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Off the Wall and onto the Couch!

Sofa Art and the Avant-Garde Analyzed

Christopher Reed

Ronnie Cutrone, Anonymous Artist *(detail), 1984. Acrylic on assemblage 6 × 6 ft. Chase Manhattan Bank, New York*

Centuries from now, historians in search of the dominant artistic expression of our culture will turn, not to auction records and back issues of art magazines, but to sofa art. While the term may be new to many, sofa art is familiar to all. Sanctioned by no less an authority than the *New Yorker,*[1] it is the trade name for the type of paintings sold in furniture stores, at motel "art fairs," and in stores that otherwise deal in posters and mass-produced prints. In terms of sheer numbers, sofa art dominates all other categories of modern painting. Industry representatives will not release sales figures, but the Starving Artists Group—just one of the major art-fair retailers—manages sixty crews nationwide that each sell between five hundred and one thousand paintings every weekend, dwarfing any upscale competition.

Despite its ubiquitous presence and obvious appeal, sofa art in our day remains neglected by art historians, sociologists, and cultural historians, though it well deserves attention from these—and, no doubt, other—perspectives. In addition to its intrinsic interest as a part of popular culture, sofa art can contribute greatly to our understanding of the high art we are more accustomed to study.

The term *sofa art,* like *subway art,* is a semantic cop-out. What characterizes sofa art? The name avoids the question, simply telling us where we might expect to find it. Indeed, sofa art comes in a bewildering variety of sizes and styles, with prices ranging from eight dollars for the smallest unframed examples to four hundred dollars and more for the larger—truly sofa scale—pieces. In subject matter, too, variety is the rule, not the exception. Although the majority of the paintings are land- and seascapes vaguely reminiscent of the nineteenth-century Hudson River School (fig. 1), there are also Dutch-style still-lifes and flower pieces (fig. 2), impressionistic urban scenes, whitewashed Mediterranean houses after Cézanne, Gauguinesque island scenes (fig. 3), nudes (fig. 4), and abstractions (fig. 5). Because no single subject or style is unique to sofa art, none can serve as a characteristic to distinguish this type of art from another.

Sofa art, moreover, like high art, is not mechanically reproduced. Each canvas is, as the television ads attest, an "original work of art" (this phrase is usually followed by "priced incredibly low!"). The rich build-up of paint that often characterizes sofa-art sunsets and waves, and is pushed to extremes of exuberant impasto in much abstract sofa art, emphasizes the handmade quality of each work. This is not to say that each piece is always the product of one hand, however. For instance, an art student described for me how she financed her studies by working at a sofa-art atelier in Rome, where she added little

1 *Sofa art after the Hudson River School*

red-smocked female figures and their reflections to rainy cityscapes that were created with two other specialists—one who painted the buildings and another, the clouds—all under the supervision of a master artist. Before seizing upon assembly-line production as a criterion for identifying sofa art, however, remember that this means of production served Renaissance workshops as well as modern Manhattan studios, and that "originals" from Leonardo's *Madonna of the Rocks* to Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Monroe* exist in more than one version.

How are we, then, able to distinguish with unswerving confidence between high and sofa art? What seems to set sofa art apart from other paintings is the signature, the name scrawled in the lower right-hand corner of each canvas. These signatures tend to fall into one of two categories: exotic or Latin-sounding, such as "Clio" or "Antonio," and "names" of artists you may (almost) have heard of. In just one hotel art fair, I found works by "Duchamp," "Heade," and "W. Barnett" (change the B to an H to discover a well-known American still-life painter). Sofa art that carries the name of an illustrious painter of the past does not, however, mimic its forbear's style: the Barnetts I saw were landscapes; the Duchamps, city skylines rendered in Joseph Stella-like black lines.

