ART REVIEW

The Boston Globe

When the lines blur

Exhibit surveys the boundary where inspiration ends and theft begins

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | January 7, 2005

BEVERLY -- Say you're an artist. Out gallery hopping one day, you come upon a collage that explicitly lifts an image from one of your best paintings. Are you angry? Do you sue?

Here's another scenario. You're an artist who explores commercialism and American identity by making use of such familiar icons as Mickey Mouse and Barbie. You post your work on the Internet, and the next thing you know, Disney and Mattel are breathing down your neck with cease-and-desist orders.

"A New Order: Appropriation Art in the Digital Age," now up at Montserrat Gallery at Montserrat College of Art, scrambles across the extremely slippery slope of copyright in visual art. Inspired by a 2003 exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art called "Illegal Art," curator Leonie Bradbury has put together her own collection of artists who mine the work of others. It's a powerful show, provocative and befuddling. It challenges the viewer to decide who deserves which rights. Just as you get comfortable with your decision, another artwork undermines it.

Collage and montage are as common in art as sampling is in music. Artists have been plundering copyrighted pictures for decades, if not centuries. Probably since cave drawings, artists have borrowed from and commented upon one another's work. What makes this topic so thorny is that artists here are often both perpetrators and victims of theft.

Copyright arose with the printing press and was written into the US Constitution in 1787. It's a product of capitalism, and of a society that exalts individual expression. But the smaller the world gets, and the greater access we have to more and more imagery, the cloudier copyright becomes. Legally, Disney may own Mickey Mouse, but doesn't he belong to all of us? And why should corporations own copyrights to work made by individuals?

Bradbury asked the artists in "A New Order" if they'd be upset if other artists cadged their imagery. Half said they would, half said they wouldn't. The band Negativland and artist Tim Maloney, who teamed up to produce the video "Gimme The Mermaid," fall in the latter category. Negativland makes a practice of flouting ownership laws; they famously sampled a U2 song and got sued by the band's label, Island Records, although the band's lead guitarist The Edge disavowed the suit.

Here, they've swiped material from Disney and Hanna Barbera, among other sources, to make a comical stab at the corporations and lawyers guarding the gates of authorship. The soundtrack includes music from "The Little Mermaid" and an answering machine recording of the CEO of a major record label threatening to sue. Maloney works for Disney and drew this Ariel, the title character in "The Little Mermaid," specifically for the video -- and look out, she's angry. She alternates in the montage with a group of fat cats sitting around playing poker, who appear to be plotting how to gain commercial control over a sock puppet.

A New York Times photographer sued Rick McKee Hock when he borrowed an image from the newspaper for one of his collages of Polaroid transfers. Bradbury says the case was settled. The 1987 collages pull together the pictures of their era and more -- Pee Wee Herman, Oliver North, and a crucified Christ -- all adding up to rich cultural commentary. That might have protected Hock under the Fair Use law, which allows artists to sample other works for parody or critique. Unfortunately for Hock, the law is open to interpretation.

D. Jean Hester recorded images of a Chevy Impala ad with a filtered Super-8 camera, turning the familiar picture of a sleek car navigating a winding road through beautiful hills into a grainy, flickering black-and-white old-time movie. She cut in a scene that might be from an old sitcom, of two dopey guys in a car, laughing hysterically -- completely subverting the mystique the commercial intends to evoke. Like Hester, Liz Nofziger splices two familiar videos together -- a 1950s-era McDonald's commercial and a 1980s aerobics tape. Suffice to say that the emphasis on buns turns the two into a disturbing and wicked parody of American values.

You probably won't recognize the images Elizabeth Cohen borrowed for her "Practical Poses," a large-scale digital montage of hands grasping a comb. They're from early 20th-century advertisements. Fair game, you might think. But no. These are still copyrighted, and Cohen scavenged them from the rare books section at the Library of Congress. In this case, the illicit story behind the making of the art is incidental: the quivering, shadowy image feels deeply intimate, despite its size.

For other artists, like Gary Duehr and Mary Behrens, the point is to revisit images and see them anew. Duehr's color photos from the "Liminalities" series are stills shot of independent movies, usually made during a frame shift; they crystallize otherwise transitory moments, and turn out to be full of emotion and loss. Duehr chose small, independent films to borrow from, so viewers would be less likely to recognize the source.

Behrens blithely takes photographs by artists such as Robert Capa and Paul Strand to utilize in her work. She photocopies, blurs, and elongates them, then sets these iterations, from recognizable to nearly abstract, on a sea of candy-colored stripes.

Many of the artists in "A New Order" use found images in their art. Robert Goss's interactive installation puts the pictures in the viewer's hands. He takes old photographs and signage and magnetizes them, creating a visual alternative to refrigerator poetry. The visitor becomes a collage artist, experiencing how easy and fun it is to appropriate a picture and tell your own story with it. Amy Stacey Curtis took pictures from stock photography books -- and therefore open for use -- and distilled them through seven generations of photocopying down to their high-contrast, grainy essence, then placed them in egg cartons. Dozens upon dozens of them fill the wall, little puddles of barely discernible meaning as delicate as eggs.

"A New Order" raises dozens of questions about culture as its own source, about authorship, about easy access and display on the Internet, and about the power structure that enables corporations to protect copyright far more efficiently than individuals can. It's a thicket of issues and it makes for a deeply satisfying exhibition. ■

▶ More A&E

50% off Globe home delivery. Order today!

PRINTER FRIENDLY   SINGLE-PAGE FORMAT   E-MAIL TO A FRIEND

Original Works, Commission
Artists Paintings, Sculptures, &
Jewellery
www.so-art.co.uk

Originals and Prints Available
www.drportraits.com

Sites controlled by artists
www.artspan.com