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Allan McCollum

interviewed by
GRAY WATSON

Allan McCollum Paster Surrogates. *1982/83. Enamel on Hydrostone.*

What are your present paintings, if that's the right word, made of?

I usually call them *Surrogates*, or *Plaster Surrogates*, and they're made from an enhanced casting plaster called Hydrostone. I use plaster in general because of its many connotations, especially its connotation as a medium for mass-produced replicas.

When did you start the *Surrogates*?

They were started before I started calling them *Surrogates*. The notion, the desire to make a sign for a painting came first; then I went through a number of ways of trying to do that. I arrived at the present basic form – the frame, the mat, and something inside the mat – around 1978. At that stage, though, I was painting them monochromatically (red, green, purple, etc.): the frame, the mat, and what was inside were all the same colour. It wasn't until late 1979 or 1980 that I began separating the frame from the centre, and painting the centre black.

How carefully do you arrange the *Surrogates* on the gallery wall?

In my arrangements, I'm only aiming to create a conventional-looking installation. I work to get them fairly evenly-spaced: I try to put about 2 to 2 1/2 inches between them and I don't leave any gaping spaces, which is harder to do than you might think, because I'm working with so many odd sizes.

Why do you go for the cluttered, Salon-type look, which is hardly typical of modern galleries?

Initially, I made that choice (this was before I came to black centres, they were still solid colours) because I found that the things I was making weren't always being read as signs for paintings in the way I wanted them to be. They were too often being seen as minimalist objects, or something like that. There were a couple of decisions I made to enhance their identity as signs. One was to create the black centre and the brown frame, which made the reference very specific. The other was to create a type of installation which *hyper-exaggerated* the idea of an installation. As you say, this type of hanging isn't fashionable in the "modern" gallery, but there are many poster shops and other kinds of art stores which sell paintings like this today. So I also like my work installed this way because when it includes a reference to all types of painting, if not all types of framed object.

When I walked into your current show at the Lisson Gallery, the first feeling I had on confronting the *Surrogates* was of photographs. Maybe they reminded me visually of Polaroids that hadn't developed; but they also had for me some of the emotional qualities of photographs, especially a slightly nostalgic feeling.

As you know, I'm fond of photographs of artworks. My work often gets into the area of the relationship between a photograph of an artwork and an artwork. And, yes, I'm aware that the shiny black is reminiscent of a photograph, and I have the same sort of nostalgic reaction to my own installations as you describe in your own experience. Another reason that they feel like photographs to *me* is that they're mechanically-reproduced. They're made from moulds, which could be compared with the way that photographs are made from negatives. I feel that all replicas carry with them a feeling of poignancy, of sadness; a memory is a kind of replica, a sort of homeless phantom. I work to give my *Surrogates* the appearance of a precious thing, and that's the way I think of photographs too. Photographs are things that I love to handle – they accrue that value of a remembrance that you want to touch.

So you accept that there's an element of remembrance in your work?

One of the things my work is about is the un-fulfilment of expectations. I would guess that whenever one goes to look at artworks, one is ready to go into a state of reverie, which includes the past prominently. And in the case of my work, it is this expectation of reverie itself which becomes the subject of one's experience.

"Found" Surrogate Painting *n snapshot taken from he TV screen. llan McCollum, 1982.*

Often, of course, as in your present show, you exhibit, along with the Surrogates, some actual photographs, taken off the TV or from magazines. These are of interior scenes, which always include some paintings on the walls. Because of the loss of definition in the photographs, these paintings read as sort of "found" *Surrogates*.

There are a number of types of photographs that I do. There are those which you refer to, in which the paintings in the background have solid black centres, and these I use as an ersatz "didactic supplement" to the *Surrogates*, in a way that is fairly ironic. There is another type of photograph that I take which is used as an intermediate image, from which I then extract another kind of art object altogether. These are also of interiors, usually taken off the TV screen, and they also have paintings in the background, but they don't have the solid black centres – there's some indecipherable image in the frame. What I do with these is to blow up the little image and re-frame it, so that in a sense I am making for myself the little picture I saw on someone's wall in a TV show. I do entire exhibits of these "recuperated" pictures, but I never know what any of the original images were.

Apart from there having to be paintings on the walls, what are your other criteria when you're choosing photographic images?

I like photographs which show action. There are almost always people in the photographs, because I'm interested in the painting presented as an object-in-the-background. Paintings are in the back ground of our lives anyway – perhaps less for us because we're involved in the arts – but their real place in the world is to be in the background functioning as a prop, or a token, and to remain secondary to the social behaviour which gives them meaning. I'm interested in foregrounding the social behaviour of making, buying and selling art, and of having art and looking at art. So there are lots of different strategies I have for reducing the art object. One of them is to place it in the background of the action.

In the *Surrogates*, where one would normally expect an image, you just provide a black rectangle, which is another form of reduction. From reading several articles about your work, and the role which reduction plays in it, I get the impression that you're implying that the distinctions between different artworks have been rendered insignificant by the development of certain economic and social forces. Do you really believe that there's now no meaningful distinction between, say, a Rembrandt portrait and some other painting, except in the terms of price?