But what distinguishes the signatures on sofa art from those on paintings in museums—and can therefore be used as a criterion to define sofa art—is that no one believes them. No one believes that the signatures refer to a human being with a retrievable biography. In fact, none of the people I interviewed who bought sofa art referred to the artist when describing their paintings, none evinced any interest in the painter's identity, and some were even surprised to find that the paintings were signed at all. Anyone naive enough to ask the staff at a hotel sale or sofa-painting shop for information about the artist is met with a look of incomprehension and perhaps a vague response that the artist is for-

2 *Sofa art after 17th-century Dutch painting*

3 *Sofa art after Gauguin*

eign, which is probably true since most sofa art is shipped in bulk from Europe, Asia, and Mexico.

The sofa-art crowd's attitude toward the signature is diametrically opposed to that of the enthusiasts of high art. From the labels on museum walls to the salesclerks in expensive galleries, the artist's name and biographical details are thrust upon the viewer of high art. The penchant for biography in high culture has been pushed in this century to feverish extremes in the "star" system that Tom Wolfe satirizes so well,[2] a system that, as Thomas Lawson contends, has taken on religious overtones by casting artists in the role of contemporary saints.[3] Indeed, the medieval church, canonizing saints whose relics were treasured not for their intrinsic physical qualities but as powerful reminders of a saintly biography, suggests a striking analogy to the contemporary art market in which the art object, with its legitimating signature, is made precious by its association with an "extra-ordinary" biography. The marketing of De Kooning's painted toilet seat is, perhaps, the clearest recent example of this phenomenon.[4]

A few twentieth-century artists have drawn our attention to the authority the patrons of high art invest in the signature. Marcel Duchamp's signed ready-mades, including the bicycle wheel and the snow shovel, are examples, as is Robert Rauschenberg's portrait of Iris Clert, a telegram that reads: "This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so—Robert Rauschenberg." Yet, the crucial role of the signature in defining high art is rarely acknowledged. We are accustomed to believing—and, indeed, constantly reassured by museums and galleries—that the "high" in high art is a qualitative measure, not simply an indication that someone is willing to place his or her biography behind the signature on a work of art. Yet in the anarchy of styles and approaches to art that characterizes contemporary high culture, the case for any aesthetic criterion for admitting an object to the category

4 *Sofa art nude*

of high art becomes increasingly untenable.

That the signature is rarely acknowledged as the basis for distinguishing between high and low art is proof of its pervasiveness as a common assumption. That the partisans of high culture react with angry defensiveness to phenomena—like sofa art—that force them to recognize this distinction suggests that it is repressed as the guilty secret of a high culture combining a lucrative high-art market with a lack of defined criteria of aesthetic judgment.[5] Anyone can pique high culture's defensiveness toward sofa art by bringing it up for conversation at an upscale gathering. In general, people fall into two distinct camps over sofa art; no one is ambivalent. One camp—the larger—likes sofa art and buys it; the other—the upscale—doesn't and hates it with a confident intolerance for the tastes of others that is otherwise rarely seen in an era of rapidly fluctuating aesthetic trends.

