

*A New Dance
With an Old Friend,*
by Ellen Fountain,
1989, watercolor, 24 x 30.
Collection the artist.



Some contemporary artists are living proof that you no longer have to have a unique vision in order to create a niche in the art world — just an interesting concept. Others, however, believe in the possibility of shedding new light on even the oldest of artistic themes.



ART ABOUT ART

Plagiarism is a time-honored tradition in the art world. Artists have been imitating, mocking, and outright stealing from each other for centuries, as any art historian will tell you, armed with enough evidence to indict everyone from Rembrandt to Picasso. While the practice sometimes stems from a lack of inventiveness, it can also be an effective way to breathe life into a too-familiar image, pay tribute to a respected predecessor, or make a point through parody. □ Appropriation is thriving, but the 20th century has played havoc with the rules. Gone are the days when a respectable artist carefully disguised his or her heist or “quoted” a source. Now you can glance through a magazine and find John Singer Sargent’s *Madame X* holding a glass of rum, Michelangelo’s *David* being kissed by a model, and Mondrian’s bright blocks of color flying off the canvas to dance around a bottle of gin. The margin between influence and dupery is getting harder to decipher, artists say.

By Cathleen McCarthy

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Above: *Appropriation Series: Batt Raid*, by Ellen Fountain, 1988, watercolor with watercolor collage, 30 x 22. Collection the artist.

Right: A photograph of the still-life set used in creating the painting *Batt Raid*, shown above.



"There's so much in print now that the lines have become blurred," says Ellen Fountain, a painter from Tucson, Arizona, who is currently experimenting with appropriation in her own work. "Fine art has become a way to sell things." In her "Appropriation Series," Fountain pays tribute to Georgia O'Keeffe and Henri Matisse and pokes gentle fun at Keith Haring and fellow watercolorist Miles Batt. Like many artists who make references in their work to other art, Fountain has had to forge her own rules. "My personal opinion is that you shouldn't appropriate if all you're doing is copying," Fountain says, a belief she passes on to her students at the Tucson Art Institute, who are often prone at first to mimicking without "renewing."

To create her parody *Batt Raid*, she constructed a still-life replica of Miles Batt's *Rock Music and Shrimpers—Shem Creek, S.C.*, adopting his color scheme and geometric pattern but substituting origami bats, scraps of fabric, ribbon, and plastic penguins for his abstract designs. She then painted the collage in watercolor, placing a small copy of Batt's original in one corner both to clarify the parody and credit her source. In *A New Dance With an Old Friend*, Fountain is even more obvious in her attribution, repainting Matisse's *The Dance* in a book of white-bordered prints which lies open in the foreground.

Reworking an old theme can be a way of entering a sort of art continuum or, as historian Leo Steinberg dramatically put it, "suing for membership in that glorious company...the performing cast of the history of art" (from *Art About Art*, 1978). In many cases, a certain pose or entire figure has been passed along through the ages, each time modernized and renewed. As Fountain points out, the



Chadds Ford, by Mark Adams Bryce, 1982, oil, 40 x 30. Private collection.



Above:
Magritte's Dream,
by Durkhee Cha, 1984,
watercolor, 20 x 27.
Collection the artist.

Opposite page:
American Kabuki/Oishiiwa,
by Masami Teraoka, 1986,
watercolor on paper
mounted as screen,
four panels, 77 1/2 x 155.
Courtesy Pamela
Auchincloss Gallery,
New York, New York.

Matisse "original" from which she worked was itself a derivative. "There's a whole history of that ring of dancing figures dating from the Renaissance," she says. "Titian, Rubens, and Botticelli all painted them. But each time, it was done with something fresh to say. Matisse's work was nothing like a Renaissance painting. He was a colorist and his version was full of those vibrating colors and characteristic fluid lines."

Appropriation can also be a way of commenting on an artist or the art world, as Mark Adams Bryce has done with *Chadds Ford*, a personal comment on Jamie Wyeth's *Draft Age*. The

painting came about after Bryce, a Philadelphia artist, had been living in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, friendly with—and somewhat in the shadow of—the famous Wyeth family. In *Chadds Ford*, the model, Jimmie, whom Bryce knew, is portrayed as somewhat more decadent than in Wyeth's version. The painting is "encased" in a *trompe l'oeil* wooden crate, a sharp fragment of which has split off, pointing ominously at the model's throat. "*Chadds Ford* is a very personal painting," Bryce says, having to do with "reflected glory and the way it affects people's lives"—in this case, both the artist's and the model's.

