

Nada If Not Clever  
by Denny Norwood  
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Going the direction of the North Shore, at the Loyola University Chicago campus, on an intellectual oasis hides Michel Balasis, Pop Art Painter and Associate Professor of Design. That, young fans, is a very clever way to set yourself up to manufacture a lotta art in your spare time. Who am I kidding, it's the University's spare time. His office is in the Mundelein Center, with a view of Lake Michigan. His secretary, Jennifer told me not to drink the day old coffee but there was no weight to stop me. She warmed up (the java dent) when learning I was on campus to interview the boss. They usually do. On her appointment pad it said 'Art Interview, 2 pm'. Some of Michel's Lichtenstein-like cartoon paintings-on-postcards adorned her wall. So I invited her to go on record with impressions of the good prof's work. Like I axed the security guards about Warhol @ the MCA press junket. I didn't really axe them, I tomahawked them. Such querries usually scare the bejesus outta workers and Jennifer did start running in and out a lot. But she finally offered me something useful and pithy. "I think he's quite clever" she blurted out in utter defiance of the paranoid academic precept re speaking to reporters for fear of demotion to the student union info booth.

Yes, Jennifer doll, Michel Balasis is nada if not clever. He came out to greet me explaining to Jennifer that Mr. Norwood the 'art writer' was really RAMA LAMA, the kaka bozo. You just gotta love guys who see right through it. We sat down in his sumptuous office and I flipped on my analog tape machine. I nix care how square it looks to coeds in white shorts toting \$500 mp3 players cuz analog audio is tres far superior. My 20th Century tape began to squeak n roll and Michel Balasis, a true 21st Sent Jury (because the jury has been sent to judge if his generation will even HAVE a hole century to work in) and myself started to rap on all things modern.

It took quite some time for 20th Century Art to be practiced in America by Americans. After being predicted by the Futurists in 1905 (those eye-tallion stallions think they are so smart), invented by Duchamp in 1917 and watered down for world export by Pablo Pick-a-casso. Conceptual art finally broke through to the whitebred mind about 1950. Jackson Pollock, thanks to Peggy Guggenheim and Clement Greenberg, finally split the pent up American psyche, pissed on Peggy's persian rug and was featured in Life Magazine as a sort of chain-smoking cowboy painter. See, gentle reader, prior to Pollock, in "America" an artiste was supposed to be a sissy in a smock. It was therefore quite necessary to push forward a nut job who could really create wild and crazy art, yet present himself as a he man. A REAL down-to-earth sorta guy. I imagine Peg and Clem had several choices available to them: the hopelessly alcoholic and incredibly self (or anybody standing nearby)-destructive aforementioned Jackson P.; remote and sincerely impervious to fame and its almost always attendant wealth Wilhelm de Kooning; diligent and committed Franz Kline; difficult fer dipshits ta git Frank Stella; or well-edumacated, business-like gentleman/scholar Robert Motherwell.

'Tis Motherwell whom most calls to my mind Professor Michel Balasis. His work has perhaps been viewed by more people in the last 50 years than any other abstract expressionist. In stuffy museums, on computer screens if some teenager accidentally accesses art while surfing, Gulp...NO! Robert Motherwell graces the cover of Columbia Records' best selling jazz LP ever, two wits "Time Out" by the Dave Brubeck Quartet. Got yer pix, sports fans? Peeps worldwide escounced in their boo dwar making out to the coolest jazz yet (whitebred division, eye mean they ain't Miles or Coltrane duh). Tunes like "Blue Rondo a la Turk" and "Take Five" with the album jacket propped up over the stereo. By candlelight. That's the Motherwell I'm talkin' bout!

Pollock, Dekooning, Kline, and Stella were men's men. If that's knot (gasp) to male for ya. Kinda Mensa mens. They hung out in the Cedar Bar in Lower Manhattan, getting shit-faced drunk by 2 pm Eastern. If Robert Motherwell dropped by to join them for a social drink after 5, cuz, he worked a normal day painting in his well-organized uptown studio, they made fun of him. He was too together. He was too focused. Hell, he was too sober (at least on the surface). That's Balasis. I make fun of him ever chance I git. Kidding. All of us screw-ups are jealous of guys like that.

Then came Pop Art. Popular...art. Populace art for the.....populace of Papa Kaka and Mama Earth. The cowboys had wrangled modern art, 20th Century Art, conceptual art, onto the American frontier of Fords, Chevy's, "I Love Lucy", and Larry Welk. It was quite a job. We can thank Ms. Guggenheim and Mr. Greenberg. They were the brains behind it. Funny story. After Peggy Guggy had commisioned Frank Lloyd Wright to build the Guggenheim Museum in New York, she ushered him through the fabulously completed venue, a wonder of modern architecture with its descending ramp (ya roll down) past great world art. Peg pushed Frank past her Picasso's, her Dali's, her Magritte's, her Duchamp's. She walked slowly, cuz Frank was pushing 90, dying, past her Pollock's, her deKooning's, her Kline's, Stella's and Motherwell's. The most triumphant moment in the history of American art to date. And then our humble but filthy rich lil' Peg turned to the great old man of American architecture and asked "Well, Frank.....how do you like your museum?". And Frank Lloyd Wright grunted, snorted, wheezed and said "Ok...but Peggy...uh....whaddya call this CRAP???"