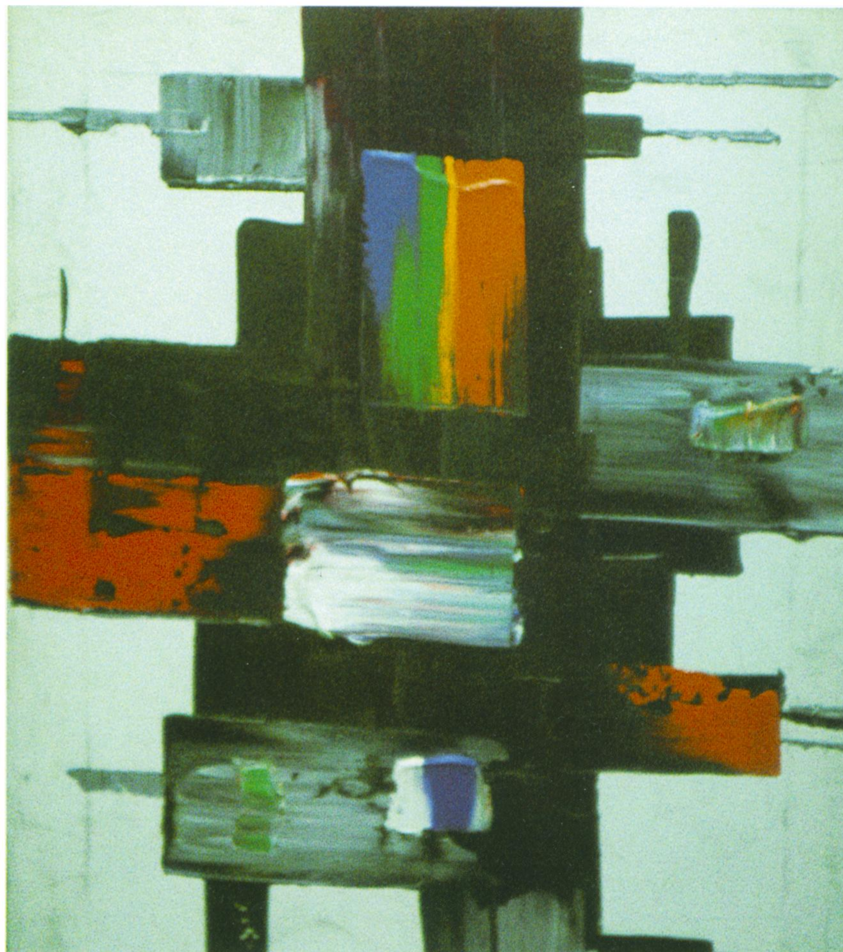
The spokesmen for high culture put the case against sofa art in the strongest—if not always the most reasoned—terms, addressing the topic only to dismiss it as unfit for consideration. Both Clement Greenberg (whose 1939 essay is anthologized so frequently as to prove the lack of critical attention to this field) and Karsten Harries lump sofa art with what they call *kitsch,* and condemn it as being not merely aesthetically unpleasing, but dangerous and morally wrong. Greenberg maintains that it is the "epitome of all that is spurious, . . . dangerous to the naive seeker of true light." From Harries we learn that "kitsch is not simply bad art, but bad art of a particular kind. Here 'bad' is used not so much in an aesthetic as in a moral sense."[6]

Neither critic, however, is able to provide a definition of kitsch that rises above the subjective. Greenberg's dismissal of kitsch as "vicarious experience and faked sensations" and Harries's pronouncement that the "need for Kitsch arises when genuine emotion has become rare" presuppose that there are "real" responses to high art, though how—and by whom—such reality is to be measured is left unexplained. One might as well claim that some individuals experience qualitatively better love as privilege some people's experiences of beauty.

Kitsch is also rejected on the basis that it is too easy, too familiar. This attitude, however, ignores that Jackson Pollocks and Leonardo da Vincis have become very familiar, especially to social classes with higher education. Does excessive exposure render these works kitsch? Certainly any object from the *Mona Lisa* on down can be viewed superficially, easily, predictably. Conversely, any object can be seen with the attitude Greenberg attributes to the "cultivated spectator," one of "reflection upon the immediate impression left by the plastic values." High art tastes have changed sufficiently since Greenberg and Harries published so that some of the objects they dismissed as kitschy—Bougereau's paintings, for example—have undergone revivals of critical legitimacy and financial success, which suggests that the critics were wrong to claim that those objects "demand" to be seen as kitsch. Response is the viewer's responsibility, and kitsch, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

As early as 1925, José Ortega y Gasset observed that avant-garde art works allow the "elite to recognize themselves and one another in the drab mass of society."[7] Data collected by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu confirm the overwhelming influence of socio-economic class structures on the aesthetic judgments that are presented—in Greenberg/Harries

