

Eric Gelber, "Yuri Masnyj: The Night's Still Young," Art Critical.com, September 2007.



Yuri Masnyj Dark Mountain Party, 2007  
Wood, plaster, wax, paper,  
70 x 192 x 22-1/2 inches  
Courtesy of the Artist and  
Metro Pictures

Yuri Masnyj's art bears the burden of historical self-consciousness unwaveringly. The modernist style permeates his compositions, the cartoonish yet exacting watercolors of interior spaces and the hybrid sculptures. Masnyj transforms modernist formal devices and elements of genre painting into a new system of signs and symbols. After all, as the title of the s

how indicates, "The Night is Still Young." Many modern masters such as Picasso and Matisse and Morandi recycled

shapes and themes throughout their oeuvre. Masnyj's art represents a self-conscious hyper-recycling, in that the references to the past are excessive. He does not appropriate other artists' work but he quotes the stylistics of modernism, almost but not quite reducing it to kitsch.

Many of his drawings use a Matissean picture within picture format. Like Matisse's painting "The Red Room" Masnyj often quotes his own oeuvre. The drawing "All In Colors" (2007) includes a picture of a head and shoulders made with Paul Klee like multicolored stripes. In "Big Books" (2007) a Noguchi paper lamp makes an appearance. Cubistic faces and bodies appear in many of the drawings. In his sculptures references to Russian Constructivist poster designs, Kasimir Malevich, and Alexander Calder, among others, abound.

In his drawings of interiors, instead of walls Masnyj often draws white skeletal frameworks and he fills in the interstices with complete blackness. It is almost as if

these “rooms” are floating in deep space. This strange isolated quality epitomizes the ahistoricity of the contemporary art world. The lines that describe the walls and floor don’t always match up. The perspective is askew. This makes the interior spaces he invents, which are sometimes little more than a drawing of a single picture hanging on a wall, conceptual rather than descriptive. Although they do have a certain naiveté, a lighthearted aspect to them, reminiscent of a cartoon appearing in the New Yorker, the drawings represent Masnyj’s thoughts about twentieth century pictorial space and the ways in which the present is constructed with fragments of the past. He obsessively recycles his own symbols, reconfiguring them in pictorial space, and adjusting their relationships to one another.

Masnyj uses a set of handcrafted shapes over and over again in these sculptures: black bottles (wax casts), imaginary books (They are hardcover books that look like coffee table art books or “important books.” Their pages are thin sheets of cardboard and the covers are made from the same materials real hardcover books would be made from, but only some of them have words or letters on their spines.), stringless replicas of acoustic guitars, wooden cube or orb shaped beads on long strings, modernist geometric

sculptures, and pieces of wood (these shards of wood relate to the shards of history visible in the sculpture) that are painted in such a way as to suggest backward or forward movement in space. Many of these objects have appeared in still-life paintings throughout the ages. Since we are reminded of the utopian intentions of so much modernist art when we look at these sculptures it is reasonable to compare them to memento mori. There is a cannibalistic quality to his work, in that he points out how contemporary cultural artifacts feed off of past creations. The drawings are a transmogrification of past sign/symbol systems and formal devices.

Often Masnyj’s sculptures have off-kilter proportions and spatial relationships. They are hybrids in the sense that they are simultaneously stand-alone sculptures, furniture, still-lives, and serial forms. The viewer awkwardly approaches the work because there is no focal point. A long black bookshelf shape filled with faux books, beads, sculptures, and bottles, with a Constructivist-like wood sculpture placed on top of it “Books and Sculptures” (2007), is a humorous twist on the concept of the pedestal/base.



Yuri Masnyj *There Is A Lot To Read To Understand What The Fuck Is Going On 2007*  
Graphite and watercolor on paper,  
12 x 7-3/4 inches  
Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures

The imaginary books that appear in Masnyj's drawings and sculptures have words and letters on their spines that could have been lifted from Russian Constructivist posters. They are fragments and emphasize the visual qualities of letters. Very few pre-postmodern artists made books the primary subject matter of their compositions. It appears that Masnyj is taking on the long-standing battle between language and images. This quote by Carter Ratcliff perfectly embodies the pre-postmodernist attitude towards language: "[E]very object of vision eventually exhausts the resources of language." Even though words have static "forms, pronunciations, functions, etymologies, meanings, and

syntactical and idiomatic uses" they have myriad connotations. It is unarguable that words and letters, whether written or spoken, are as integral part of our unconscious life as images are. Therefore they make just as rich metaphors as objects and people do. A word, a letter, a sentence, can have just as many potential meanings and interpretations as physical objects.

The fact that Masnyj's "books" are products of his imagination, even though they are well made or rendered well enough to pass the reality test, shows us that Masnyj's art represents a struggle, a constructive one, between the impulse to make a unique art work and an almost self-conscious recapitulation to what has come before. Masnyj makes art that is cognitive rather than expressive in that it celebrates conscious intellectual activity. Stacks of faux books are monuments to the potential change and growth hidden within the pages of real books, but they are all closed, never open, in the sculptures and drawings. So these crowded bookcases represent an everything/nothing duality. We can treat this as potential liberation from the dilemma put forth in the title, "There Is A Lot To Read To Understand What The Fuck Is Gong On" (2007), or we can see these books, these imaginary archives, as empty pages to be filled in by future artists.

