

Cook's multimedia works show her courage

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Casey Cook is a painter, installation and video artist whose work seems to pursue a very personal content. Influenced by the Droste effect, Cook repeats certain images over and over in ever smaller versions.

The centerpiece of her exhibition is a large chain that hangs from the ceiling and is pierced with high heeled women's shoes that erupt at the center into a lavalier studded with a swollen bulge surrounded by sausage-shaped appendages. The sexual allusions are obvious. These shapes and forms appear and reappear in her large paintings and in a series of small digital prints.

The paintings are a mass of linear forms that move from figures to snippets of intimate rooms to various human appendages. The prints focus on the clown Perrot, in double, and also focus on ambiguous interiors where a woman's high heel shoe is in the background.

Cook has also morphed into a video artist, and using six monitors appears in a short video with female dancers. They twirl and extend shield-like disks toward her. In mime, she beats her drum sticks toward the disks as if they are drums. All this takes place to the taped sounds of a cadenced beat.

Mounted almost as a palate cleanser or an after thought are a set of small paintings featuring phrases like "Are You For Real," "Front Row Center," and "Body Body" done in block letters on Mondrian-like backgrounds

In thinking about Cook's work I found myself musing about the contemporary art world and the courage it takes to enter a space filled with great artists. In today's world only the super rich can afford a Joan Miro (1893-1983) painting or one by Helen Frankenthaler (b. 1928), Ellsworth Kelly (b. 1923) or Salvador Dali (1904-1989), but the collector who has some discretionary funds can own a signed original print by almost any of the 20th century's best painters. It is those signed prints that I thought about in connection with Cook's very serious, unique paintings, sculpture and videos. Her raw energy and earnestness are visible in each brush stroke, each line and each form -- whether it is a shoe, a block letter, a sexual organ or a make-believe drum.

On the other hand, the signed original print is many steps removed from the living, breathing artist. Usually a signed original print begins with a design or composition by the artist, who works it into the lithographic stone, or a copper plate or a silk screen and then a master printer sets the machinery in place to print that composition into multiple images. The number is determined by the printer and the artist together. The act of printing is labor intensive, but technology has taken some of the hardest work out of the process and the printer is now able to focus on color and line registration according to the artist's original design. The artist is expected to be on hand for the entire process and only signs the work when it has passed its final inspection.

Technology has changed the face of original art. Today the machinery is so efficient it can produce an endless number of images and there will be no difference between the first and the last. The photographic process has also changed the creation of the plate; the artist's composition can be photographed onto the plate or stone and a perfect print can be reproduced from that plate. All of this separates the artist even further from the art object and ultimately the viewer. As a collector, what are you getting with a signed print? You get a design that was originally created by the artist and now exists in any number of copies and the artist's name, which has been individually signed by the artist. As the processes become more technical, the distance between the viewer and the artist lengthens and there is a school of thought that believes all that is left of the artist is the autograph.

This is not to belittle the value and delight of the iconic image that is one of many. Cook believes there is room for her one-of-a-kind object or very limited number of photographs and we begin to understand her courage. There are hundreds of Cooks who continue to work in their studios, putting their guts out on paper or canvas or metal and, as viewers, we are grateful, because we feel their breath, their fingers and their sweat in every part of the work.

A signed print by a famous artist is safe; a unique object by an emerging artist is exciting. The question is "How do you like your art?"

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