5 *Abstract sofa art*



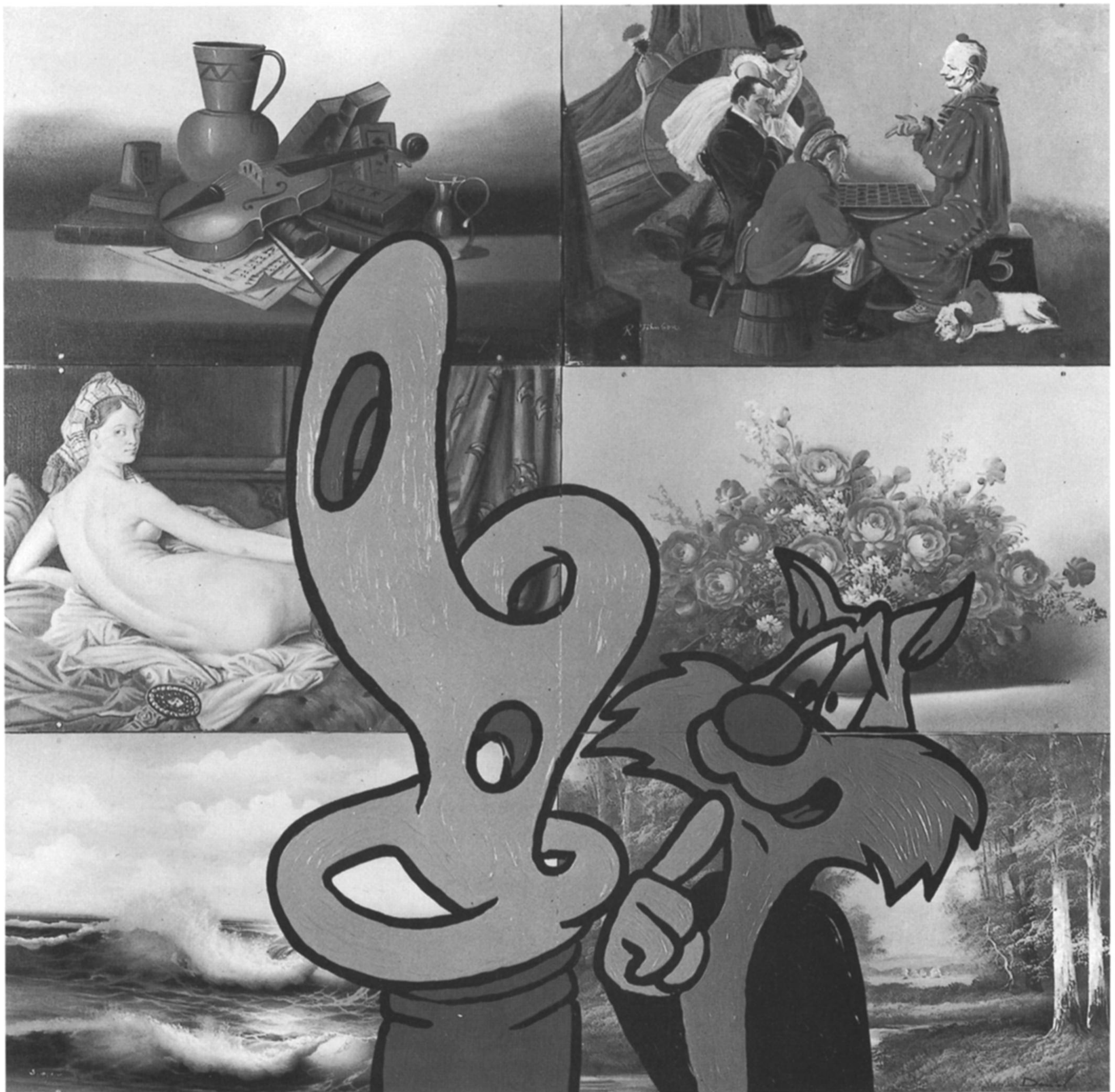
style—as factual observations about art. This tendency, Bourdieu notes, is exaggerated among academics, whose social identity, distinct from the working class, must be constructed more by attitude ("cultural capital") than income ("financial capital").[8] A certain class-based paranoia does seem to inform both Greenberg's and Harries's conclusions about kitsch as both erect an awesome barrier to any subsequent analysis by rushing to link it—and those who would defend it—to Hitlerian fascism,[9] as if popular art were rooted completely in the principles of mob rule, as if high art did not have its own ties to violence and oppression.

