

ART

PAPER MONET: SEAN MELLYN

By Laurie Simmons Jul 29, 2010

What better way to luncheon in the garden than on Sean Mellyn's subversive/commemorative Monet-inspired Chinette? Laurie Simmons speaks with Mellyn about his residency in Giverny and the work that sprung forth from the lily pond.



Sean Mellyn, cabinet installation of PAPER MONET, 2008–10, photo transfer, ink, on paper objects and plywood, 84.25 x 99 x 7".

Whenever I encounter a work by Sean Mellyn, I want to inhabit his singular universe, if just for a moment. Lushly painted characters emerge fully formed from a time that Mellyn may or may not know first hand. Nostalgia is too simple an explanation for the feelings the works evoke. There is always a tick, an intrusion, a disturbance that indicates one must look again. Something's not quite right in the Emerald City. Humans with pig-like noses and nose job bandages live near chubby cheeked children at once loving and diabolical. Mellyn's characters are familiar with a twist of lemon.

All of this made me want to better understand what the artist is up to and thus we decided, one balmy night last spring, to have a conversation for BOMB.

Laurie Simmons: The story goes that you arrived at your summer 2008 Giverny residency with your project *Paper Monet* 100 percent preconceived and pre-visualized. Is this really true and did you stick to your plan?

Sean Mellyn: Well it's sort of true! I did bring four-dozen Chinette paper plates with me on the plane. I didn't know how I was going to use them exactly, but I knew they would come in handy. I originally wanted to open a roadside gift shop selling Monet-inspired knickknacks to tourists—I would Xerox my sketchbooks, collect twigs from the garden and make key chains, or paint water lilies on rocks for paper weights—I had heard from other artists how Monet's water lily studio had been transformed into this incredible gift shop, packed from floor to ceiling with everything Monet, so I thought it would be funny to compete with the Museum. I was thinking about this because the Euro was beginning to rise and I wasn't sure if I could afford to keep things going in New York and pay for things in France. I was telling people I needed to supplement the café lifestyle so enjoyed by the Impressionists! I also thought that sending stretchers, canvas, casting materials, and all my studio junk seemed crazy. I do a lot of work on paper, so when I spotted those neatly wrapped paper plates at Pathmark, it hit me that they would be perfect to draw on. They also have the absorbent surface that could take the photo transfer that I use in my drawing.

LS: So what happened when you got to France?

SM: When I arrived at my studio in Giverny, unbelievably, there was a huge cabinet lining one of the walls. It was a pine-shelving unit with paneled doors and adjustable shelves. It seemed perfect to fill with plates—eventually I made other things as well, but the plates were first. There were a lot of false starts—I wasn't quite sure how to visually equate paper plates into what I was previously doing in my work. I began to obsessively tour Monet's house and the gift shop—and I started to read the Wildenstein catalog raisonné, and through that a vocabulary began to form. What was amazing to me was how the tourists would arrive by the bus-load and want to see the water lily garden—hoping to see something that Monet saw, take a picture, and head to the gift shop. And I have to confess that I found myself doing the same thing—and it struck me that I was becoming involved in a collective experience that involved this surplus of myth, and the gift shop was brilliantly assembled to have objects relating to each individual moment or painting in Monet's life.

LS: What about the residence? Monet's home?

SM: Monet's house itself was the biggest surprise—The dining room was painted an acidic yellow, and had Baroque cabinets filled with blue and white dishes. The walls were hung with Japanese prints and the floor was laid with bright red checkerboard tile. The kitchen had incredible blue tile Monet designed with a shiny blue ceiling painted to keep flies away. The whole house in fact was painted in a variety of color which seemed so out of place in the late 19th century—I could relate it more to a decorating craze from my childhood in the late '60s and '70s of American Baroque, French Country-ish.

Japanese prints were hung all over the house. Years of sun damage have faded most of the colors revealing a kind of indigo blue as the primary color. I had been using indigo in my work for a while, and I used Indigo as the place to start

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LILY DINNER PLATE, 2008, photo transfer, ink on paper, 10.25" Dia.

LS: Tell me about the fragility of the paper plates? Their temporal quality? Given that all this stuff of Monet's has lasted so long?

SM: My impulse was to just make something beautiful—I know that can be a naughty word in artspeak these days—and it was important to me to make work that related to what I have been doing for the last couple of years. I have made three-dimensional drawings in the past, but I had never explored the possibility of a 360 degree drawing. And the cabinet really becomes one huge drawing with multiple elements, it's stuffed with images that in a way disappear, or are obscured—in order to do this I had to abandon my knowledge of "what will last." A lot of it is actually constructed from good drawing paper, so it is not that different than an ordinary watercolor. For years I worked with a very good picture framer, and we framed extraordinarily precarious works on paper—from Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning* to Picasso's sketches of *Les Femmes d'Alger* and sometimes I think you just have to forget everything and get the work done.

