

Technology vs. Emotion
by Ryan Hallquist
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Not many college football players have gone on to become college art professors. Fewer have been owners of a graphic design company. Even fewer have been the featured artist in a show at an art gallery. If you haven't caught on yet, Michel Balasis is not just your ordinary artist. In fact he's also a Professor of Fine Art at Loyola University Chicago, teaching Computer Graphics and Visual Communications courses since 1998.

"I think it's a good idea to keep active as both an artist and an educator", said Balasis. "The two activities supplement each other and allow for the opportunity to do both at a higher level."

His latest gallery show is a series of paintings that take an ironic look at modern life. Exhibited at the David Leonardis Gallery in Chicago, the paintings are an example of Balasis' diverse background. Trained as a graphic designer during his schooling at Michigan State University where he was a kicker/punter on the football team, his paintings have a strong linear graphic aesthetic. He combines the cartoon-like imagery with textual elements derived from observation and research of our society.

Balasis is proud to be considered a Pop Artist. He uses heavy contour lines and bright, contrasting colors to produce images that emulate popular culture. While his work is most reminiscent of Roy Lichtenstein in his use of comic book art, most of his paintings are fundamentally different.

While Lichtenstein's work explored the emerging printing processes of his time, Balasis' work touches on human emotion and how we react to the influence of technology. "One of my main areas of focus is human expression and how it defines the way our culture is derived," Balasis said.

"Technology vs. Emotion" is an exhibit that examines the dehumanizing effects of technology with ironic humor that doesn't smack you in the face as much as it will make you reconsider the culture we are creating for ourselves. The bright imagery immediately captures the viewers' attention and draws them in to the deeper side of the meaning and intention of the work.

The selection of paintings look at technological issues ranging from radar speed detectors ("Nine Over") to the use of television ("Babysitter") and the many uses of computers ("Face Value" and "Upgrade"). While the message can be obvious in some, others are open to more interpretation.

"Nine Over" is an interesting look at a number of issues that we deal with contained in

one caption. The image of a stressed out man at the wheel of a car with his nervous female companion is a scene played out everyday in our culture. The man exclaims, "I always go exactly nine over", in response to the request of his passenger to slow down. Yet it is more than a simple answer in defense of the typical male urge to be aggressive on the road. Highway travel, itself a result of technology, brings out other cultural references, specifically the need in our modern society to save time and cheat the laws that govern our speed. The painting suggests that by traveling at nine mph over the speed limit, the driver will save time while avoiding a higher level speeding ticket. The assumption is that the police officer who uses the radar gun will be less likely to pull over a car registering a speed in single digits over the limit.

While all of the paintings make profound statements about our modern society, a few of them stand out in the way Balasis uses form and color to add depth to the subject matter. "Upgrade" tells the tale of a forlorn lover who refuses to communicate with her mate because of her inadequate computer. All of Balasis' characters convey emotion, yet the sadness evident on the woman's face as she looks at the blank monitor gives the piece added emotional depth. Using contrasting blocks of color to create a split-screen effect between the woman and her computer, Balasis creates the impression that she is looking around the corner, peering at the machine she has seemingly pushed out of her life.

As his different professions continue to overlap, Balasis' art will continue to evolve, shaping the keen observations he makes about our modern society. And if the works in his current show are any indication, Michel Balasis will continue to flourish in the Chicago Pop Art community.