When sofa art is not denounced by upscale commentators, it is ridiculed. In a recent "humor piece" in the *New England Monthly* a buyer of sofa art—carefully identified as a "hairdresser from Oakland Beach, Rhode Island"—is described as she purchases

a frosty Tyrolean scene rendered in varying shades of what I took to be blue radiator paint. Striking. A true marriage of art and the petrochemical industry.

The description of another painting concludes, "The youth's head was more ovoid in shape, suggestive of Zippy the Pinhead."[10]

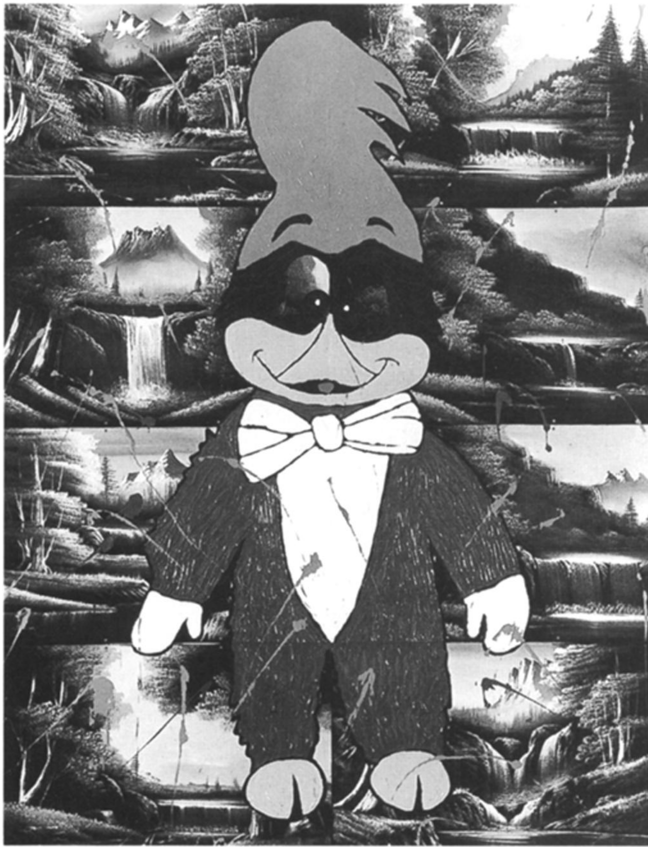
Modern artists are, as a rule, notoriously irreverent of established critical standards; yet on the issue of sofa art, they too remain silent or disdainful. It is another measure of sofa art's power to threaten the assumptions of high culture that in the sixty years of avant-garde art made from and about what



6 *Ronnie Cutrone,* Beauty Is in the Eye of the Beholder, *1984. Acrylic on oil paintings, 6 × 6 ft. Private collection*

Greenberg and Harries would call "kitsch"—everything from Picasso's wax tablecloths to pin-up photos and Cadillac fins—almost no high-art painters have taken up the subject of low-art painting. Recently, however, two have done so, each from a very different stance.