LS: I think, too, that the images canceling each other out in the cabinet has a kind of visual accuracy in the sense that when we enter a museum of antiquities or a high-end china shop or even a tourist tchotchke shop there is a moment when everything looks the same. There's a visual reckoning to be made and an effort is exerted to separate, understand and categorize what one is seeing.

SM: I kept thinking about how one absorbs a Pollock painting, the way the webs of drips are at once chaotic and perhaps it's in our nature to organize those lines—a desire to see something within the chaos that is recognizable, that makes sense. At MoMA, looking at people looking at Pollock that have almost become part of the paintings themselves—the viewer seems transfixed, almost hypnotized, like sitting in front of an altar, contemplative until something is revealed. Rauschenberg really took it further by actually layering images in a way that canceled out their power, reducing them to geometry. And it's no wonder that visual merchandisers go to art school—A box store like Home Depot or Bed Bath & Beyond are dizzying studies of the color grid with layers of "revelations" affixed to the shelves and floors.

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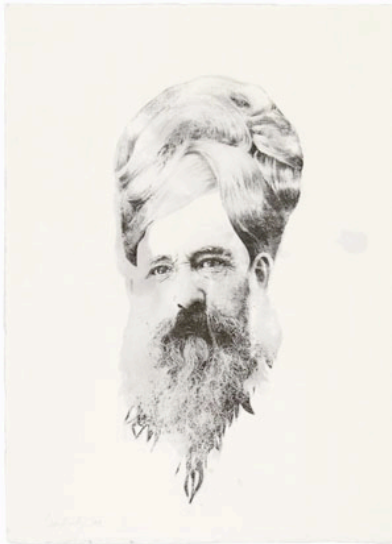
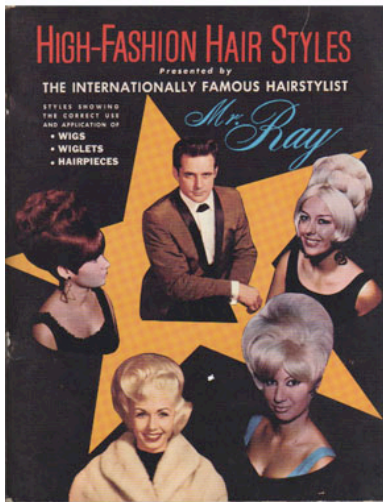
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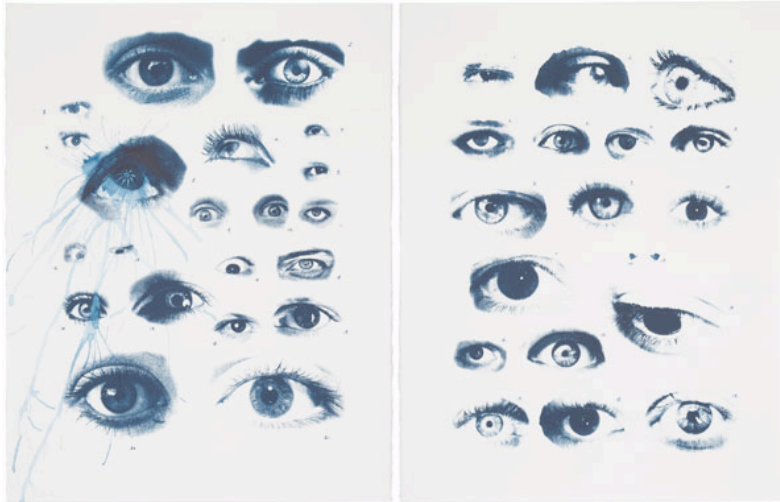


Left to right: MR. RAY, HIGH FASHION HAIRSTYLES, 1967. Sean Mellyn, MONETANTOINETTE/LUCKY LADY, 2009, photo transfer, graphite on paper, 15.12 x 11".

LS: How do the Monetantoinette drawings connect to this if at all?

SM: The Monetantoinette drawings started by using Monet's portrait and attaching bouffant hairdos from a salon that was going out of business right before I left for France, and I brought them with me. I didn't know how I would use them, but in my head they seemed right for Monet's garden. It was only after reading Monet's letters did I realize Monet in big hair was a good thing. Monet had been working on a late Fall landscape and had to abandon the painting and travel. He was to return in the late Spring, and wrote to his estate manager to pay the villagers to remove all the leaves from the trees in order to re-create the Fall landscape. As a side note, I suggested to the Museum gift shop that they sell bags of leaves.

