



JAMES LIPOVAC: *The Swan, a Shark, and the Glacier*  
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Walter Benjamin referred to Charles Baudelaire as the lyric poet of the metropolis. It was Baudelaire who defined the artist/philosopher as a *flâneur*, that paradoxical city-strolling creature who can, at will, be ravenous or disengaged in the face of urban spectacle. Baudelaire referred to this evolved saunterer as a *botanist of the sidewalk*, one who collects stimuli to allay or indulge the discrete and the dizzying in modern life.

James Lipovac, a forager of images, said, “My studio is full of scraps of colored paper and books and magazines I find on the street.” But the barrage of scenes, images, and texts open for collection and interpretation in present-day modernism has not just exploded out on the streets but also imploded in cyberspace. On Lipovac’s computer desktop, the samplings of visual specimens he has collected and filed in folders betray a fascination with the mundane such as ‘balls’ and ‘parachutes;’ the morbid such as ‘gymnastic accidents;’ mass obsession with tabloid fodder such as ‘pregnant celebrities;’ and anonymous groupings such as ‘grade school class photos.’

Lipovac’s street-strolling and Web-surfing conflates the act of distilling information and sensation in Baudelaire with the act of hoarding in Robert Rauschenberg’s assemblages and combine paintings. Lipovac asserts that his method of collecting, categorizing, and cobbling together of disparate images is “a democratic process where all ideas are entertained.” Where he departs from Rauschenberg is in the latter’s explicit refusal to create any fixed meaning particularly in his early work. Rauschenberg’s “Note on Painting” was rife with sentences that were the verbal equivalent of his works such as: *I find it nearly impossible to free ice to write about Jeepaxle my work. The concept I planetarium struggle to deal with ketchup is opposed to the logical community lift tab inherent in language horses and communication.* To Lipovac, there is method to the madness and it is motivated by “our ability as humans to compartmentalize, organize, and eventually harmonize in order to preserve our sanity.”

The deliberate mingling of divergent elements in Lipovac’s work such as photographs of celebrities with images of consequence such as world leaders and contemporary war imagery seems to be his stream of consciousness playing itself out in his studio, that upon final punctuation becomes a resolved form of satire. With the mutability of daily news and the corresponding mutability of his own incredulous, hopeful, or cynical responses to what goes on in the world and on the Web, all his paintings undergo multiple transformations. His system of any number of pasted and painted layers reiterates his method of visual *freestyling* that does not favor one approach over another so that it’s neither dominantly painting nor dominantly collage. Nonetheless, the works in this exhibition are testament to the painterly impulses of his eye and wrist. The assured gestural brushstrokes and the seasoned eye for color—even where the colors are garish clumps of acid hues—evidence an artist with a strong painting background who has also looked at a lot of modern and contemporary art. Only by digesting so much imagery from art history is he able to filter these influences and talk about “caring less about *correctness*” and “intruding on the beautiful with something ugly.”

By strolling, surfing, and freestyling, Lipovac attempts to avoid easy codification and hopes to approximate instead a complex collision of thoughts and images. But the juxtapositions do open themselves up as commentary. The recurring motifs of skulls, explosions, celebrities with clouds of smoke coming out of their mouths, and photographs of fish and fowl set around a painted iceberg that sits forlorn under the looming threat of global warming are odes to the “dark, sad comedy that grows out of my place in humanity.” In Lipovac’s *Heartbreak in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, it is critical to understand that it is not just Walter Benjamin he is referencing but also the green, sad, steady glare of the dead shark of Damien Hirst’s *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. The quickly scrawled texts and quotes on Lipovac’s canvases may be bizarre, obscure, or inane but there is one that pointedly instructs the viewer to “Walk through my brain.” Walk through the gallery and one would have to admit that indeed his pictures are—in an achingly human way—“vulgar, arrogant, self-conscious, intellectually

irresponsible, single-minded, unapologetic, and draped in a haze of my own personal fears of mortality.”

-Carina Evangelista

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