No, of course not. But I am not personally very interested in what these other distinctions may be, to tell you the truth, and anyway, the art world is filled with people who are anxious to make these distinctions, and who are very good at doing so. I'm focussing on something else. There are a lot of ways an art object acquires meaning, and its price is an important factor. An aesthetician will seldom waste too much of his time documenting the virtues of an artwork that just *anyone* could afford to own, for instance. And there are those art collectors who will rant interminably at you about the beauty of their possessions. when you know in your heart it is the price – and their ability to pay it – which has truly infatuated them.

Allan McCollum. Surrogate Paintings. *1980/81. Installed in corporate waiting area, New York.*

Could this be more blatant in America?

It is possible, I suppose, but I doubt if it is more prevalent. Connoisseurship is a way of life in Europe, it seems to me, and it is enjoyable precisely because it connects its practitioners with a tradition of wealth, intellectuality, privilege and general superiority.

How about art in public galleries and museums?

Whenever I walk into a museum, I am very much aware – and maybe this is increased because I have sometimes worked in museums for money, as a labourer – of the fact that I had nothing to do with choosing what got in there. The objects that are important in my life, or my family's life, or your life, or in the vast majority of people's lives are never going to end up in a museum, because most people aren't in a position to enforce the meanings in their lives and say, "this should be the meaning in your life, too." Museums are filled with objects that were commissioned by, or owned by, a privileged class of people who have assumed and presumed that these objects were important to the culture at large – and who have made sure that they are important to the culture at large. My awareness of what kind of people decide what goes into these shrines, and how we are expected to emulate their tastes in our own lives, and find personal meaning for ourselves in their souvenirs, causes a hostility to arise within me which becomes the major factor in my experience of being in a museum. Obviously, if I felt that all was well with the world and if I approved of the mechanisms of connoisseurship and expertise, and thought that these were value-free talents that some people had, it would be very different. But I believe that connoisseurship has always been part of a sort of self-answering structure which has supported a class of people who feel themselves better than everybody else, an attitude on account of which others suffer.

In a recent interview with D. A. Robbins [Arts Magazine, New York, October 1985], you put forward the theory that when people enjoy looking at art in public galleries and museums, they are unconsciously identifying with the power of that privileged class, which is oppressing them. I must confess I've increasingly come to feel that, though such factors may play a part, they are not nearly as important as the fact that what one can get from acknowledgedly "great" art is often exceedingly real and valid.

Well, I don't mean to reduce art to that one single function when I speak that way: I make exaggerated reductions when I talk about art, just as I do when I make art. Of course what one gets out of art is real and valid, regardless of whether a particular work of art is "acknowledgedly great" or otherwise; but it is real because it is through art that one connects oneself to other people, to society, and to culture. This is the essence of all aesthetic or spiritual experience, I should think, and one of the biggest factors of our social life is coming to terms with how some people are dominated by other people: art not only depicts these social forces, *it is used to mediate them*. Aesthetic discourse nearly always overlooks these really simple, primitive realities of the ways art is used to reinforce class boundaries, that the art object itself is a kind of token. If one is not able to admit to oneself that part of the thrill of going into a museum is that one is going to look at some extremely valuable and *expensive* objects and that in some way by saying "I appreciate this" one imagines oneself as somehow similar in spirit and privilege to those ladies and gentlemen of superior sophistication and lineage to whom one is indebted for one's visit, well, then I feel that one's perception of art is cloudy and incomplete.

In that same interview, you spoke of "the very real desperation that underlay my drive to make art in the first place." Can you elaborate?

I was referring to those kinds of deep needs that any artist has, to be seen and to have what one does valued. This is another factor involved in the experience of looking at art which seems to be frequently ignored – probably because it seems so obvious it isn't considered important. Just as one's relations to power make up the emotional ground of one's visit to a museum, as we've just discussed, I feel that the artist's desperation to be considered important, to be seen and recognized, to be accepted – this emotionality underlies one's visit to the one-person show in a gallery. Why else does an artist do what he does? An artist puts on a performance, and solicits approval, and the viewer addresses his solicitation with various acts of criticism, adulation, and so forth. As an artist, I know that this exchange is very basic to my situation, and I am certainly not alone in this.

So your work, rather than hurrying past these basic things, draws attention to them.

Yes, I hope so. If one wants to understand art, it seems to me, one should start with the rudiments of one's experience of it, one should begin with the terms of the situation in which one actually encounters it. There's a way in which my work is a sort of "working to rule": in a sense, I'm doing just the minimum that is expected of an artist and no more. I try to reduce the activities of the art world to a sort of going-through-the-motions: making art, looking at art, maybe buying and selling art – but with the mystique set aside for the moment. It's like performing the technical run-through of a play. One doesn't have to dwell on content in my work, because there *is* no content in my work, in the normal sense. The *Surrogates* aren't pictures of anything; and one looks no better than another. I'm trying to provoke a slightly schizoid feeling of "walking through" a situation, of performing activities without the kinds of excuses one generally uses to do so, not because I think people should behave this way all the time – and I certainly don't think everybody should be making pictures like mine – but because if one experiences one's activity with some of the standard mystifications removed, one learns certain things about oneself that one doesn't learn when one is engaged in a more direct way. I'm trying to orchestrate a sort of charade--like a ritual re-enactment, or a child's game – which includes not only the art gallery, but the social behaviour which inspires – and is inspired by – the art gallery. I think that an analysis should always begin with pinning down one's own position, and it is my position in the world as an artist which I aim to characterize in this project, to even mock myself, perhaps, and to try to tip the seriousness of my critique slightly over into the realm of play.