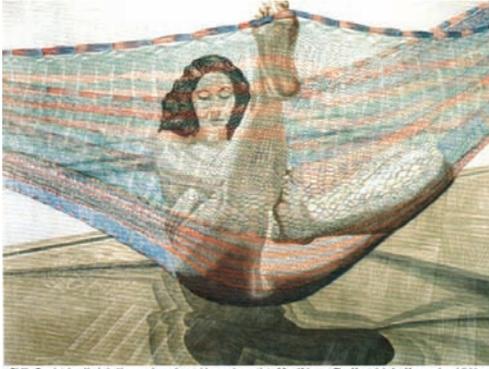
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"It's easy to criticize" it's something we hear all the time. "Try doing it yourself" follows. The relationship between theory and practice is crucial when it comes to art as a knowledge product. Knowledge is generated when interviening, when actively participating in the creative process, when one reflects about it. "Ioana in a hammock" is the result of my reproduction of Philip Pearlstein's realist painting "Nude in a hammock" for my "Images Analysis" class taught by conf. univ. dr. Doru Pop. The assignment was to reproduce a realist painting with the help of photography. My choice for this aquatint was a personal one, of course. As soon as I saw it, I empathized with the character, but didn't know why. Most of Pearlstein's nudes contain the human body in an apparenlty relaxed position while having the "je ne sais quoi", an inexplicable charm.

The first level of interpretation, descri-bed by Erwin Panofsky (1972) in his iconological studies, is the formal one belonging to the natural subject, based on the experience one has in everyday life: a

Philip Pearlstein - *Nude in Hammock* - color etching and aquatint, 36 x 48 in. - at The Montclair Art Museum's exhibition includes paintings, watercolors, drawings, and prints that cover Pearlstein's art from 1940 through 2008.

woman in a hammock, in a room. Three light projectors, a hammock and my model - it wasn't going to be an impossible image to reproduce, I thought. But if I were to go further with my analysis, to the second level in the Panofskyan approach, then I could make an analogy of the hammock with a mother's womb. The curve drawn by the hammock under the woman's weight and the sensation of hanging in the air or being carried takes the viewer onto the intrauterine stage of development, towards the relationship between the mother and the fetus. That's why the third – and last – level of interpretation is content- related, expresses the meaning deliberated by the author and it has to do with the woman's position. Even though the hammock is a means of relaxation, the way she holds her legs contradicts with an impression of her being fully relaxed. In fact, the woman is trying really hard to keep herself in balance having her right leg really tensed propped by her left one. Even though Pearlstein doesn't care much for facial expressivity in this case specifically her closed eyes exclude any dialogue with the viewer in exchange for a self-

evaluation. This intimate and melancholic moment is portrayed by Pearlstein very carefully, very meticulous having had paid great attention to detail especially when painting the hammock strings and the woman anatomy. Lightning plays a very important role in this composition because the shadows on the floor balance the central subject.

Mimesis, as a creative process constructs another version of the original. There's no "simple reproduction" of an artwork, Estelle Barret states in her study entitled *"Practice as research: approaches to creative art enquiry"*. We can use the "personal adaptation" term. Because of the implications that come with practical research, reproduction becomes a profound way of knowledge. Above the theoretical approach propelled in "Images Analysis" class I was asked to actively involve in the creative process in order to realize that practical research often determines new ways of generating new meanings. Innovation is derived from methods that cannot be predestined; therefore the results of a practical research are usually unpredictable. It was the same for me. Theory is extremely important but the problems I had to face when actually having to take the photograph (space problems, lighting, the position of my subject) were not so easy to solve because of the technical equipment, props and my model, Ioana. But in the end, that was the challenge: finding solutions in situ. Heidegger said that theory and ideas are rather the result of practice not vice versa. Once a system evolved to a critical

point, new properties will appear which will be liable to exploit in order to reach innovation.