We call it KAKA Frank! Mainly cuz it is scatalogical..... Hang on to yer collective lids ladies and gentlemen of the 21st Century - we're about to die.....(gulp)....GRESS all the weigh back to Jon Swift, a flat out blue sky literary genius by ANY damnable "standard" was nix too thrilled with things back home in merry old England. He was kinda miffed how the King's court had xtreme luxury while the other 99.9 percentiles got limey pop squat. Literally. The eventual result of his anti-whitebred retard ruminations was "Gulliver's Travels", a savage satire of Victorian Secrets. They made him Poet Laureate of England, and that was WEIGH back when poet laureate MEANT something. It meant youse wuz the King's fave joker. Not some fruit up in Cambridge.

Meanwhile back in about 1960 (eastern) Abstract Expressionism had bout had her day. Pollock drove into a tree (get the Academy Award-winning movie w Ed Harris the excellent bio flicker based on "Jackson Pollock: an American Saga"); deKooning was holed up in a manse painting one masterpiece after the other for outsized duckets; Duchamp had settled in New York and several smarty pants young artists were exposed to HIM and got it. Andy Warhol. Roy Lichtenstein. Jim Dine. Claes Oldenberg. These fellers saw how to get weigh, weigh further than Abstract Expressionism in a big fat hurry. In an NYC minute. Simple: apply full-on Duchampian tech to Amerikan Kulture. Use multi-media messaging a la McCluhan. And send the hole kaka thang out via cinematic science. This was the vaunted Pop Art. Lotta fun. Happenings. The Factory. Girls w good legs getting painted in oil. No, it was painted onto their righteous flesh, and video-taped as a performance piece. It was the ABSOLUTE realization of Marcel Duchamp's vision.

Among these world-famous-before-lunch hot shots was Roy Lichtenstein. He was a proficient painter. Like that matters in conceptual art. More importantly, he was well-educated and could understand Duchampian Theory. Can you? Not to worry people, it was a trick question. He and Andy both started whipping out big canvases of cartoon frames. When Leo Castelli (big cheese dealer) informed Warhol that he was gonna show Roy's stuff, Andy started painting soup cans instead. Campbell's was just crazy about it. NOT! That left Lichtenstein with the cartoon franchise. They were big, vibrant paintings of select newspaper comic strip frames with bubble boy captions. This brings us to Professor Balasis.

Michel Balasis was born in France. Sound familiar? What's up with that? Why does every famous painter have some French roots? I want to live out my years next door to whatever makes art happen there. But the guy is Greek. Brings to mind Sophocles. U rip! -adies. Socrates and his method of instruction. He teaches amongst a gaggle of Macintosh computers in a lab next door to his office filled with cool gear. It overlooks Lake Michigan. You see, Michel Balasis has gotten his life together. He reminds one of Motherwell. Organized and businesslike. He got his horse, then he went to get the little cart. He established his educational situation, now he is poised to move ahead with his art. He doesn't bring to mind Jackson Pollock. He's not an alcoholic (at least from outward appearances) and he probably won't drive into a tree @ a considerable m.p.h. very soon. But having said all that stuff, Michel is kinda like a Cedar Bar painter. He's a man's, man. He played football @ Michigan State. He's big, healthy, strong, yet sensitive and creative. The classic intellectual trapped in a macho facade.

So Michel Balasis is reminiscent of Robert Motherwell, the artist as scholar; yet he is a real man, like Jack Pollock. Ok, but what about the art for god's sake? Balasis is neo-Lichtenstein. That is, he follows in Lichtenstein's footsteps to depict cartoon frames. The difference is that Mr. Balasis gives considerable thought to the bubble caption (its fun! like getting the New Yorker on a daily basis with your coffee and a joint). Mr. Balasis has "intentionality". The artist paints facial expressions. A pretty woman or a rugged man, close up and personal. Sometimes its a two shot. Sometimes you see something over somebody's shoulder. They are original ideas, not a reproduction of a real comic book. I like that. It's interpretive comic imagery (sans the Lichtenstein ben-day dot aesthetic) with Pop culture context. After Michel has completed the image portion, he studies the painting for quite a while to make a decision on how thick to make the slice of irony to insert into the bubble caption. These poignant captions are invariably the title of the works. And the words are non sequitars. Latin for "not in sequence", the non sequitar is another one of those mainstays of 20th Century Art, like chance, found accidentally on purpose.

So Balasis' body of work is very entertaining: a blonde woman with a nifty hairdo faces a computer console with the caption "I won't write him 'till I get my upgrade"; a handsome dude in a purple suit on the phone implores "I need that YESTERDAY"; a pretty young gal with enough attitude to turn nose up at the infamous Chicago Gold Coast says, "It was an Impulse"; and in the title piece of Mr. Balasis fine book of reproze, "Nine Over", a couple are in a car and the guy brags "I always go exactly nine over", a clever peak into modern society's urge to tactically cheat the rules.

Are these paintings humorous? Does a one legged duck swim in a circle? YES! The pix are a kick. But there's something much more. There is a space that needs to be filled between your ears. A huge element in Duchamp philosophy. Leave something empty. A chasm the art user must bridge. Then one can employ one's own subconscious mind, or what's left of it.

Marcel Duchamp to Robert Motherwell to Roy Lichtenstein to Michel Balasis.

Ie: Surrealism to Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art to 21st Sent Jury Art. I REALLY hope this century (still out) will be that hot, young guns. I sincerely and most certainly do.