

frieze



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Quotation Marks

On copying, repeating, quoting and joking,
Sturtevant & The Salon Pour Rire

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According to Giorgio Vasari's *Le Vite* (The Lives, 1550), the 'copying' of another artist's work is an indictable offence. Reputed to be the first intellectual property case in art, Vasari writes that Albrecht Dürer filed a petition against Marcantonio Raimondi for 'counterfeiting' his woodcuts. It's hardly a secret that the art historian's largely fictional story misrepresents the way the 'copy' was typically treated at the time: printmakers would hoard and repeat each other's designs as freely and enthusiastically as Instagram users. Likewise, we would hardly expect Vasari's definition of the 'copy' to be any more relevant now than it was back then. Yet, dominating our understanding of artistic mimicry is the same outdated story: that a repetition is nothing more than one artist's assault on another.



Sturtevant,
Duchamp
Wanted, 1992,
offset print, 34 x
26 cm.
Courtesy:
Chewday's,
London

'Sturtevant & The Salon Pour Rire', recently shown at London gallery Chewday's told a different story about repetition. Sprawled over a wide table, a selection of 19th-century prints, books and journals were laid horizontally alongside four works by the late Elaine Sturtevant (who was known simply as Sturtevant). As examples of the caricature that filled the pages of the Parisian press from the 1840s until the end of the century, the folios present comically re-worked reproductions of paintings seen at the inaugural art fair, the Paris Salon, which reached its apogee from 1820 to 1890. Canvases by Gustav Courbet are reassembled in expressive lines and bright highlights; grand religious scenes are jumbled into comic strips; and life-size, sensuous portraits are scandalously

stripped and disfigured in miniature. The works by Sturtevant similarly respond to pre-existing works of art: a story by Jorge Luis Borges is rewritten in fragments, a poster by Marcel Duchamp is interposed with Sturtevant's headshot and paintings by Jasper Johns and Roy Lichtenstein are re-enacted as delicate drawings.



Gill-Revue, *Le Salon Pour Rire*, 1868, lithograph, 35 x 27.5 cm. Courtesy: Chewday's, London

Sturtevant has been labelled a conceptual artist on account of the fact that she remade works by other artists for the most part of her career, a method she described as 'repetition' as opposed to copying. Best known for the simulations she made from the 1960s to the early '90s, she has been hailed as the 'mother of appropriation art' whose repetitions collectively make a joke about the concept of originality and lay the foundation for the theory-based quotation practices of artists such as Joseph Kosuth, Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince. Salon caricature could be understood to deploy repetition for similarly derisive purposes. Frequently titled *Le Salon pour rire* or 'the Salon to laugh at', the comical purpose of its reproductions might have been to jeer at the establishment.



LE SALON
DÉPEINT ET
DESSINÉ PAR
BERTALL (The
Salon
depicted/'de-
painted' and
drawn by
Bertall), *Journal
Pour Rire*, 25
June, 1853, eood
engraving with
hand-tinting, 43
x 31 cm.
Courtesy:
Chewday's,
London

Going by all of these associations, you might assume that 'Sturtevant & The Salon Pour Rire' would have narrated the historical progression of repetition as a critical strategy. What, in fact, it did was far more inventive, discerning and enthralling. Removed from the wall and displayed on a plinth, the remakes were separated into a myriad of case studies. Accompanied by white gloves and magnifying glasses, these intricate objects could be individually handled and inspected. Spread out to reveal their idiosyncrasies, it became clear that these are handmade, technically accomplished exercises. This was a museum of repetition, laying out various specimens to set the story straight.

It soon became apparent that artistic identity was irrelevant to Salon caricature: there were far more styles than the eight printmakers listed on the press release. Most of these prints were made by unnamed aristocrats who morphed into multiple creative personas for the purpose of reproducing art. The characteristics at play in Sturtevant's work are similarly diverse and unclassifiable. Like a chameleon, she continually adopted different artistic styles in a way that left her own identity as an artist curiously absent.



