

PAINTING FOR THE MASSES?

A work of art today must withstand comparison to any manufactured object. The artist-painting is false and outdated. Only the object-painting is capable of resisting the comparison and holding up over time.
Fernand Léger

According to English ethnologists at the end of the nineteenth century such as Alfred Cort Haddon, the development of decoration since prehistoric times marks the beginning of the cultural history of forms, thus linking from the outset art and the decorative.¹ In autumn 2013, the *Musée national Fernand Léger* and the *Musée d'histoire et de céramique biotoises* invite Australian artist Heidi Wood to continue this dialogue between fine art and applied arts, in connection with the pertinent distinction Léger made between easel painting and ornamental painting. The result is the two-part exhibition, *Setting for an Ordinary Life*.

Experimenting with images on all surfaces, Heidi Wood draws together two notions of time (universal and contextual) as a traveller and artist in residence. "I explore the use of pictograms in the simulation and evocation of an idealized world. I continue to design repertoires of forms in response to a given context. But the forms are no longer presented via series of photographs to (potentially) become paintings. The physical artwork has disappeared. I now prefer to make ephemeral environments." Pursuing her visual infiltration of reality in a dizzying, self-promoting marketing campaign, Heidi Wood undermines the functionality of objects by exploiting their visual potential (street sign, billboard, flag shield, pencil case, souvenir plate, etc.) With the series *Serving Suggestions* begun in 2001 (abstract paintings in modernist interior settings), the artist acknowledges that the artwork, reduced to an image, has been stripped of its aura, as foreseen by Walter Benjamin in 1935.² Her advertising-inspired photographs thus turn the viewer into a consumer.

In Biot, Heidi Wood sets up a dialogue between her pictographic landscapes and Fernand Léger's progressive aesthetic in close relation to the town where the painter practiced ceramics from 1949 to 1955. An urban theme runs through these three elements, as this was essential to Léger's work. Indeed, from the 1920's he was enthusiastic about the architectural and social innovations developed and practiced by friends such as Le Corbusier or Robert Mallet-Stevens. Lucid, he nonetheless advocated painting's integration into architecture and wanted artists to reclaim the visual impact of advertising. During the aviation salon in Paris in 1912, along with Marcel Duchamp and Constantin Brancusi, he acknowledged the competition of the industrial object (a propeller, in this case). While Duchamp stopped painting in favor of a conceptualization of the artistic act, Fernand Léger opted for a strategy of integrating painting into total art projects in architecture, cinema or theater. Convinced that art is a means not an end, he discovered the working class during the First World War that he spent at the front alongside miners, tradesmen and road workers. This shift in perspective made him aware that the near-abstract he had reached in his cubist-inspired series *Contrastes de formes* distanced him from the man in the street. During the famous debates at the *Maison du peuple* in 1936 during which he opposed defenders of socialist realism such as Aragon, he advocated the necessity of art education for all and refused the instrumentalization of art for popularity-seeking or individualistic purposes: "If our artworks have not permeated the masses, I repeat, it is the fault of the current social order and not because these artworks lack humanity. ³" From then on, he illustrated his concept of *nouveau réalisme* by focusing on the everyday object rather than the romantic subject, which had been rife since the Italian Renaissance. In 1923 - 24, he maintained "Beauty is everywhere, in the order of your saucepans, on the white wall of your kitchen, perhaps more so than in your

1 Guitemie Maldonado, "Chapitre 1 / Archéologie du terme" in *Le cercle et l'amibe. Le biomorphisme dans l'art des années 1930*, Paris, INHA/CTHS ("Les Essais de l'INHA"), 2006 [on-line], put on-line December 7 2010, consulted August 10 2013, <http://inha.revues.org/2876>.

2 Walter Benjamin, *L'oeuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproductibilité technique*, Paris, Allia, 2003.

3 Fernand Léger, "Le nouveau réalisme continue", *Fonctions de la peinture*, Paris, Gallimard coll. Folio Essais, 2009, p. 197.

18th century living room or in official museums”⁴. With his theory of contrasts, he laid claim to the beauty of the pure means available to the painter (line, form, color).

With her project *Sister Suburbs* begun in 2011, Heidi Wood takes stock of this progressive history of 20th century art in light of today’s suburban environment, often scorned as less patrimonial than the city center. Her homage to suburbia invites us to change the way we look at the constructed environment, its visual codes and also its contradictions. Halfway between irony and political stance, she explores the social function at the heart of the avant-garde utopia. Influenced by the constructivist aesthetic of Malevich and the Bauhaus, she questions the capacity of non-figurative art to merge with everyday life. What relationship can the painter really establish with her fellow citizens? Does she see the systematic appropriation of geometric abstraction’s topos by design and visual communication as the victory or bankruptcy of modernism? What is the artist’s place in today’s global economy of goods and services? As Nicolas Bourriaud says, (...) “the abstract glossary allows us to apprehend a visible (architectural, social or economic) reality that capitalism has turned into abstract painting”.⁵

A service provider to her own creative undertaking, Heidi Wood provides an answer by examining the signs generated by the regions she visits. The renewed way of seeing she offers us questions the values underlying our era and consequently the way we look at it. As such, Heidi Wood clearly incarnates the still relevant utopia of 20th century avant-gardes: our awareness will change the world.

In the two-part exhibition *Setting for an Ordinary Life*, Heidi Wood presents us with an uplifting *mise en abyme*. Viewers become actors, despite themselves, in a reality show. From inside a museum, they are asked to admire the domestic environment in which they live. All-over painting renders the space concrete by putting homo erectus (back) in its center. At the Musée national Fernand Léger the exhibition *The Projects* thus immerses the visitor in a total artwork by recreating a standardized apartment in a housing project. Between high art, applied arts and popular taste, the artist is amused by the ambiguous status of her own works that she makes herself or gets others to make for her. Road signs printed with floral motifs are hung on blocks of color painted on walls that evoke the clichés of anonymous suburban architecture. White sculptures based on floor plans from social housing are used as display cabinets for souvenir plates representing electrical towers.

At the *Musée d’histoire et de céramique biotoises*, the exhibition *House* is a lively dialogue between the collections that describe daily life in this beautiful hilltop village in Provence and Heidi Wood’s industrial aesthetic. Reinforced by a roadside trail of posters through Biot of five posters with floral or architectural motifs on blocks of color, these exhibitions interact dynamically with two urban realities on the Côte d’Azur: *The Projects* at the *Musée Léger* looks at the dialogue between painting and low-budget architecture while *House* at the *Musée d’histoire et de céramique* explores the connection between applied arts and everyday objects.

For Fernand Léger and Heidi Wood, painting’s strength is as a means of visual education capable of countering mankind’s alienation by mankind. Their strategy of distancing themselves from reality allows them to look at it more intensely - benevolently but without romanticism. Beyond the canvas, can painting be inhabited? Does our standardized habitat indicate that a learned art form has finally reached the masses? In attempting an answer, Heidi Wood takes her turn at enriching the cultural history of forms.

Diana Gay, 2013

Décor d’une vie ordinaire (Setting for an Ordinary Life) catalogue

⁴ Fernand Léger, “L’esthétique de la machine, l’objet fabriqué, l’artisan et l’artiste”, *ibid*, p. 88.

⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, Sarah Morris. *Mechanical Ballet*, digital catalogue of the exhibition held at the Musée national Fernand Léger (November 17 2012 - March 4 2013), [on-line], p. 5, consulted August 13 2013, <http://www.musees-nationaux-alpesmaritimes.fr/library/Sarah%20Morris/SarahMorris2MN2012BD.pdf>