I have installed the Monetantoinette drawings on top of the eye charts in the show, which I guess could be Monet Among the Leaves, or the image revealed against the grid.



EYECARTS, 2010, unique silkscreen, ink on paper, 17 x22" each.

LS: The eye charts are not literally eye charts. Why are some of the eyes degraded?

SM: They had started out as test prints to locate their position on birch trees in my surveillance paintings. I numbered the eyes to keep track of them, and only later did I realize that they were an important part of the whole story—there's a kind of perfect storm of events here—a bit ironic. Before I left for Giverny I had about two months of really serious eye infections—at one point it was so bad I could not leave my apartment, and my doctor was squirting steroids into my eyes. She was also performing painful bits of office "surgery" just a bit too gross to tell you about! We were trying to beat the clock and heal my eyes so I could get on the plane, and every day I would look in the mirror at the bizarre deformities thinking the damage would be permanent. I felt like a Nan Goldin photograph after a hard day's night.

It was only after reading Monet's letters that I realized he had cataracts. He had experimental surgery, and by the time he was painting the large water lily paintings, there was a desperation and urgency to completing the work. And it's this moment where I think we begin to explore the possibilities of how Monet achieved such time-traveling imagery. It's only later in the century that we see aggressively abstract work—abstract not just visually—but with all the emotion and soulfulness that became canon. There is this amazing photograph of Monet lying in bed against polka-dot wallpaper recovering from surgery wearing dark round sunglasses.

Over the last year I've been collecting pictures of ideal eyes and making screens—I intervene during the printing

process and sometimes after, singling out the imperfections in order to amplify them. I also used photos of eyes with infections—but in the end it's really hard to figure out which is which.

LS: Eye surgery makes me think about my first encounter with your work in 2000, *Caveat Emptor* at the Ambrosino Gallery, Miami. I saw a painting of two raven-haired sisters against a Chinese red background. The two girls were otherwise perfect except for matching bandages obviously covering matching rhinoplasties. The title of the painting is *Nose Jobs*. I love this painting. Not only is it beautiful but it calls to mind one of the many horrors of my high school experience—girls returning from Christmas and Easter vacations with brand new noses. Can you talk a bit about this period of your work?

SM: At the time I was using images from advertisements where I would shift the context of the image, so that instead of cheerful twins selling paper towels, they would be selling new noses. Portraits of self-confidence and an idealized sense of perfection were important to use because they were more fun to fuck up. I also really wanted to change the traditional relationship in portraiture between the artist and the subject. Whereas the subject sits for the artist and there is a drama which unfolds, my relationship with the subject is anonymous, and the drama that unfolds is self-imposed. I originally had wanted to use photographs, but I couldn't afford to print them so large, so I painted the images. That's why the surface is so smooth, I wanted the paintings to look printed.

The rhinoplasties in *Nose Jobs* were 3-D, and I began to think about how I could disrupt the picture plane not only by adding an object, but how that object could change the narrative as well. And the object would also change how we see the painting, as we shift our view from side to side, the image changes. The noses begin to twist off the surface and the image is no longer fixed in time. There is a play between wanting to align the object and the image to make visual sense, and the eventual impossibility to do so.



NOSE JOBS, 1998, oil, hydrocal, and plaster bandage on canvas, 72" x 48" x 6"; HAY STACK PLATTERS with stands, 2009, photo transfer, ink on paper, 10 x 12.5" each.

When I would look for an image such as the one for *Nose Jobs*, I would try to find one which would convey a collective recognition, a déjà-vu so to speak. Monet was constantly repeating composition in a serial manner, a haystack in blue, one in red, one with burnt yellows—I think Warhol must have looked at Monet a lot. The serial repeat is not just a Pop idea, but an idea related to the investigation of an image—how the light changes our perception of the image. At night the tourist office in Rouen projects slides of Monet's cathedral paintings onto the face of the Cathedral accompanied by dramatic music—the slides line up really well with all the Gothic details. There's even a section of projected Lichtenstein paintings—it's wild to see the façade dressed in polka-dots. It must have been evident to Monet that in the end he was creating an object of desire—maybe he would have liked the gift shop, though probably off campus.

LS: If you had to do the impossible and sum up your work in a sentence what would you say?

SM: Ah hah! That is impossible because I'm not finished with my work! But seriously, there are directions and meanings that shift, and I see my work as a totality over time—I used to describe it to my friend Greg as an arc. [Drawing a picture with his finger of a half circle in the air.] The half circle has multiple satellites of ideas, and hopefully some day they will all belong to the same solar system.



Photo of the Monet gift shop located in the water lily studio taken by Laurent Lemaître, the great grandson of the man who built the "Haystacks" for Monet.

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