

Petzel

Jonathan Goodman, "Rodney McMillian at Petzel," *Whitehot Magazine*, July 2020.



Rodney McMillian at Petzel



Rodney McMillian, Untitled (landscape on blue afghan), 2018. Latex, ink on blanket, 48 x 74 inches.

Rodney McMillian: *Recirculating Goods*

Petzel

February 27 - July 31, 2020

By **JONATHAN GOODMAN**, July 2020

Rodney McMillian, educated at Cal Arts and working in Los Angeles, is showing Afghan throws covered partially with thick encrustations of latex paint. The throws have several origins--they can come as memorials, that is, handed-down relics kept in families, as finds come upon by the

Petzel

Jonathan Goodman, "Rodney McMillian at Petzel," *Whitehot Magazine*, July 2020.

artist in second-hand shops, and as pieces simply bought new in a store. The works reference contemporary art's ongoing fascination with class, as evidenced by our interest in layerings of culture--how they play out visually and how they might be made into artifacts meant to be read as examples of current life in art. In McMillian's case, the embellishment, technically and conceptually, of these very inexpensive, we can say "cheap," productions looks like the artist's wish to work out new conceptions--of what we find acceptable as evidence of current visual culture.

Here, McMillian's work appears to be part of a general eschewal of the beautiful object, preferring instead the visual and social transparency of art that opts for direct experience. Deliberate beauty is given little if no allegiance, although perhaps the show is arguing for a wider expression of taste. This gives McMillian's work its social underpinning, its revelatory aspect in relation to class. Like many artists devoted to a social practice, McMillian appears to be working toward a leveling of culture; the traditional demarcations of high, middle, and low lose their ability to reify social and class distinctions. Thus, this show is involved with redefining visual efforts as they relate to simple or naive esthetic objects traditionally dismissed on both political, cultural, and economic levels. In consequence, the art we see does not attempt a purely visual statement so much as it fashions a reading of culture that would support a truly democratic approach to the visual. This is not always easily done, but in McMillian's art the intention is clear.



Rodney McMillian, Untitled (clouds), 2019. Latex on blanket, 98 x 61 inches.

Petzel

Jonathan Goodman, "Rodney McMillian at Petzel," *Whitehot Magazine*, July 2020.

How, then, does such thinking play out in the work on exhibition? The throws are relatively small, being easel-size, and are worked on casually with paint materials. We know the items are cheap as some of the works still have their price stickers--one is for \$7.99. *Untitled (clouds)* (2019) consists of latex paint on blanket; thick, blue, horizontally aligned clouds cover the top half of a cheap wool or cotton blanket, striped horizontally in tan, black, or range in repeating sets of three. The imagery is not gracious, having been set down with a roughness without cultural allusion. And that is likely the point--McMillian is reaching for a language entirely determined by popular, even populist culture, in which all traces of esthetic hierarchy are absent. It is impossible to read the work without confronting its social awareness. And this makes it open to question, in the sense that current American art's political drive, its insistence on a social reality that shows no evidence of hierarchy, may well distance McMillian's audience from the visual awkwardnesses presented. Other, similar works repeat the equation.



Rodney McMillian, \$7.99: *a blue moon*, 2019 - 2020. Latex on blanket, 47 x 61 inches.

\$7.99 a blue moon (2019-20), another work consisting of latex on blanket, is composed of thick paint, mostly blue, covering the greater part of a yellow-and-orange striped coverlet. The yellow price tag has been attached to the top of the composition. Here is a work that quite literally publicizes its inexpensiveness; it is as if McMillian were making it clear that the price of something is not a determinant of its true value, although we are aware that these very rough-hewn constructions are being shown in a gallery in the heart of an expensive New York City neighborhood. But maybe that is the point--we are meant to consider the discrepancy between

Petzel

Jonathan Goodman, "Rodney McMillian at Petzel," *Whitehot Magazine*, July 2020.

the imagination and the reality in which it finds itself. The contrast between the artwork and its framing, social and geographical, could not be more stark.



Rodney McMillian, Untitled (green afghan), 2019. Latex on blanket, 82 x 52 x 1 inches.

Untitled (green afghan) (2019) is a cover made of thin white and green stripes that create horizontal v-shaped patterns, messily overpainted with mostly green latex in the lower half of the work. This is an example of McMillian's manner of working for this show, called "Recirculating

Petzel

Jonathan Goodman, "Rodney McMillian at Petzel," *Whitehot Magazine*, July 2020.

Goods." in which materials are used once again, in a rude fashion. The artist wishes to make an important point, namely, the difference between good and bad taste needs to be re-defined as an example of opinion dominated by class interests. So taste is not to be seen as an impartial accomplishment. In *Laci Belle: Present Day* (2019-20), the blanket is a mixture of pink, purple, and mauve, with an undulating reddish stripe running across it. There is a thin stripe of darker yellow latex paint at the bottom, along with a couple of streaked, variegated passages of white that occur in the top half of the piece. A thin black outline frames the throw. It would be easy to characterize *Laci Belle* and the other works in this show as examples of conscious vulgarity, but McMillian's undertaking here is an attempt to do away with cultural hierarchy.

If that is true, where do these works of art belong? They can be seen, I think, as an idiom coming from experience rather than the sophistications of art schooling. This is a rebellion on McMillian's part, in which discarded afghans become the vehicle for imaginative freedom. They act as a bridge for another way of thinking. Can we now decide whether art is good or bad? Maybe not, given that educated artists are determined to accept any and all kinds of visual materials as equal in value. This can--and should--be debated, in the sense that much of what we see today is socially motivated and may lack visual interest. Thus, esthetic pleasures submit to the conceptual politics inherent in a show like this. McMillian is to be recognized for the stringency of the exhibition's roughness and social categorizations.

But it is also true, perhaps for more than a few, that subjecting art to the constraints of politics can pose problems. It shifts the argument from the imagined to the social and moral, not art's primary focal interests. Great political art has been made, but most often the argument is openly evident. It does not occur implicitly, as part of the art's unseen suggestiveness. But this is what happens in this challenging show. McMillian, educated at a school like Cal Arts, would be highly aware of both the strengths and weaknesses of a politicized position, in which the politics are inferred rather than stated directly. There is nothing wrong in working this way, but the lack of an overt statement, in regard to a political position, *indirectly* involves the audience. To McMillian's credit, notions of good taste and high culture are successfully challenged, if not done away with entirely, in the implicit tenets the show presents to us. **WM**

<https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/rodney-mcmillan-at-petzel/4677>