

What You Poppin' About ?
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What makes Balasis's art beautiful? This question presupposes a more basic one: How do we talk about beauty in a painting? We begin by identifying painting as a spatial art. Painting makes ideas visible—it puts them in a material space—by using colors and lines and by creating depth and dimension on a flat physical surface. Philosophers call the combination of these elements "the painting object." However, no painting exists in isolation, separated from the artist or the culture in which it was created. Putting a painting in context brings out its hidden meanings, which contribute significantly to an appreciation of its beauty. The painting object and its context, while not absolute or comprehensive, provide a structure to analyze Balasis's paintings.

The first painting, *Babysitter*, puts a contemporary spin on pop art by dealing with the pervasive impact of technology on human relationships. A young mother is welcoming into her home the babysitter, a television (TV) set.

And why not? In the United States alone, 600,000,000 TV sets sit in nearly every living room and bedroom of the home, telling us what to buy, what to think, and how to feel for nearly seven hours each day of the year.* The personification of a TV set may not be the fantasy of an artist; on the contrary, for many Americans, the TV set is the "family member" who rarely shuts up.

Is the new "family member" a welcome one for Balasis? The exchange between the two parents ("Who is it honey?" and "It's the babysitter") occurs with one parent not pictured in the painting. Moreover, the TV set is splitting the speech bubbles. There's only one focus in this painting, and it's not the parents, their words, or the family. It's the TV set in the center of the painting and, according to Balasis, in the center of the family, perhaps even breaking up the family.

The painting's colors support the divisive role of the TV set in today's families. The set itself, in drab brown and gray colors, is an electronic machine manufactured with millions of look-a-likes. But the importance we attach to the set is extraordinary, almost divine-like. A yellow and orange aura zigzags around the set, creating a saintly halo. Archetypally, yellow and orange signify an explosion, in this case, an explosion of meaning from electronic machine to other-world being in the middle of, and at the expense of, the modern family. The warm yellow and orange colors also contrast with the cool, flat, lilac-colored walls of the home, colors that are complementary (orange and blue, yellow and purple) and thus incapable of mixing, like television and family.

The exclamation point to the painting is the mother's smile. She is welcoming the new "family member," if only temporarily for the evening.

The second painting, *Man in Disguise*, appears straightforward: a dark-haired, orange-shirted, Caucasian man is looking through binoculars. Why is he so excited? He's probably not bird-watching, at least not the ones with feathers, but he could be at the race track, cheering for his horse to come in the money. Is he ogling a woman? The painting's colors reveal the answer.

Balasis chose a cool color, teal, as his background for the painting. The blue in teal serves as the complementary color of orange, in this case serving as a foil to make the orange in the man's shirt jump out at the viewer. A warm hue, the orange in the shirt is suggesting heated excitement, passion, as do the open mouth and pink tongue. We cannot see the man's eyes, but we do see the binocular lens, lavender-colored. The calmest color in the painting, lavender seems low energy and out of place amidst

the high energy orange on the man. The colors are suggesting that the man is looking at the opposite of himself, and what else could that be but a woman.

The black shadows around the man's right hand and upper arm tell us even more. Balasis rarely employs shadows in his paintings, so these shadows darken the painting, adding a sinister dimension to it. The painting's theme, far from the innocent admiration of a woman by a man, is pervert curiosity or voyeurism.

Why didn't Balasis title the painting, "Man in the Shadows," or "Voyeur," instead of "Man in Disguise"? What is the disguise? Balasis is presenting a conventional man, who is hiding his desires. In many of his paintings, Balasis dresses his men in suits and ties, but in this one the man wears a collared shirt, ordinary clothing for an ordinary man hiding ordinary sexual desires.

Balasis's third painting, *Nine Over*, portrays an all-too-familiar scene in American society: a man hunched over a steering wheel with eyebrows furrowed in a frown, a female passenger watching the speedometer and holding her hand to her face in distress, and the man explaining, "I always go exactly nine over." The man is likely responding to a request from the woman, probably his wife, to slow down. Why go slower? The man believes that a law enforcement officer will never pull over a car driving in the single digits over the speed limit. Besides, this "safe" speed can save him time and avoid a pricey speeding ticket, and, in today's American fast-paced society, time must be saved, even if laws are broken and lives endangered.

