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Whose Picture is It?: Bumber by Number at Bumbershoot

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Jim Woodring, Altered Paint by Numbers Original

Are Paint by Numbers pictures art? 60 years after the anyone-can-paint fad first took off as a creative outlet for newly leisured, post-War Americans, the completed pictures hold a continued fascination for artists and collectors.

That collectors are interested is clear from a quick glance at Ebay, where hundreds of completed Paint by Numbers pictures are on sale, with especially high values (up to \$40) assigned to vintage works from the 50s and 60s.

That artists are intrigued has long been clear as well. As a quintessential product of popular culture, with their relentlessly mainstream subject matter, and mysterious provenance (Who created the original art? Who completed the kit?) they have both excited and repelled the serious practitioner.

Serious practitioners were in fact very much in evidence at Bumbershoot earlier this month, where artists and Paint By Number collectors Marlow Harris and JoDavid recruited several dozen of their local colleagues for Bumber by Number, a terrifically entertaining exhibition of artist-altered PBN originals, both an homage to and a subversion of the genre.

The good news about Bumber by Number is that everyone benefited from the mash-up: the participating artists, the viewing audience, and even, in an odd way, the unsung hobbyists whose craft projects were being altered. The actual Paint by Numbers images, with their barns, sailboats, pastures and clowns, represent kitsch at its Hallmark Cards extreme, but the pictures are also full of eye candy – subject matter aside, they are often really fun to look at. By adding a single ironic element – like Jim Woodring’s car crashing through the bottom of a Vermont covered bridge – the artists allow us to enjoy the resulting picture completely guilt-free.

That the contemporary artists benefitted from the project is a bit less obvious. But given the variety of styles, scale, and media represented by the current participants, the discipline of everyone starting with the same basic picture (several images appear more than once), gives the show a coherence it could have never had otherwise. And not to take anything away from the artists, there is something to be said for doing a takeoff on a painting that has strong qualities of shape, color, and design to begin with.

Even the unsung amateurs, whose patient labors gave birth to the works in question, get to take a bit of a bow. Cathy Sarkowsky chose to rework a Paint By Numbers original of a deer standing by a pond that included a florid, white signature reading “Kristi, 11 November 88”. After populating this syrupy woodland scene with rank after rank of tiny, vaguely sinister, cartoon houses – the deer now appears as a figure of anxiety rather than tranquility – artist Sarkowsky added her own signature “Cathy, 8 August 11” in amusing imitation of her predecessor.

Sarkowsky’s alteration, with the theme of American fantasy meeting American reality, is, not surprisingly, a popular motif, given the mindlessly upbeat tone of the original illustrations. In the same spirit, Demi Raven transforms a woody pond in a suburban park into a noxious Superfund site reminiscent of Brooklyn’s Gowanus Canal, the greenery entirely replaced with bare dirt, the sky gone from blue to brown – all executed in seamless, even tasteful, Paint by Numbers style. Aaron Huffman dumps a balding businessman sprawled on his backside alongside a grazing horse and pony; the title “Out to Pasture” gives it a timely, Great Recession spin. Mary Iverson encircles a postcard farm with her signature giant shipping containers, an industrial invasion; John Brophy fills a stallion’s mouth with a knot of twisted

hundred-dollar bills, a gift horse indeed. Most ambitious of all is a reworked pastoral triptych by the brilliant art prankster Mike Leavitt, in which a hard-hatted utility crew is busy replacing every original landscape element – including animals, waterfalls, sky, and clouds – with riveted, metallic panels, a manufactured simulation. His dystopic fantasy brings the element of artistic irony to a nearly fever pitch.

Equally successful are those pictures where the artists decide to push the calendar art original into the zone of the bizarre. Jeff Mihalyo floats a colossal godlike head with a smoking skyscraper crown into an alpine scene, the apparition staring down a tiny gesturing figure in the valley below, a worshipper of an industrial deity. Chris Crites turns a sailing ship at sea into a vivid surrealist vision by precisely covering selected original colors with Day-Glo orange and violet replacements; that, plus a giant, airborne squid, quite effectively electrify the mood and effect. And speaking of electricity, Kurt Geissel substitutes blinking LEDs for the painted eyes of a pair of too-cute cats; the eerie Cyber Cats that result are no one's idea of cute.

Most intriguing of all are the pictures where the artists have made even more radical alterations. Bill Blair, working independently in Victoria, BC, was prepared and willing to contribute huge, Paint by Numbers photo backdrop cloth to the outside of the Bumbershoot booth, as well as a set of PBN panels turned into appropriately accessorized guitars. Robert Hardgrave displayed both the empty frame from his original PBN still life, as well as the four-legged creature sculpted from the cut-up and reassembled panels. Elizabeth Jameson converted the same farm that served Mary Iverson into a frenetic, night time scene that looks like the crazy spawn of Peter Max, George Seurat, and Paul Cezanne.

Perhaps the piece-de-resistance of the entire enterprise is the reworking of Gainsborough's Blue Boy by multi-media artist Janet Galore. The underlying painting is itself an appropriation, by the Paint By Numbers team, of a classic British portrait – by the pioneer English society artist Thomas Gainsborough – of a handsome young aristocrat in silks and satins. In Galore's version, two flaps of canvas painted to resemble skin have been folded back from the Boy's chest and are held open by surgical pins; revealed inside are the internal organs, from lungs and heart to intestines. The boy's pastoral surroundings and confident pose remain unaltered.

Here the cultural references are various indeed, from the Visible Man plastic anatomical figure dating from the same mid-century American cultural milieu, to the macabre half-head/half skull sculptures of historical Netherlandish art. Both the original Blue Boy and it's Paint by Numbers counterpart were the products of times of prosperity, expansion, and cultural self-satisfaction; Galore's version expresses instead social and personality vulnerability – art as exposure rather than celebration.

None of the artists directly addresses the underlying issue raised by the Paint By Numbers phenomena to begin with: what does it mean when the creative process is replaced by a rigid simulation, with identical results that deny any individual input? By agreeing to paint on top of someone else's work, the artists do make an implicit value judgment: that the paintings themselves are not, in fact, "originals", but the shadowy product of the art spirit attempting to accommodate the democratic ideal.

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