Working in New York, Ronnie Cutrone has brought sofa art out of hiding only to cast the first stone against it, creating artistic equivalents to the *New England Monthly* essay. It is not Zippy the Pinhead, but Puddy Tat and Woody Woodpecker who dominate works like *Beauty Is in the Eye of the Beholder* (fig. 6), in which Cutrone nails together six sofa paintings and paints over them. Here the cartoon character, who—we may recall from Saturday mornings in front of the



7 *Ronnie Cutrone,* Anonymous Environmental Protection Agent, *1983. Acrylic on velvet oil paintings, 8 × 6 ft. Private collection, Milan*

8 *Ronnie Cutrone,* Anonymous Artist, *1984. Acrylic on assemblage, 6 × 6 ft. Chase Manhattan Bank, New York*

TV—was always too dumb to catch Tweetie Bird, stands equally baffled before an example of high-art abstract sculpture in an apparent dig at sofa art's audience. According to the artist, one of the ideas thematized in this piece is, "I don't trust art that is immediately likable,"[11] an echo of the Greenberg/Harries position. Cutrone's *Anonymous Environmental Protection Agent* and *Anonymous Artist* shift their focus from sofa art's consumers to its makers (figs. 7, 8). Cutrone claims his work is a "recognition of all the anonymous artists who help paint the landscape in which I live."[12] "I like bad paintings as much as I like paintings in the real art world because art for me is a job, and I respect those men, they work hard."[13] But painting cartoon characters—embodiments of childishness—over the work you claim to "respect" is hard to see as anything but a backhanded gesture of "recognition" at best.

Cutrone, in his appropriation of sofa art, is acutely aware of what I maintain is its definitive characteristic: anonymity. Before beginning *Anonymous Environmental Protection Agent,* the first of his works to be based (literally) on sofa art, he said:

> *I also thought of the word anonymous for a while, and about all these nameless artists churning out thousands of paintings for anonymous collectors. . . . I made Woody anonymous by changing his colors and adding a mask."*[14]

To see Cutrone's *Anonymous Environmental Protection Agent,* however, is to recognize that Woody is not anonymous. His disguise, which reveals his tell-tale beak and tuft of hair, only calls attention to his identity as a specific cartoon

9 *Kim MacConnel,* Formidable, *1981. Acrylic on cotton, 97½ × 128 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York*

character, one who is, moreover, an attribute of the artist: Cutrone has appeared in the press with a stuffed Woody on his shoulder. Whatever Cutrone's stated intentions, his deployment of sofa art becomes analogous to the cartoon-character-cum-painter he depicts in *Anonymous Artist.* His own persona, at six times the scale and brush in hand, dominates and obscures the anonymous art, reinforcing rather than undermining the high-art fixation on individual personality.

Cutrone documents his status as a good soldier for the patrons of high culture in *Ronnie Cutrone,* which reproduces newspaper clippings recording his battles with such bastions of working-class taste as the real-life soldiers of the American Legion, who have objected to his art. That his work functions to please the highbrows as much as it offends the lowbrows is shown by the history of *Anonymous Artist,* which, shortly after its completion in 1984, went to the corporate art collection of Chase Manhattan Bank, where it was featured as the cover illustration on the annual acquisitions brochure.

Fortunately, however, the battle between high and popular culture finds occasional mediation, as for example, the recent work of California artist Kim MacConnel. MacConnel's large patterned works of the early 1980s were well received by the critical press, up to and including John Russell of the *New York Times* (fig. 9).[15] When his new smaller paintings, based on sofa art, were exhibited in New York, however, critics received them with the silence that has hitherto been reserved for sofa art (figs. 10, 11).

When asked about these works, MacConnel—who likes to call himself a painter rather than a high-art artist[16]—affirms that they confront established attitudes toward the arts.

Popular Art is what everyone likes if you are of one class, and it is what the masses like if you are of another class. . . . Art is the great modern separator of classes.[17]

These images, which MacConnel completes with art-fair frames, are an attempt to combine the elements he sees as enduring sources of western imagery—such as the

10 *Kim MacConnel,* Bullring, *1985. Acrylic on canvas, 32½ × 26½ in. Holly Solomon Gallery, New York*

stadium—with a "non-intimidating" format to reduce the "schism that exists between what is produced as artistic activity and who can appreciate it." He explains:

The attempt to cross breed High and low Art, high and low culture, the intellectual and the mundane. . . . The work is either offensive to us as a cultural reflection of who and where we are or it educates us.[18]

Considered thoughtfully, MacConnel's paintings cannot but be educational. By suggesting lowbrow art in an environment that demands highbrow aesthetic contemplation they are more subtly challenging than traditional Pop Art, which turns the unaesthetic aesthetic in a gesture of appropriation that Bourdieu describes as reinforcing class distinctions by alienating objects of working class life from their function in that life. MacConnel's paintings are not like calling Brillo boxes art. Instead they force an awareness of the conventions that separate some art—some paintings, even—from others, with all the social and financial consequences that entails.

