

Selling out

Tuesday afternoon, 2014. Art history repeats itself. On a loop. The advent of technology couldn't even save the day. All has been said and done. Enough art has been created; we have reached the point of saturation. Time to start recycling. And maybe turn art history into a lucrative little venture, why don't we? Licensed merchandise is definitely the way to go. After all, it is well documented that the Star Wars "franchise" will have generated far greater profits in merchandizing than with its phenomenal box office revenues. And with the ever-shrinking cultural budgets... Action figures it is, then. Six inches, trade standard. At long last, some tangible art for everyone to grasp (and collect!). Step aside Batman and Robin, here come Arshile Gorky and his mother.

Project description:

A serious reflection on the place of art creation in our consumer-oriented society, this exhibition comprises one hundred fifty-five action figures based on historical and contemporary works of art. Paradoxically the carefully hand made and hand painted figures are trapped in sealed industrial packaging, containing printed reproductions of the original work; the resulting "product" sits precariously between work of art and commodity. Another section of the exhibition features classical works reworked into Marvel-style comic-book covers; painstakingly hand-embroidered, and exuberantly framed to further confuse the issue of disposable commodity versus precious work of art, they refer to the cheaply produced comic magazine turned pricey collectible. Add to the mix a series of 200 collector's cards featuring artists and their artworks, and we're in business.

Appropriation, copyright, the commerce of art, the relevance of art and art history for the general public, as well as heroism and violence in comic book culture are all issues that lay very close to the surface of this playful, store-like installation.

Along the way, this much appreciated exhibition has been updated and augmented by the production of a new line of "products" for each venue where it has been presented (sliding block puzzles in Regina, designer bottle caps in Sudbury, t-shirts in Montréal). The next iteration will feature a collection of metal lunchboxes adorned with much loved classics, and the very latest in contemporary works.

Curatorial statement:

"Selling Out debuts a new body of work by Gatineau artist Michèle Provost, whose canny and compelling textile works have garnered national acclaim. Provost sends up art world commercialism, everyday consumerism, and merchandising mayhem with 155 action-figure-style sculptures, 12 intricate textiles and a set of 200 trading cards, all of which pay homage to the work of artists from Caravaggio to Beuys, Kahlo to Kruger, and Graham to Wall, while re-framing it for a souvenir market.

The exhibition is installed to mimic ubiquitous styles of contemporary merchandising display. The cards are presented in the hard-plastic cases typically used by collectors of sports trading cards, while the action figures — each in their own clamshell package — hang from wall-mounted pegboard. Provost's "products" cleverly blur the boundaries between original and copy, handmade and mass-produced, fine art and kitsch. They are one-off collectibles, and they're not for sale. So the show won't sell out. But has Provost?"

Sandra Dyck
Director, Carleton University Art Gallery
Curator of *Selling Out*