I wanted to have a hammock as close to Pearlstein's as possible so I ordered an almost identical one from Yucatan over the Internet. I had 3 light projectors, a room with white walls and wooden floor. The first problem was hanging the hammock in the room in order to be safe for Ioana to take her position. Creation can be collaborative so I asked my classmate Paula and a friend to help me get everything ready. We hanged the hammock from a screw in the wall on one side and from the doorknob on the other side.

I could assume that the model's position would be hard to reproduce. Ioana had to keep herself really steady in the hammock, which was hard to do because it was diagonally placed across the room. We succeeded in placing her but the shadows on the floor seemed impossible to reproduce. It was then when I realized that Pearlstein used 3 light spots coming from the ceiling. I didn't have those so however I placed the projectors my floor didn't look like Pearlestein's. It was the same with the hammock. My strings were so thick that I couldn't see her face. And the face was so clear in the painting. Optics were important as well. Pearlstein showed his own reality, something he could see with his eyes (huge depth of field) by my lens could do a 38mm (I used a general purpose, 28-105mm lens) in order to get the right composition, 1/160 shutter speed and an aperture of 4.0 because I wanted to isolate the face since I couldn't focus it very

well. Therefore, my digital reproduction of the painting (intended to be as precise as possible) is not very successful.

But the fault isn't completely mine because just as my "adaptation" suffered changes on the primary level, Pearlstein distorted reality in his studio. After completing my project I realized that the woman had unnaturally big hips (which confirms the hypothesis concerning maternity), big strong legs and muscles, that the hammock strings couldn't be that thin to make her face visible while sustaining her body and that the lights

couldn't create such concentrated shadows on the floor. So, Philip Pearlstein created the illusion of reality, or his own reality to fit his own message. For the artist, the idea of realism has nothing to do with conventional painting. Putting the easel in front of the subject and painting what you see doesn't work for him. On a contrary, he wanted the rules of the game to be apparent meaning that he consciously chose the elements in the composition, lighting and angle to look randomly when they aren't. His paintings, very mature ones, don't suggest that you step into a room and you find naked people in

different positions, because they are too concentrated, well thought of, composed with much concern. Also I could discover some sort of repetition when it comes to his models, they are always in contrast with the props: many of his paintings contain carpets in strong contrast with the human body. If I were to take a closer look at Pearlstein's painting I could see that there's a big difference between "nude", "naked" or bare. The woman's body is not sexual and does not invite the viewer to take part in the sexual act. Usually, women are somehow far away, looking outside the painting without giving any voyeuristic sensation. So the artist observed reality but its reflection in his art isn't quite neutral or objective.

Being there, in the room with my model, the hammock and everything else ready I got carried away in the creative process. The heuristic part of practice made me use my film camera, a Canon AE-1 with a 50mm lens, charged with 125 ISO Ilford film. The result is very interesting.

The face is not noticeable anymore, the composition is different and the photograph gives a dynamic sensation, like the hammock was moving. The room corner in the left side determines an unconventional angle. In this reproduction, the only common thing besides the existence of the hammock in approximately same percentage is the position of the legs. We can't tell the gender of the subject, we only know he or she is naked in a hammock in a room. It still has its iconographical meaning. The hammock, by what it means takes us to the idea of

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womb and floating but without the gender identity we cannot speak about maternity anymore. In addition, the relaxed face existent in Pearlstein's paintings which are missing here makes us wonder about the person in the hammock and the reason for he or she is they're having such a tensed position. Comparing the two reproductions I realized that the second one, the analogue one (which I had scanned) is more creative, mostly because it loses the meaning intended by Pearlstein. Because it's more mine than his.

Practice can be tricky. The idea behind it is not to lose its initial goal and systematically review it. That's what we did during this course. After reproducing the realist paintings, we talked and debated the aspects that should have been primordial in our own artworks being involved in the creative process. Research methodologies are emergent and subdued to reiterative rectification.

This experience I had while reproducing Pearlstein's aquatint made me rethink the strategies of approaching a practical process before starting it: not only limiting myself to a homework but always modify something (to assume the artwork) whether it's technical elements or content-related, always use my imagination but especially to always reiterate the theory while creating, from now on. Knowledge is the result of practice.

Bibilography:

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