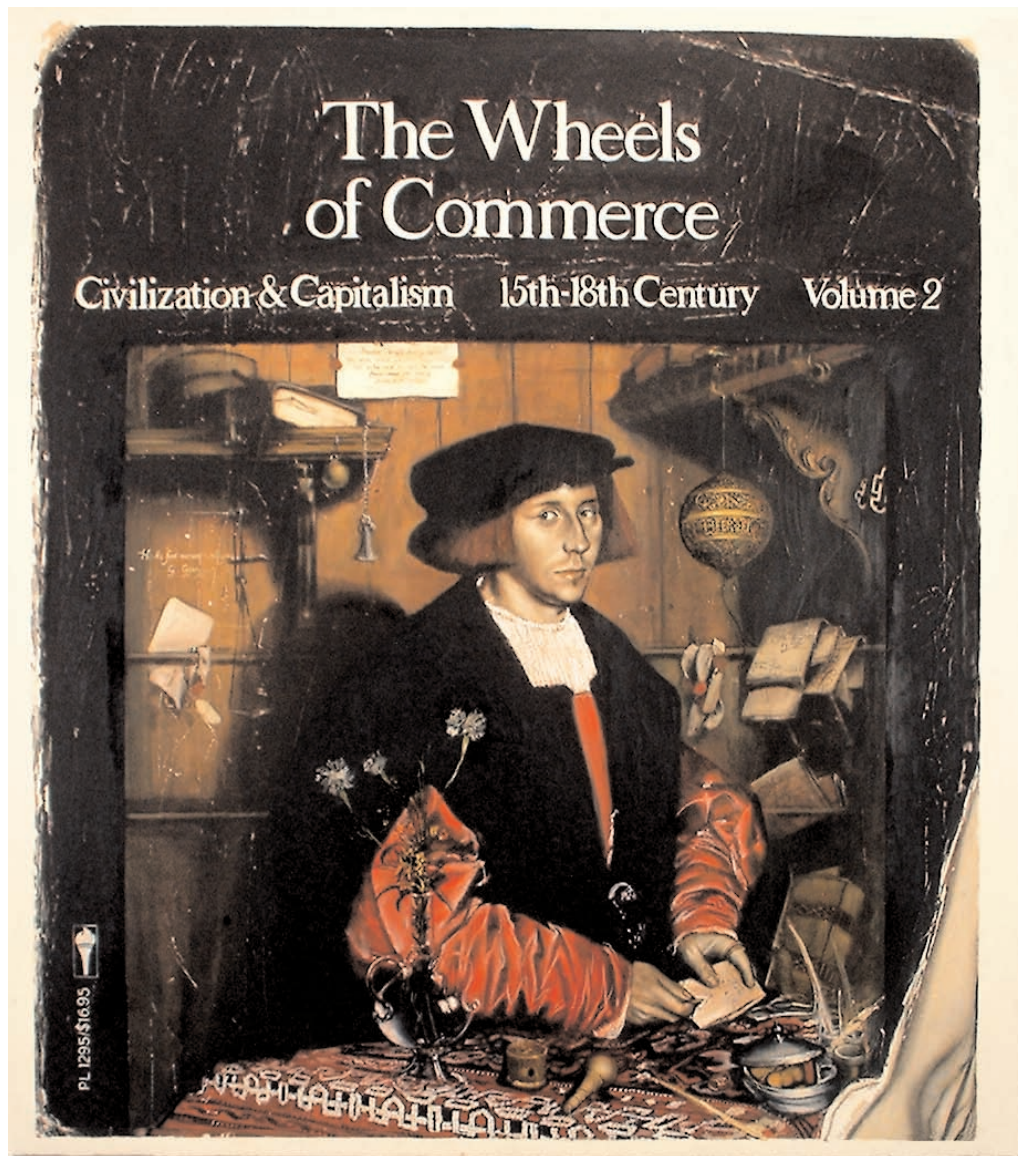


# JOSEPH KAROLY



*The Wheels of Commerce, fresco on canvas, 66" X 60"*

Frescoes On Canvas  
September 9 – October 16, 2005

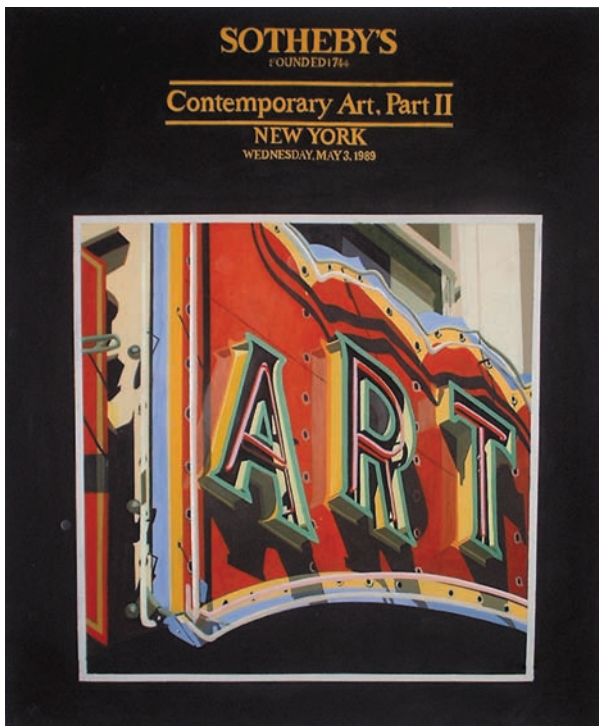
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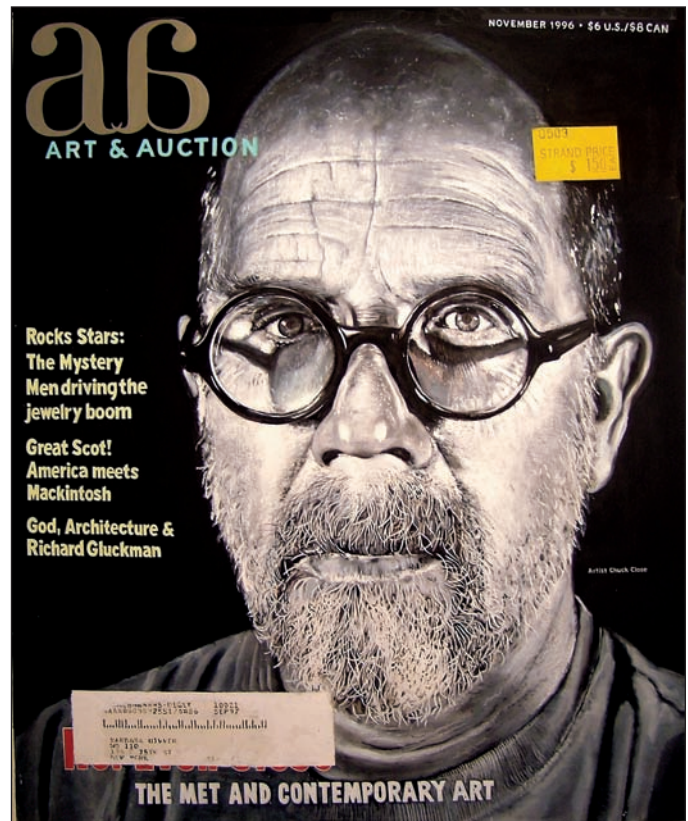
# The Wheels of Commerce

Frescoes by Joseph Karoly

The contemporary art world as such has for some time found itself inchoate and untethered from theoretical dictates, regarding unified stylistic identity. Some find this condition to be liberating and necessary if artistic activity is to find renewed significance in cultural life. Yet another faction thinks an ahistorical position indicates little more than an anti-intellectual discursive lapsus in art-historical orthogenesis— a post-modern-fashion bump in the road, as it were. Both positions, as well as the micro-spaces between them, occupy strategic ground, suggesting, if not precisely defining, a self-conscious



