

Art Now LA
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Infusing Reproductions with New Life

Robert Russell
Book Paintings
Anat Ebgi
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by Jody Zellen



Each of Robert Russell's large-scale oil paintings depict the cover of an art catalogue. As painted objects, these books lay flat, but are also awkwardly positioned at a diagonal (not perpendicular to the sides of the canvas) on a nondescript white ground. The paintings follow a formula— Russell chooses an artist and searches the internet for an image, as well as a copy of the artist's signature. The chosen painting is not necessarily the artist's best or most well-known work, yet it does sign for the artist's oeuvre. Russell transforms these digital reproductions back into paintings, placing them in the center of the book's cover and above the signature, which also appears on the spine. Russell carefully delineates, when applicable, the paper dust jacket wrapped around a cloth cover and suggests the volume of the book's interior pages. Through these paintings he has created a fictitious series of monographs that include a surprising mixture of contemporary and historical artists: Josef Albers, John Currin, Philip Guston, Carmen Herrera, Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, Bridget Riley, Gerhard Richter, Rembrandt and Andy Warhol.

Russell's paintings do not attempt to replicate the depicted artist's style or technique, but rather are flatly painted representations. They are more about the perspectival depiction of a book than they are about the artist's art. It is a given that much art is experienced through reproduction and Russell calls attention to this fact by making paintings of books based on found copies of the original paintings. He questions the relationship between an original (his paintings) and the copy (the image on the books cover). The image in *Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun Catalogue*, (all works 2019) does not appear in an initial Google search so it is curious why Russell selected this specific image: a close up of a woman with cascading blond hair and a blue bow. The Le Brun painting relates to the image for John Currin as both depict seductive women. Here, Russell chose a work of Currin's entitled *Heartless*, that is an easily found reproduction. In Currin's original work, a smiling young woman with flowing curls wearing a gold-toned dress

with a large heart cut out of it, stares at the viewer. In Russell's representation, the painting is muted and foreshortened, losing some of its allure.

These representations are somehow both works by the selected artists, and paintings by Robert Russell. Russell's choices in this iteration of *Book Paintings* are curious. In a previous exhibition (2011), he also painted book covers with images by Warhol, Rembrandt and Leonardo, etc. However, each of those books had different designs rather than being a part of an invented series of monographs. This leads to a question about artists' monographs— who is chosen and why? What is the story being told by this collection of sanctioned painters. Russell's decisions are clearly specific. He includes men and women from the past as well as the present who paint either portraits or abstractions. What is the relationship between the portraits Russell has reproduced by Currin, Warhol, Le Brun or Rembrandt? Similarly, why these abstractions by these artists: Albers, Riley and Herrera? What canon of art history does his series of catalogues represent? Or, is it just a subjective view of artists who have inspired or influenced Russell?

Russell's undertaking is a conceptual project that examines how works of art, specifically paintings are viewed, especially in the digital age. That more art is seen via reproduction, at a small scale and on the internet, rather than on the walls of a museum or gallery is a given. Russell takes these reproductions and infuses them with new life. While they still function as reproductions (book covers) they now also exist as beautifully painted large-scale oils.

<https://artnowla.com/2019/05/17/robert-russell/>