

“Patrick Schuchard: Difficulty Reading/Reading Difficulty”

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Glance at Patrick Schuchard's *Wall of Sound* and it evokes a teenage record party (a phenomenon long since replaced by CDs, headphones and car stereos). You can almost hear the scratchy sound of the well-worn vinyl played on a portable turntable. The scattered remains of an eclectic mix of record listening abound, the sleeves strewn haphazardly about. The sculptural *Emotion Heads* that accompany the records might stand in for the excited, enthused and otherwise agitated listeners. The title *Wall of Sound*, too, references Phil Spector's pop music productions of exactly the time period in which such listening parties might have taken place.

But look closer and this nostalgic waxing evaporates. These are not artifacts from another time, nor *trompe l'oeil* representations intended to evoke such particular memories. Although many of the record cover paintings evidence the sort of wear and tear that frequent use would cause, these paintings are not about the use value of their subjects in our lives, past or present. They are about painting, about representation, and about a whole set of issues particularly affecting art and artists in the last twenty years.

Schuchard has carefully constructed a series of encaustic and felt paintings that serve as sleeves for actual vinyl records embedded within. The painted covers then replace that which they evoke (in terms of physical function) and also approach an equivalency in terms of visual function. But here is where the challenges begin.

Schuchard is not content to make his series consistent, regular, or too much *like* their mass-produced “originals.” The paintings skew the square format of the covers they portray by expanding outward (almost imperceptibly) by 1/8” on the horizontal. There is no real consistency of painterly handling—one is a tight, realistic representation, another nearly abstract for all its brushwork and illusionistic wear and tear.

Of course, each of these examples begs the question of realism and verisimilitude. To gauge the faithfulness of any representation, one must first see the model—the “original.” Obviously some record covers will be designed with what might be called realist images, others not so. And on top of this, quite literally, would be the idiosyncratic wear and tear on the particular sleeve model viewed. So there is in effect a layering of the original artwork/design of the record cover, its mass-produced reproduction on the manufactured “model” sleeve, and the marks and wear accumulated over the life of that individual object. All this before Schuchard ever begins to paint his representation. And, of course, all out of sight of our eyes.

So what we are given is simply a series of paintings, similarly formatted, referencing (we assume) a similar category of objects, and painted with some measure of similarity of style. And, yet, looking closely at the assembly of painted record albums in *Wall of Sound*, one notices that there is not that supposed final similarity. Many are constructed of pure encaustic on felt, but occasionally one notices a layer of photographic or xerographic imagery floating underneath the layers of wax, hovering in an interzone between the real surface, the illusionistic painting, and the ground material. This (re-)introduction of a “real” image confounds any consistent reading of the group as a whole, and challenges the viewer to find other ways of thinking about these works.

These paintings are not ultimately about realistic representations, just as they are not solely about the records they portray. Schuchard's process is largely what they *are* about—the process of seeing, both editorially and phenomenologically, and the process of painting, and the whole range of activity within that enterprise. And, perhaps most importantly, they are about trying to wrest meaning from a world flush with images and things, both mass-produced and made by hand.

It is a given that our minds will try to find connections among the disparate objects Schuchard presents; musical or visual similarities among the records chosen; memories and evocations of personal responses to the music embedded therein; and perhaps formal relationships among Schuchard's representations. But these inevitable searches are somewhat beside the point. Schuchard challenges his viewer *not* to satisfy him or herself with any anecdotal reading of this work. Not for Schuchard the one-liner quality of so much recent art, nor the easy nostalgia or shock-effects of so many found object installations. The *Wall of Sound* is a brave and assured work, treading perilously close to the ground it seeks to avoid, never once falling over the edge.

Schuchard's use of the *handmade readymade* (think of Robert Gober's recapitulations and corrections to Duchamp's *Fountain*) extends beyond the painted record album covers. One recurrent object/motif in Schuchard's recent work is a scotch tape dispenser bearing the mock German platitude, “*We grow too soon old und too late schmart*” in a sort of Gothic/Old English type. He renders this object sculpturally at life-size, twice life-size, and also in paint. The stultifying banality of the object and its saying destabilizes

the viewer's whole manner of looking and receiving the work. No longer are the objects portrayed equally laden with personal, cultural, and artistic references.