*Sotheby's/ART*, fresco on canvas, 72" X 60"



*Art & Auction/Chuck*, fresco on canvas, 72" X 60"

sensibility signally different from the project of modernism, whether this is in fact post-modern or merely a position which demarcates modernism's entropic terminal point. This sense of difference from the modern has given rise to the plurality of works in our contemporary present and informs the methods by which they attempt to articulate their meaning.

As one tactic of a broader and largely problematic formation of post-modernism, appropriation involves issues concerned directly with artistic objects and their epistemological identity (as framed by the differences with the objects they ostensibly resemble).





*Art & Auction/Maastricht, fresco on canvas, 74" X 60"*

how it is culturally 'used'. Meaning is construed according to a range of extrinsic influences and interpretive agendas beyond mere appearance.

The citation of historical stylistic modes references codified types of presentation by critically addressing the conventions of those presentations. This type of appropriation of extant styles is neither about copying or emulation of forms in a desire for some elegiac, romanticized nostalgia for a fictive past, nor a nihilistic dismissal of tradition. Instead, it foregrounds as its subject, placing issues of surface reading in a re-contextualized relation of ironic contradiction by suggesting alternatives to putatively authoritative semiotic interpretations, engaging in a process of simultaneous practice and criticism.

Appropriation constructs its recontextualization through a historical/temporal contingency, the historical context of its origins, and the historical conditions of a citational present. Mere citation however, is not the subject, but the position implied by the citation and subsequent positions that compound and refract content in ways unavailable to the original object.

Quotational strategy is meant to place extant images, both representational and non-objective, and more pointedly, the theoretical models that inform types of works, in parenthetical brackets. My program of theory and production creates an on-going feedback loop of self reference and commentary with the history of artistic objects and practices. For me, any image is less important for what it appears to represent (picture) than for



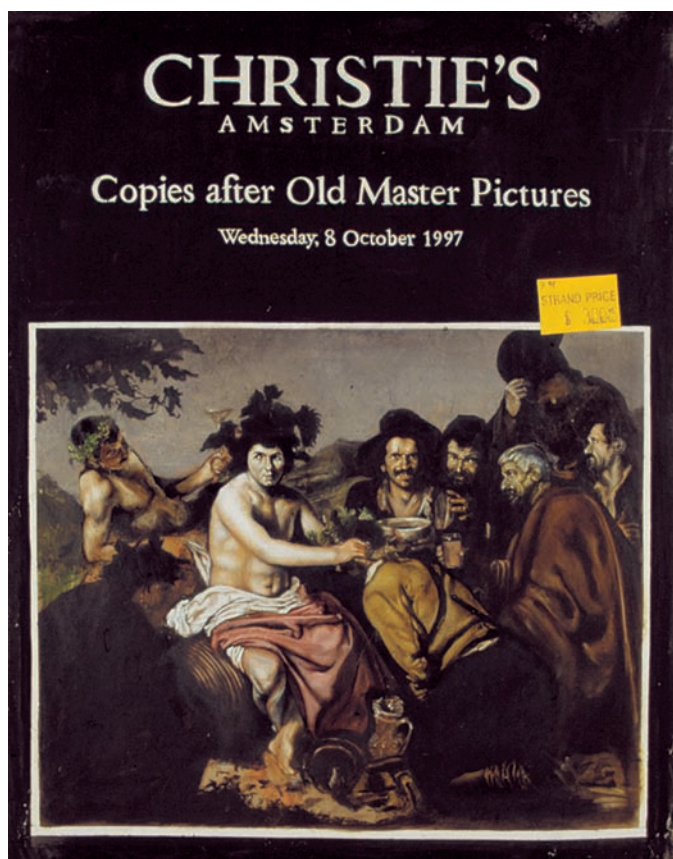
*Signal To Noise, fresco on canvas, 72" X 60"*

I do not make a claim for my work that it is free of the historical and social processes that are an inherent part of its critique. The work cannot be outside of its historical/temporal constructs, and if it is to be effective, must embody this self-consciousness as a component of its content.

