From The Brueghel Series, 1983-84



Jan Brueghel the Elder's Flower Piece in a Blue Vase, painted in 1599, depicts a magnificent array of flowers in full bloom against a dark background. It is a Vanitas painting, a common still-life type of the period, in which the flower, among the most lovely and evanescent gifts of nature, symbolizes human vanity. The painting served as a model for Pat Steir's complex conceptual work, The Brueghel Series (A Vanitas of Style), a tour-de-force culmination of her longstanding research into style and meaning.

After gridding a reproduction of the painting into 64 rectangles, Steir, over the next two and one-half years, created as many separate paintings, each the size of the original. Steir painted each panel in a recognizable art historical style, from Botticelli to Baselitz, suggested by the corresponding detail. The monumental, multipart painting (reconstituted it measures 18' x 14'8"), a smaller grisaille version comprised of 16 units, and the gridded poster of the original complete the project.

That she selected a 17th century painting of a vase of flowers as the point of departure for her investigations reflects not only Steir's interest in art history but her predilection for painting flowers. Through the repeated use of the motif, Steir, like Fantin-Latour and Georgia O'Keefe before her, has become identified with the flower (Steir's real first name is Iris, so the flower is a personal symbol, as well.)

In her paintings of the seventies, Steir often combined realistically painted flowers with a grid or color field, on one hand paying homage to admired Minimal artists Sol LeWitt and Agnes Martin, and on the other, questioning the dichotomy between abstraction and figuration. Her suspicion that the two are simply "different ways to inspect the same thing, an image and its meaning" (Steir, CAM, Houston catalogue) was confirmed by her work on The Brueghel Series. She found that often the perception of what is abstract and what is representational is often only a matter of scale; a greatly enlarged line in a Rembrandt drawing can become an Abstract Expressionist gesture of Kline; a scaled-up section of a painting by Van Gogh can look like a de Kooning.

Steir's deconstruction of the Brueghel still-life was preceded by years of paring down her own artistic language to its primary elements. When she arrived at the simplest mark, Steir gradually rebuilt her vocabulary of marks and images. Like Jennifer Bartlett (MATRIX 73), who spent a soggy winter in the South of France, obsessively drawing and redrawing a garden scene in a multitude of modern art styles, Steir systematically explored line and color while making explicit allusions to admired artists in her intaglio prints, the Drawing Lesson series (1978).

If Steir's quotations from art history place her in the mainstream of Postmodern practice, it is fortuitous— Steir has always followed her own path, which was often at odds with current trends (for example, references to other artists appear in her earliest work). Her art historical awareness, however, was intensified by firsthand study of Rembrandt, Vermeer, Van Gogh and others in Amsterdam where she has lived half the year since 1975.

By training herself to impersonate various artists in The Brueghel Series, Steir learned a lot more about them. "I could tell if they were slow or fast, if they were right-handed or lefthanded." Whereas she gained increased regard for some, she lost respect for others. In the end, she concluded that despite obvious distinctions, "it's all the same thing--painting" (Steir, Arts and Auction). The commonality among all great art may be called beauty or humanity, but ultimately it cannot be expressed through language. "That is the reason we make art, that is what we consider 'beauty' and why all great art is at once of its time and of all times, why it is at once both personal and political, and why the need to see it and to make it persists." (Steir, Arts--members magazine for Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts, April '85).

Pat Steir was born in 1940 in Newark, New Jersey. She studied at the Boston Museum School and Boston University as well as Pratt Institute, where she received a B.F.A. in 1961. Steir worked as a book designer for Harper & Row publishers during the 1960s and from 1973 to 1975 taught at California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. She received a 1974 Individual Artist Fellowship from the National Endowment for the

Arts and a 1982 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship. Steir currently lives and works in New York and in Amsterdam.

The Brueghel Series was shown previously at the Brooklyn Museum, the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska, and will travel to Ohio State University, the Honolulu Academy of Fine Arts and the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts.

Constance Lewallen

Work in MATRIX:

The Brueghel Series: A

Vanitas of Style, 1983-84,

oil on canvas, consists of 64

panels, each 28-1/2 x 22
1/2"; 16 panels, each 28-1/2

x 22-1/2"; 1 poster with

pencil grid, 28-3/8 x 22
1/4". Lent by the artist and

Michael Klein, Inc.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Terry Dintenfass Gallery, NY, '64; The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, '73; Fourcade Droll, Inc., NY, '75; Galerie Farideh Cadot, Paris, '79; Galerie Annamarie Verna, Zurich, '82; Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, Form Illusion Myth: Prints and Drawings of Pat Steir, '83 (catalogue; traveled to several U.S. museums); Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Arbitrary Order, '83 (catalogue; traveled to Lowe Art Museum, Coral Gables, FL, and Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH); Fuller Goldeen Gallery, S.F., '85.

Selected group exhibitions:

The Museum of Modern Art, NY, Drawings, '64 (catalogue); Whitney Museum of American Art, Biennials, '73, '77, '83 (catalogues); Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Joan Snyder and Pat Steir, '74 (catalogue); P.S. I, Long Island City, NY, A Painting Show, '77; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY, American Painting of the 1970s, '78 (catalogue, traveled); Crown Point Press Gallery, Oakland, CA, '82 (catalogue); The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NY, Language, Myth, Source, Drama, '83 (catalogue); Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, Content: A Contemporary Focus, 1974-1984, '84 (catalogue); Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, Art of the Seventies, '84 (catalogue); The Museum of Modern Art, NY, New Work on Paper 3, '85 (catalogue).

Selected bibliography (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Baker, Kenneth. "The World Within Around Us,"
Christian Science Monitor
(Boston), Nov. 17, '72.

Castle, Ted. "Pat Steir and the Science of the Admirable," Artforum, May '82.

Hughes, Robert. "Myths of Sensibility," Time, March 20, '72.

Tucker, Marcia.

"Interview with Pat Steir,"

Journal of the Los Angeles

Institute of Contemporary

Art, March/April '76.

White, Robin. View

(Crown Point Publications,
Oakland), v. 1, no. 3, June

'78.

Castle, Ted. "Pat
Steir: Ways of Marking," Art
In America, Summer '84.

"Pat Steir, The Brueghel
Series (A Vanitas of Style),"
Art & Auction (NY), Feb. '85.

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