Schuchard suggests that the schizophrenia of his mixed German/Irish parentage might be symbolized by the images of an *Angst*-filled Grünewald crucifixion aside a *Lucky Charms* cereal box with its ridiculously sprightly leprechaun. The tape dispenser unfurls its own series of juxtaposed banal/silly and serious/mock-serious references: the Germanic stoicism of the typeface with the schmaltzy faux-German reading of the saying; the heavy, solid construction of the dispenser against the fragile transparency of tape; the harsh reality of growing old versus the infantile state of ignorance.

Standing amid this already abundant installation is Schuchard's monumental *Worlds Tallest Man* sculpture. Its unavoidable evocations of wax museums and *Ripley's Believe It or Not* seem to place the whole lot squarely in the realm of popular culture (and *lowbrow* culture at that). And yet this sculpture, too, demands a longer take and greater consideration. Constructed of the same wax and felt as the records (with the addition of clay), the sculpture enlivens the space surrounding the wall-hung works, effectively bringing them into our space. It also contextualizes the records--into a world inhabited by people, and also in terms of their relative scale. But the subject here, the man himself--like the music and musicians apparently contained in the records--invades the viewer's consciousness. His portrait is monumental without being colossal, grand-scale without being grandiose, overwhelming yet humble.

Here is the portrait of a man of intelligence and refinement, who, because of a rare medical condition, became a sideshow attraction. He made his living by being photographed with "normal" people. His role in life--as a sort of scale measure of normality for others--is paralleled in his portrait sculpture's role in the installation. His situation and social role might read as a metaphor for the artist's.

Schuchard's sculptural portrait of the tallest man is, like the record album paintings, slightly larger than the "original". Its distortions are minor, and include a subtle shrinking of his hands and head relative to his body. These reversals of Michelangelo's proportional formula for *David* effect a sort of exaggerated perspectival view, making the man's towering body seem even more imposing. His tentative gesture and pensive gaze, however, catalyze the antithesis--an empathic response from the viewer. Once again, Schuchard heartily engages a subject that screams out for a simplistic, anecdotal reading--here, that of the "freak"--and then frustrates any such possibility. In favor of a more measured, textual response. The artist's daring rivals that of the tightrope walker.

Another handmade readymade, the *Baby Grand Piano*, fills space in a somewhat different way. While formally pointing (with its open lid) to the paintings high on the wall above, the piano also articulates some of the same questions about representation raised in the paintings, now in sculptural form. Although life-size, this piano does not function in space as its real counterpart would. And while it does lend to its space a similar air of elegance, wealth, respectability, perhaps even *culture*, it does not rest comfortably in the ambiance. In fact, it seems in danger of disappearing into mere illusion or shadow. Subtle departures from its "real" counterpart point to its instability. For instance, it has no black keys, no bench, no foot pedals, and, perhaps most, disconcertingly, no smoothly polished edges. It is, in fact, a blur, a shadowy replacement for a piano, occupying a real piano's space in no way other than physically.

The illusion challenges all levels of representation--from the simple making of an image, to the construction of cultural and socially defined meaning, to our physical understanding of three-dimensional reality. If Schuchard's work frequently addresses issues raised in Gerhard Richter's paintings, here Schuchard seems to reinsert back into physical space a sculptural object seemingly rendered in Richter's signature painterly blur.

Schuchard constantly challenges his viewer to balance and ponder the multiple vectors in these works. Just at the moment when the "correct" reading seems firmly in the realm of everyday life or popular culture, an important artistic factor rears its head, demanding that any understanding of the work take that too into consideration. These paintings and sculptures do not rest comfortably in either sphere. They remove themselves from "real life", and are not satisfied to remain in a strictly artistic milieu. The viewer's understanding of the work can only come through his or her acceptance of these various modes, and by sharing with Schuchard the search for meaning between the "real" and the represented. The communication that takes place here is little related to the "realism" or recognizability of the images produced.

Schuchard's complex installations ultimately produce the effect of *glossolalia*-- that of many languages being spoken at once. Given the nature of the included images--record albums with voices ostensibly contained within, gaping-mouthed heads frozen in mid-utterance, and musical instruments silenced by their materiality--the suggestion of any voiced language is problematic at best. And that is precisely the effect the viewer must struggle with--that within a system outwardly silent and communicating in every way *except vocally*, lies an undercurrent of voices beyond and between that which is seen, a veritable choir wailing away for those who will listen.