

## Dominik Steiner

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### Ironing Irony

by Hunter Braithwaite

Dominik Steiner's "Mr. West / Marlboro 07" (2007) is an alpine summit against a red sky. With a bit of perspective, it becomes a road pushing through a hematoma desert. The composition can slouch off representation and become a New York School painting—shadowboxing with the muse, fueled on doubt and nickel beer. Then, moving forward in history just a bit, the oil on canvas registers as a profile view of a pack of Marlboro Reds. The most abstract reading, the cigarette pack, is also the most concrete. The vistas (here they are American, but they don't need to be) have been reduced over painting's steady, existential flame, then packaged in cardboard and foil, transformed to product placement.

This climb up history's rungs seems like it would lead to an ontological hardening. Note, for instance, how Pop presented a crystalline image of post-war desire and terror, one delicate yet inflexible. However, the nods to landscape, canonical painting, and advertising are not contingent on one being better or more present than the others. They represent different modes of seeing. And I mean mode en Francais: fashion. I'm not interested in the cigarette pack, but in the fabric pockets that surround it. Dominik Steiner borrows from textile production—folding, ironing, and applying patchwork—to reinvigorate modern painting. Admittedly, this is cherry picking. Fashion isn't the only Rosetta stone for Steiner's multipronged project; the objet trouvé, Hollywood and 19th century French poetry also cast shadows. And even then, Rambo and Rimbaud must court painters as varied as John Baldessari and de Chirico.

The stripe paintings are created by folding the canvas into an accordion of strips, painting a line on the top surface, then refolding and repainting until Steiner has made his way from the left edge to the right. The lines get progressively weaker and lighter as they progress across the canvas. While this provides a metaphor for the fading of meaning over repeated washes, it does so in a language of isolated fields and repetitive edits/cuts, that is, the language of film, collage, and cultural appropriation.

In order to achieve depth and gradation in the monochrome while minimizing the painterly touch, Steiner has taken to smearing paint onto his canvas with a hot iron. And in a move to reintroduce the figure into his work, the artist began affixing iron-on patches to his canvases. These patches, which feature smiley faces and the bodies of ducks, give the work a pop sheen and belie a membership to a larger ideological body. Think of those who usually wear patches: rock and roll fans, motorcycle gangs, and the military. Like products, the paintings are branded.

I asked him if he was critiquing something with his paintings. The response both frustrates a reading of the painting as cultural critique and implicates the artist himself in larger myths. "I'm not a political artist," he says, "I make art because art is art... I use it to get to a poetry." What does it mean to be idealistic in a world so completely smothered by commodification?

Talking about the sculpture of Isa Genzken and Rachel Harrison in *Ecce Homo*, Isabelle Graw noted that “the anthropomorphic return is emblematic of life under the conditions of celebrity culture, where products become persons, and persons are themselves commodified.” Steiner’s practice incidentally includes found sculptures not unlike those by Genzken and Harrison. The three-dimensional pieces are often no more than slightly-altered furniture. As such, they primarily serve as armature for the paintings. But in this engagement of the found object, used by other artists to question of being, Steiner uses the prefab sensibility to update the spectral varieties of life: the image, the vision, and the dream.

The work isn’t cool appropriation—a laboratory move of pressing a butterfly wing between two pieces of glass—but intensely lived and felt moments. He has said, “art history as catharsis.”

There is history here, but it’s not what you expect. The earnestness of Steiner’s painting has a funny way of rewriting the textbooks. We come to see past movements as they weren’t. Ab-ex becomes campy, Pop stares at us with Dostoevsky eyes. Of course, this makes for awful art history, but in sloppy scholarship one finds potential. What can it tell us about the impending ecological crisis, for instance, to see soup cans worshipped with the zeal of a suicide bomber? What can it tell us about the crisis of masculinity to think of Pollock, painting’s suicide bomber if there ever was one, as a fan-wristed dandy?

Steiner uses the tools of fashion production in a painterly way to question the specificity of both. Should paintings be fashionable? Most would say no; most would hope for worth that outlasts the season. However, what does it mean today to be unfashionable? Who is obliged to take this seriously?

If we think of irony as a folding of meaning, a creased folding that both reverses the flow of meaning and thickens the message (you have the primary level, then the self-aware, ironic version), then Steiner’s painting irons it out. Using established brands like patchwork, the painter allows us to once again put on the smock and beret of the romantic artist. The crisis of painting is just another style.