The bold colors and recognizable forms create, at first glance, a simple contemporary scenario with an automobile context and a relationship context. However, the colors Balasis uses tell a more complicated story. The woman has red lips and yellow hair, both primary colors, suggesting that the woman is traditional, probably a housewife. The red on her lips implies she is angry that he is speeding, ("red with rage"), even if he is going only "nine over." But she doesn't say anything. Perhaps her yellow hair symbolizes cowardice ("yellow-bellied") or fear. The cool blues, greens, and violets or purples surrounding the woman are contrasting colors, and they appear to single her out as the "odd" individual in the car. The man's colors, on the other hand, display flare and daring. His suit is green, a non-traditional suit color and a contrasting color to the woman's red lips—these two people do not mix well. The purple car windows in the background also add important details to the story. Purple, a cool color like the man's green, is the complementary or, in this case, contrasting color of the woman's yellow. Since the windows open to the outside world, the man with his daring character and over-confident attitude behind the wheel is socially accepted, while the woman's caution and traditional ways are not.

A simple story, but a complicated series of relationships—that's the beauty of *Nine Over*.

In his paintings, Balasis often juxtaposes a figure's thoughts with the painting's content. This is the case with the final painting, *Insecure*, which tells a relationship story with only one person, a woman, blonde and blue-eyed, an archetype of beauty and desire used constantly in American culture (the Andy Warhol images of Marilyn Monroe, for example). The text in the balloon ("He must think I'm insecure") suggests that the woman is strong, secure, and defiant. The text could easily conclude with the words, "I'll show him," but it does not, creating the possibility that the woman's apparent security in the presence of the man she is looking at (but not seen in the painting) masks a deep insecurity. Indeed, the colors and bold lines of the painting relate a story very different from the balloon text.

Balasis is mocking an idea tied to cosmetics: women spend time and money improving their looks, but they display a confidence that shuns such things. The woman in the painting has put in the time to look beautiful. Thick, wavy lines for the hair suggest a beauty salon cut and daily coiffure, probably with hair

spray or gel, and the thick lines around the eyes and lips show the application of heavy eye make-up and an exact lipstick. Will all the beauty work ever create a secure persona for this woman? Probably not. She will never step away from the irony of her situation. She wonders how the "he" is viewing her, which prompts her to work at her beauty, and this in turn puts the "he" in the forefront of her thoughts, which, well...she will never escape this circle of irony.

The woman's color scheme also depicts this "he"—make-up—"he" irony circle. Balasis chose pastel colors to paint the eyes and lips, and pastels or light shades are often colors associated with babies, thus indicating innocence. The eyes are light blue, but thick, contour lines frame them. Could the woman be trying to hide her innocence, read here as her insecurity? Or is the black trying to indicate mystery or sexiness (two of the positive emotions of black)? The theme continues with the pink lips, suggesting timidity or the "little girl" part of her (red lips would have shown boldness prompted by confidence). The background color behind the woman's face adds more complexity to this story, since it signifies the world around her. The light blue-green, a tertiary color, suggests that society is also a mixture of different sentiments and opinions. Could the woman be attempting to gain acceptance from people who have a million different ideas of beauty? If so, she is placing herself in an impossible situation, and Balasis, by choosing green for the background, may be intimating that she is aware of her dilemma and that she may even be "green with envy." What might the woman envy? Men who don't have to undertake the stress to impress, since they make the rules and run the show. She cannot be a man, but, failing that, she can at least attract one and gain for herself some confidence, thus creating the irony circle.

Kermit the Frog on Sesame Street bemoans the difficulty of being green by singing, "It's not easy being green." The woman in *Insecure* might lament the difficulty of being soft pastels, for they point out how fragile, innocent, and insecure contemporary beauties are.

Perhaps the ultimate beauty of Michel Balasis's paintings is the way he manipulates lines, colors, and context in his paintings to create questions in our minds about aspects of American popular culture that we may have taken for granted. Can confidence be created by adding more facial make-up (*Insecure*)? Do nine miles per hour faster add more quality time to one's life (*Nine Over*)? Are men's actions turning women into objects (*Man in Disguise*)? Is technology de-humanizing our lives (*Babysitter*)? The questions impinge on the meaningfulness of our lives, and they beg for answers, but how can we answer the questions if we're not even cognizant of them? Enter the beautiful pop art of Michel Balasis.

Now it's your turn. Please examine the Balasis paintings below and then explain why they are beautiful. The text in the balloons will identify the aspect of popular culture that Balasis is examining. How do the lines and colors of the paintings tell a story about an item of popular culture? What are the important questions raised by the paintings about your life? Do you have answers to the questions?