

Kathleen Volp: PRONK! by Mary Bucci McCoy

In previous work Kathleen Volp has engaged with still lives by artists such as Caravaggio, Frans Snyder, Juan Sánchez Cotán and Jan Davidsz. de Heem, using these paintings as a point of departure or incorporating reproductions into her work. *PRONK!* expands on this work with an installation comprised of a larger-than-life reproduction of *Still Life: Game, Vegetables, Fruit, Cockatoo* by the Flemish Baroque Antwerp School painter Adriaen van Utrecht, in dialogue with a trio of free-standing, three-dimensional works based on the painting.

The title *PRONK!* succinctly telegraphs the connections Volp makes across time, referencing contemporary Dutch usage (where it means “to show off”) and also the art historical term *pronkstilleven* (“still life of ostentatious display”), a form of still life painting that originated in Antwerp in the mid-1600s. These over-the-top still lives were painted for wealthy patrons (the “1%” of their day), displaying the abundance of their wealth through complex arrangements of luxurious objects including costly imported fruit, dead game, Chinese porcelain, and live exotic birds; these paintings capture a pivotal moment in history, announcing the advent of globalized consumption through the expansion of trade which led to both a growing chasm between the wealthy and the rest of the population and the transformation of agricultural products from staple to commodity.

Volp chose this particular *pronkstilleven* because it is in a sense a meta-still life, combining multiple still life genres. Drawing on her longstanding engagement with the field of visual culture, she began by deconstructing van Utrecht’s painting through close looking to discover the relationships between the image and the viewer, or consumer, finding the narratives signaled by the objects and their arrangement, placement and perspective. The resulting riotously exuberant works humorously comment on the seemingly incongruous

elements of the still life, not least of which is the titular live cockatoo (represented by a not particularly lifelike plastic parrot).

Indeed, Volp’s cheap, mass-produced, kitschy materials are the antithesis of both the painting as object of value and the display of wealth and privilege it contains. They carry cultural meaning which can be unpacked as part of the system she creates. For instance, woodgrain-patterned spandex fabric used to reference the painting’s furniture can be mapped onto synthetics, fakeness, fitness, absurdity of wood grain on fabric/clothing, elasticity, faux finishes, wooden tables, and even lumbering practices. Volp also maps the painting’s objects physically, deliberately choosing materials to communicate qualities such as softness and matteness.

She herself participates in the commodity exchange she comments on, buying many of the mass-produced items that she uses (often manufactured in China) and combining them into work that in turn comments on global commodification. As a still life arrests its subjects and secures them within the painting’s frame, she arrests the components of her pieces from the flow of commerce, setting them apart and eliminating their mobility.

It is critical that Volp works in physical relation to a reproduction printed out from a digital file (made freely available by the J. Paul Getty Museum, owner of van Utrecht’s *pronkstilleven*) which is in a sense an advertisement for itself, rather than in relation to the actual painting. This process of reproduction disconnects the image from its existence as an object of value, by way of the internet. She then takes things a step further by separating out the objects of value represented by the image: they become tongue-in-cheek present-day simulacra of objects represented in a digitally-mediated printout of a painting.

Mary Bucci McCoy is Boston-based painter who exhibits nationally. She frequently writes about art for publication.

About Kathleen Volp

Originally from the Midwest, Kathleen Volp studied with renowned conceptual Siah Armajani and kinetic artist Cork Marcheschi at the Minneapolis School of Art and Design. She received her BA from SUNY Empire State in NYC before settling in the Boston area. Her work has been exhibited widely, most recently in *Still Life Lives!* at the Fitchburg Art Museum and a solo exhibition at the Griffin Museum of Photography. Volp lives and works in the Boston area.