Gill-Revue, *Le Salon Pour Rire*, 1868, lithograph, 35 x 28 cm. Courtesy: Chewday's, London

In a folio from 1865 illustrated by the pseudonymous artist Cham, the eponymous hero of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c.1599–1602) is represented in a flurry of scribbles; a prostrate Saint Sebastian is encircled by dense hatching; and the story of Perseus and Andromeda is rendered ridiculous in crude outlines. As caricatures of the disparate works that crowded the walls of the Salon, these images reflect the absurdity of seeing a multitude of styles and subjects all at once – an experience not unlike the eye fatigue induced by visiting a biennale or scrolling down a screen. Rather than partaking in the quest for individuality, Cham doodles in the margins of it.

Sturtevant literally doodles in the margins of her watercolour *Johns Numbers* (1991). Made after Jasper Johns's oil painting of typeset numbers, *O-9* (1960), the watercolour is a skilful translation of Johns's complex application of paint while at the same time revealing the labour involved. In places, the earlier artist's technique seems to spring forth almost organically: scrimps of oil paint are recast as pools of watercolour and feathery brushstrokes rematerialize as blots on paper. Yet other areas hint at the pains Sturtevant took to achieve this resemblance: textures are impatiently abbreviated in scribbles and various marks are tested out on the edge of the page.



Sturtevant,
Johns Numbers,
1991,
watercolour and
graphite pencil
on paper, 41 x
33 cm.
Courtesy:
Chewday's,
London

As well as being uncommitted to a single style, the works in the exhibition are also deviant in terms of narrative. Joan of Arc spits on an English soldier; the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel play a game of lottery with their scrolls; and John the Baptist's executioner wields his lance at a tree. Rather than directing attention back to

the purposes of the original images, these works do away with the concept of narrative altogether.

An anonymous and untitled mythological lithograph from 1842 and a drawing by Sturtevant after Lichtenstein, *Lichtenstein Study for Eclipse of the Sun I and Eclipse of the Sun II* (1988), go one step further, corrupting the messages of their originals not through what they represent but rather how they represent. Made after a florid painting by Paul Jourdy, *Prometheus Chained Upon the Rock* (1842), the lithograph exaggerates the technical quirks of its model into what Julia Langbein, co-curator of the exhibition with Tobias Czudej, dubs a 'high-class dick joke'. The subsidiary piece of cloth that conceals Prometheus's nether regions is recast as the narrative centre of the image. No longer conveniently robust and rumpled, the cloth now curls zestfully around his pendulous ball sack, its imminent release feared by the swooning women who surround him.



Sturtevant,
*Lichtenstein
Study for Eclipse
of the Sun I and
Eclipse of the
Sun II*, 1988,
colour pencil
and graphite
pencil on paper,
40 x 30 cm.
Courtesy:
Chewday's,
London

Sturtevant's drawing of Lichtenstein's oil and magna painting, *Eclipse of the Sun* (1975), similarly warps the purpose of its original. Lichtenstein's stencilled design is translated freehand into rutted marks in graphite and colour pencil. Where the painting morphs the stylistic clichés of Cubism and Futurism into a shiny product, the drawing is a double pastiche. Going by Vasari's book, it could be argued that Sturtevant is competing with Lichtenstein. Through mirroring, she turns him into the cliché, showing how his critique of commodity culture has itself become a commodity. Yet in the context of the exhibition, Sturtevant's repetition probes a wider territory: her work takes on the appearance of a preliminary study that has confusingly been made after the finished product. All of this obscures the sense of what is an original and what is a copy. By encouraging us to linger over Sturtevant's homespun marks, the exhibition opens up the breadth of her art historical critique that far exceeds a quip about one artist.

We don't know the result of Dürer's lawsuit, but it's not difficult to imagine that Marcantonio might have rightfully pleaded innocent and so had a place in this exhibition. Just as Sturtevant and the printmakers at the Salon translated paintings into drawings, Marcantonio translated Dürer's chiselled woodblocks into etched engravings. To assume that these artists were deriding their predecessors would be adhering to a questionable tendency to think about what repetition means, as opposed to looking at what it does. By exhibiting translations that blot our perceptions of artist, style and iconography, 'Sturtevant & The Salon Pour Rire' recasts the repetition as a kind of ghostly drag performance that is at once visually scintillating and perpetually troubling.