

Chicago Pop Artist Michel Balasis

by Jack M Silverstein

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Pop Art is by inception a naturally re-producible genre. It actually almost defines the imagery being used as repeated imagery. Soup can paintings, comic books, Marilyn and Jackie-O photos, etc.

Even though I make each painting a one-of-a kind, and give the client that comfort of owning that one original, the style of art is actually defined by repetition. A lot of times I'll get a client who will say, "Oh, you've already sold that painting. I really like that one." "Well let me make you one that's slightly different. I can change, for instance, the background color. I can change the direction of the character." Like if someone wanted this painting again, I'd just completely flip it and have her face the other direction. And as you can see, there's three or four different tones of yellow here. I could play with those tones to bring it brighter, make it more subtle... the shirt color, the lip color, the eye color, obviously. I've actually had people give me slightly different phrases that they'd like instead of the one that I had. So I work a lot with clients in different conditions.

I had always been very creative, but once I saw Roy Lichtenstein comic book paintings, I freaked out. "Oh my god: those can be real paintings?" I had been addicted to comic books since I was a little kid. I spent the summers in Greece, and I couldn't speak the language, so I had my American comic books with me, and that was sort of my only outlet, and so I got addicted to that imagery. They came together once I became a painter - I started developing these comic style paintings and I was in New York on a graduate student research trip, and I decided I would stop into Leo Castelli gallery in SoHo, which no longer exists there...

I walked up a flight of stairs with my slides in hand, just to see if anybody was around, or anything, by chance. There was a show of some sort of anal photography thing that was just grossing me out, and I could barely stand it, and I looked to my right at the regular collection of art work, and I saw Roy Lichtenstein standing there like he was waiting. So I kind of sidled my way over to him. This was mid-90s. '96, '97, right before he passed away. I stood near him, and I was trying to figure out what to say, and he said something to me: "That's a tough collection to look at." The anal photography. (laughs) And I said, "Yeah, I prefer this collection better," which was the general collection of the gallery which had some really great pop pieces.

And I said "Are you here for a meeting?"

"No, I'm actually getting read to leave. What are you here for?"

"I'd like to show my slides to somebody."

And he goes, "Well let me take a look at them."

So here I was standing by my total mentor, and I tried not to act like a fan. I was also a little bit concerned that my artwork was gonna look just like his, and he thought I was mocking his work, or something. His first glance was, "Oh, wow." Because I had taken the surface treatment that he had done, which is the Ben-Day dots, to make it look like 50s, 60s style comic book imagery, and I had smoothed that whole thing out to a nice flat surface. I had stylized the imagery even more than he had, and I obviously was using popular culture in my phrases, in my quotes in the bubble. So he, I think, was taken by it.

He pointed to one of my first paintings, which was a television standing in the doorway glowing, and one of the characters says, "Who is it?" And the mother character in the image says, "It's the babysitter." He just loved it. He said, "I'd go with this." I sort of felt like I got the green light from Roy Lichtenstein, and I was only just by chance going by the gallery, so I bounded down the stairs out to the street, went to find my buddies, grabbed a bunch of beers. I actually asked Roy Lichtenstein if he wanted to get a beer, and he said he couldn't. Come to find out about three months later that he passed away.

For the next three or four weeks I was just in this euphoric state. Because I had always been concerned: I didn't want to totally copy another artist's style, and it was clear to me that he had seen that I had taken it to a different level. Maybe not so much a new level, but a different level, still obviously relying on comic book imagery - and he's done so many other styles - but that was one where he really hit it big. Since then, my career has really catapulted, partially because of the confidence built from just that chance meeting.

I realized all the sketching I had done was now gonna come to fruition, where I had always been kind of holding back. Because everybody that I was gonna run in to would say, "Well you're just copying Roy Lichtenstein." And now people see my paintings, and they say, "Hey, these look like Roy Lichtenstein," but no one ever says, "You're totally copying." Because I haven't used the Ben-Day dots. And all of his imagery comes from late 50s/ early 60s comic books, which really had sort of a set way of communicating their ideas - it kind of seemed like post-war 50s/ early 60s style, even the commentary, and so now I'm using these hip, cliché terms that we use now. When I'm out, when I'm doing anything - and I'm a professor at Loyola, so I hear my students say these idioms and phrases that are real interesting, and I apply them to my paintings. So it makes them really current.

So I do it all the time now too. And those phrases that people hear a lot - I have one at the wine store down below here that says, "Are you fucking kidding me?" And anytime anybody sees that painting, they immediately jump: "I say that all the time!" I've sold a few of those paintings - I usually try to make a little, subtle difference in each one, so it's not a complete mock of the last one. Phrases like that seem to be very popular for me.

My favorite thing is to develop a show of eight to ten paintings of my own ideas that I've come up with. One of my most recent paintings that's done well is this one that's right over here on the other side of this. This guy: "Lose the dress. Keep the shoes." It's a phrase I heard when I was having lunch, let's see, early spring. I heard a guy say it to a girl who looked like she was on her way home from a Walk of Shame. She was carrying her shoes and her dress was a little bit screwed up. Three or four of these guys kind of yelled out to her, "Lose the dress but keep the shoes." And I

thought that was a really interesting turn of phrase. And I've used it now in that painting. Getting ready to hang that in an ad agency downtown.

That piece that I did with the black frame there is 24 years old. I guess I could almost consider it "vintage Michel" which is interesting. I pulled it out of the basement, and I was like, "Oh man, this is a really interesting piece to hang alongside my most current stuff." (points) So that would be the oldest painting that I have, and that's the most recent right next to each other. And I like how they relate, but they contrast. You can kind of tell it's the same artist, even though they're drastically different in style qualities.

It's interesting that people who have started to collect my comic book paintings, and when they see that, flip out: "Oh my god! I want one like that." So it's interesting – yeah, it's kind of captivating. You get lost in the lines a little bit, try to figure it out.

*It's just so suggestive. You've got, sort of, lips over here. You've got leg, you've got an eye, you've got hair swooping down. I don't know what other people are seeing –*

You kind of nailed most of it right there. That's not lips but it looks like lips. Yeah, it's just arms and legs wrapped around each other. The guy's got brown hair, the girl's got blonde hair, and they see things together. She's got blue eyes, he's got green eyes.

I think the most obvious element of pop art that grabs me is the high contrast. Extremely high contrast. Very bold colors contrasted against another opposite color, and then transposing the two colors so that it creates this sort of illusion of depth – although I go for a very flat appearance – and I think that comes back to what I was talking about earlier: I spent the summer in Greece with my family, for probably six, seven years in a row. And so instead of going to museums and seeing artifacts and relics and the Parthenon and all this amazing historical stuff, I really just had these comic books. I literally had 20 of them in a little baggie, a little back pack.

For some reason I went through a critical period when I was a young man – I knew I was creative and I didn't know where I was gonna go with it – it somehow stamped itself on me. And so I go through art school, and I start to paint, and people are like "Well you don't seem to be going anywhere with this." And then I realized what I really like to do would be something that relates to comic book imagery. And that was when I found Roy Lichtenstein in my art history book. And I had no idea that kind of art work could be considered "fine art."

I was at the end of the diving board, and I didn't know what I was going to do. Was I going to walk back and quit art? I didn't know. I was gonna be a graphic designer, so I ended up actually being a graphic designer for a few years after I graduated from my undergraduate degree. And started developing these comic book paintings. And now here I am, with a gallery in Chicago.