I am not particularly concerned with adding to the commentary on the narrative references that images 'picture.' Iconographic reading is primarily directed toward symbolic exegesis of interpretation: symbolic or allegoric models. The formal (theoretical) structure of art works seems to be disregarded as incidental to illustrative meaning. This traditional art historical approach, as well as that of literary criticism, appears to do



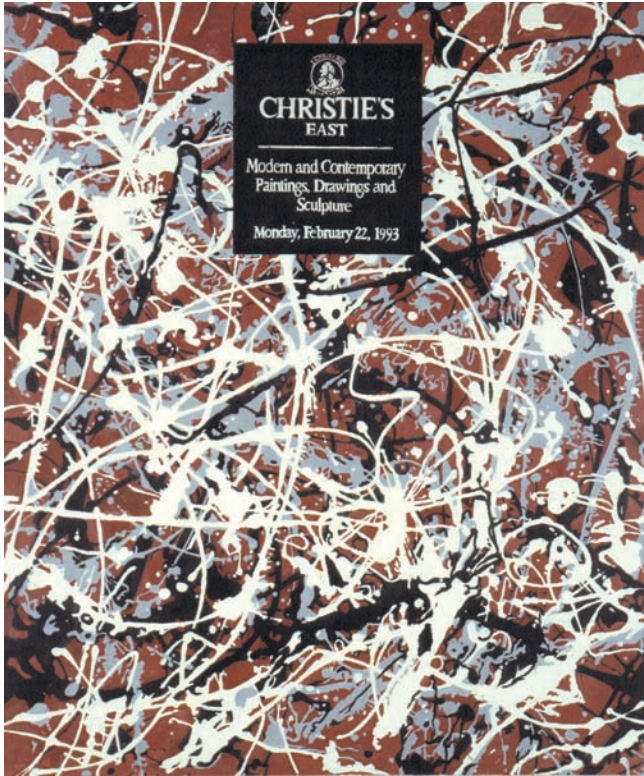
*Art & Auction/Marilyn, fresco on canvas, 72" X 60"*



*Christie's/Old Master Copies, fresco on canvas, 78" X 58"*

little to address more interesting issues pertaining to formal structure, or a work's 'style' and theoretical identity. Self-consciousness of theoretical tenets becomes the identity of the work, both its subject and content. Representational images inherently possess narrative content in that they resemble, to a greater or lesser degree, their depicted subjects with fidelity. Literary (illustrative) (mis)readings are capable of myriad interpretations which tend toward subjectively psychologized templates of association once they move beyond the cultural symbolism of a community of readers. Both old and new associations produce an array of often contradictory meanings. A work is open to semiotic shifts, yet the object itself remains unchanged, which would seem to indicate that the one level of content most





