



Matthew McDonnell's Multivalent Abstraction

BY ANDREW McDONNELL

The art of Matthew McDonnell represents something the artist calls “multivalent abstraction,” or simply “multivalence,” where, as McDonnell puts it, “multiple figures share one space.”

McDonnell derives the term “multivalence” from the concept of valence in chemistry, where an element is understood to have some capacity to react or unite with other substances. In a picture—particularly in the modern, surreal picture—elements which we can identify as figures have a similar capacity to join or combine with other elements, other figures, and create a new compound figuration. This compound representation allows figures or hints of figures to combine in a new figurative fusion, where the entire constituent space of the picture is animated. The picture space is alive, and acute, with all the intelligent attributes and provocative cues that all the constituent figures imply. The total picture structure is the product of an implicate sentient intercourse. The multivalent image is corporate apparition.

Though he gives this type of imagery a new technical term, McDonnell understands that plan of fantasy to grow out of the established tradition of Western fine art; but also, equally, from our global heritage. McDonnell first looks for inspiration to modern art, the new depiction developed after 1906, most specifically, to cubism and surrealism. Cubism, as introduced by Picasso and Braque, made an image where representational cues structured the space where they were implemented. The paradigm was advanced in the fantastic anthropics of Klee, in his populous intricacy and whimsy. After this, biomorphic surrealism emerged, as Picasso prosecuted it, a fierce sexed organic imagery, devoting flesh to metaphor: carnal, characterful, voluptuous, and ambiguous. McDonnell uses cubism to integrate biomorphic surrealism into a thoroughgoing spatial manifold, where soul melds with structure, in which nuance and resemblance regulate space. In turn biomorphic surrealism gives sumptuous gust to the cerebral organization of cubism, rendering that not just an abstract but a gorgeous art.

McDonnell is convinced that all our modern discoveries in figuration, from Picasso or Klee to Miró or Gorky to the “totemic” Pollock or de Kooning, themselves repose in a greater, global notion of the figure, where the human form and gesture, and face, with all their deep psychic import, are not subject to the parochial constraints of what we call realism. Indeed, in culture after culture, throughout time and across the planet, a deep psychic authenticity, and shrewd, deeper realness, is manifest in representations of the figure we could denominate surreal: so much so, McDonnell contends, that surrealism is the actual norm of human art. McDonnell develops that norm into a complete new pictorial architecture, a renewal of the conceptual into canon, a rigor, and a culture, refreshing figment with synthesis. This is the tradition of multivalence, as McDonnell builds and advances it: where drollery and fancy, feeling and charm, raise an occult structure of luxury: where design is alive, and tissue intricate finesse, space made of functions suave and vital, beauteous and lush, which breathe their structure and style as mysteries, whose secrets render these supple, ply of likeness sensate, and aware.