Durkhee Cha often alludes to two or more artists in one painting. In her watercolor *Magritte's Dream*, Hokusai's woodblock print, *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa*, has been recreated as the back wall of a room, flanked on either side by walls painted with Surrealist René Magritte's signature cloudy skies—all in the flattened perspective typical of both Oriental prints and Surrealism.

"*Magritte's Dream* is an effort to explore the meaning of Hokusai's work through a surrealist approach," Cha explains. Magritte's theory of "the naked truth of things" is illustrated, she believes, by

the "hidden idea of fear" embodied in Hokusai's wave, the universal fear of the tidal wave. "It is interesting to find a spiritual affinity between Hokusai and Magritte," she says, "although there is a large gap, both chronologically and geographically, between the two." Cha says her goal is "to find the unity between Eastern art and Western art."

Masami Teraoka is another Asian-American intrigued with that combination, but more with an eye for its comic potential. A Japanese transplanted to Los Angeles, Teraoka always paints in the *ukiyo-e* ("floating world") style of Japan's Edo period, sometimes on the traditional large screen covered with Japanese calligraphy. His beautifully detailed, stylized watercolors could be easily mistaken for the 19th-century woodblock prints, were they not stamped with Teraoka's own peculiarly modern, Americanized wit. As a takeoff on Hokusai's *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji*, Teraoka painted *New Views of Mt. Fuji: Pleasure Boat* in 1977, depicting a boat full of figures in Edo costume thrashing about on a stormy

sea. Despite their imminent peril, one character clutches at his golf clubs and a beautiful geisha tries to balance her tripod to get a shot.

More recently, Teraoka's paintings, while still styled after the *ukiyo-e* artists, have taken on more serious subject matter. In the haunting *American Kabuki/Oishiiwa*, a terrified Japanese mother in traditional garb clutches her baby, both covered with AIDS lesions and half submerged in a raging ocean. Flames flicker around them and the moon looms large, half hidden behind dark clouds. The calligraphy in the background tells their story as a kabuki drama. Most of Teraoka's paintings, however, even when dealing with the dismal subject of AIDS, make their point through a sort of black comedy.

A group of New York artists has gained national notoriety in recent years by taking appropriation to its extreme. Most notable among them is Sherry Levine, who paints the characters from George Herriman's comic strip, *Krazy Kat*, and rephotographs Walker Evans's Depression-era photo-portraits of sharecroppers.

Levine makes no effort to embellish these copies, making a point instead about the futility of trying to be original. "A picture is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.... We can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. Succeeding the painter, the plagiarist no longer bears within him passions, humours [*sic*], feelings, impressions, but rather this immense encyclopedia from which he draws.... A painting's meaning lies not in its origin, but in its destination," she writes (from *Implosion: A Postmodern Perspective*, 1987).

Levine is living proof that you no longer have to have a unique vision in order to create a niche in the art world—just an interesting concept. Many artists, however, believe in the possibility of shedding new light on even the oldest theme, the most "imitated" of "gestures."

"There's nothing wrong with rephotographing an existing photograph as long as you bring something new to it," says Joe Rogers, an artist from Alexandria, Virginia. "But most amateurs don't do that. They're

attracted to a work because it already expresses something that appeals to them."

When asked how he determines the line between redefining a work of art and merely ripping it off, Rogers quotes Picasso: "A good artist imitates, a great artist steals." Picasso took everything he could but it went through him and came out fresh and new," Rogers adds. "Artists, when they're through with a composition, know whether it came out fresh or whether they've done a pale imitation of what they've been looking at."

Appropriating, Ellen Fountain concludes, is a way at once to show the relevancy of art to its own time and to demonstrate that great art is timeless: "The outer trappings may change but humans, ultimately, must deal with life, death...and our relationship with the world we live in. I can never be another Matisse or O'Keeffe or Picasso or anyone else but me, nor do I want to be. In the end, I can only take from their work those things that have relevance and meaning for me in this time. And maybe I can add something to the art continuum, just as they did." ■