MacConnel's work is both an example and a critique of the crisis in contemporary aesthetics that thoughtful contemplation of sofa art reveals. It is on the basis of his legitimating signature that his *Chinoise* is moved from motel to mu-

11 *Kim MacConnel,* Chinoise, *1986. Acrylic on canvas. 18 1/2 × 22 1/2 in. Collection of the artist*

seum. Once his status is assured, we feel free to interact with the work; without that guarantee, we might pass it by, and—worse—condemn anyone who did admire it.

Such behavior leads me, finally, not to argue for the inclusion of sofa art in the canons of high culture, but to question the bases and purposes of the critical distinctions that create such canons. At a time when an acceptance of cultural relativism is putting an end to many of the prejudices that have precluded serious investigation into the art of particular epochs or geographical regions, I suggest we bring the same attitude to distinctions of social class within our own culture. Sofa art certainly has the potential to reveal far more about both the dynamics of popular taste and the construction of high culture than has been touched on here: Let's get it down off the walls and under analysis!

Notes

For their contributions to this study—and much else besides—I would like to thank Christopher Castiglia of Columbia University and Mimi Cole, Robert Herbert, and especially Ann Gibson, all of Yale. Recognition is also due to Karal Ann Marling, at whose 1987 College Art Association panel on popular culture an abbreviated version of this paper was presented.

1 Charles Dickinson, "Sofa Art," *New Yorker,* 6 May 1985, pp. 42–48.

2 Tom Wolfe, "The Shockkkkkk of Recognition," in *The Pump House Gang* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968), pp. 277–92.

3 Thomas Lawson, "The New Laocoön or, the Snake Pit," *Artforum* (March 1986): 96–106.

4 Arthur C. Danto, "De Kooning's Three-Seater," *Nation* (9 March 1985): 282–83. Jane Tompkins's research on Nathaniel Hawthorne's short stories is analogous; see Jane Tompkins, "Masterpiece Theatre: The Politics of Haw-

thorne's Literary Reputation," in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 3–39.

5 Psychoanalytic historians have extrapolated from Freud's description of the psyche's functioning analogous principles in the workings of culture, locating areas of cultural repression that evade overt recognition. See Bernard Bowron, Leo Marx, and Arnold Rose, "Literature and Covert Culture," in *The American Experience,* ed. Hennig Cohen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), pp. 381–91.

6 Clement Greenberg, "The Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 3–21; Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 74–83.

7 José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art,* trans. Helene Weyl (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 7.

8 Pierre Bourdieu, *L'Amour de l'art* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1966), and *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

9 Greenberg, "The Avant-Garde and Kitsch," pp. 19–21; Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art,* pp. 149–52.

10 Norris Randolph, "How I Discovered Motel Art," *New England Monthly* (July 1986): 11–13.

11 Ronnie Cutrone, *Ronnie Cutrone* (New York: Tony Shafrazi Gallery, 1985), p. 44.

12 Ibid., p. 36.

13 Thomaso Trini, "Ronnie Cutrone," *Flash Art* (April–May 1984): 62–63.

14 Cutrone, *Ronnie Cutrone,* p. 30.

15 John Russell, "The Deft Hand of Kim MacConnel," *New York Times,* 12 March 1982, C-20.

16 Robert Becker, "Pattern Painting in Encinitas: Kim MacConnel," *Interview* (June 1982): 52–54.

17 Kim MacConnel, letter to the author, 1 May 1986.

18 Ibid.