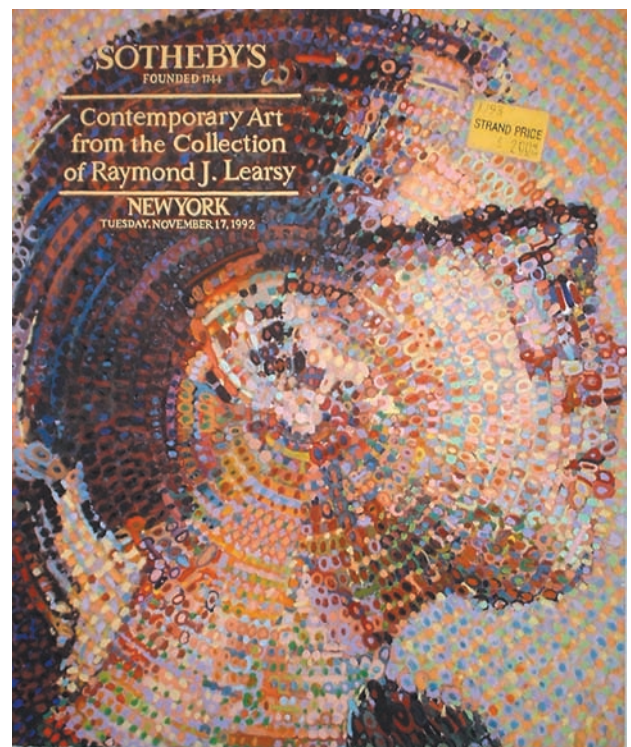
*Christie's/Pollock/Bidlo, fresco on canvas, 72" X 60"*

artworks, but also in questioning the propositional aspects of identifying/distinguishing artworks from other things. The paradoxes and dichotomies encountered almost immediately, upon such a seemingly easy taxonomic identification, begin to reveal elements of absurdity couched in irony. Humor is often a by-product of this type of inquiry though the questions contain a serious logical gravitas. In these frescoes, irony arises not just as an index of contextual cultural shifts, but in the visual presentation of formal marks or gestures meant to read as inappropriate or canceling in their identity. For example, a mark that shows itself to be emblematic of spontaneity or expressiveness is antithetical to the inherent lack of the spontaneous inherent to fresco as a technique.

An aspect of fresco that interests me is as a “distancing” technique that tends to thwart both

inherent to the identity of a work is its formal structure as an embodiment of its theoretical tenets. This foregrounds a difference/distinction between how an image means and a painting means. Thus, theories which inform stylistic ‘isms’ are in effect definitions of art at any given time. By “re-presenting” an extant image (or style) as culturally codified, its original narrative remains historically intact, yet irretrievable. It also acknowledges the accrued levels of content that perpetuate re-contextualization. Semiotic meaning advances and recedes through both temporal distance and the mutable cultural constructs of interpretive agendas.

Any interest in art compels one to formulate notions of criteria not just in evaluating



*Cindy, fresco on canvas, 72" X 60"*



*Morley/Vermeer, fresco on canvas, 72" X 60"*

facile and overt expressive associations. Technical proficiency is important only regarding its sufficiency to induce recognition rather than replication, a sense of adequacy elucidating a conceptual program rather than an exercise in verisimilitude.

Textual elements included in given paintings also contain their own descriptive identity, as when an auction catalog states its contents to be copies of Old Master paintings, or depicts paintings such as Malcom Morley's or Andy Warhol's versions of Old Master paintings, while these images reveal their commodified identity in the marketplace as contemporary art. Text from the magazine covers serves another semiotic function as linguistic referent or actual descriptive equivalent to an image or its intended illustration. This raises

interesting issues of difference between textual and visual language systems. The text also becomes a spatial flattening device corrupting any notion of the representation as real, pointing out the dual fictions of visual perception and the metaphors for that perception. By incorporating the cover texts as part of the new image, it seems to underscore the image as reproduction, already removed from painting as a 'mirror to nature', or as a location for fixing ephemeral and largely expressed but inarticulate inner emotional impulses.

Fine art has always found itself to be a product of social and economic forces. The contemporary trend for art to serve as little more than entertainment drives the impetus for trend of the museum blockbuster. The auction houses have seen the age of the connoisseur give way to the speculator. The perceptual shift in cultural use, from appreciation to exploitation, is one of interest in attempting to address issues of artistic identity and creative impulses, at a moment when emphasis seems to be placed on economic value over other types of meaning. Appropriation will continue to be a useful tactic in mapping future conditions as they occur, and irony presents itself as a pressure ridge between the tragic and the absurd.

—Joseph Karoly, 2005