

• *Book Reviews* •

Black Velvet Art. By Eric A. Eliason. Photographs by Scott Squire. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011. xlii + pp. 112. Over 150 color and black and white photographs, preface, notes, index.)

Picture yourself under the intense sun on a desert highway in the Midwest of the U.S.A., outside a gasoline station, where you can see on display a few kitschy paintings made on black velvet. Among those images one recognizes odd portraits of Jesus, Elvis, lying ladies, and other popular cult figures among the main themes. As one of the very few academics with expertise in “Black Velvet Art,” Eric Eliason of Brigham Young University has explored and gathered an impressive number of such works, as photographed by Scott Squire. The analysis and scholarly comments by Eliason are mostly concentrated in the prefatory pages, while the remaining remarks are rather descriptive and contextual. There are about 150 photographs (almost all in color) gathered in the book’s second half, while the first 30 pages bring the context and some valuable theoretical perspectives.

According to Eliason, twentieth century movements have often challenged our traditional conception of art as synonymous with beauty, perfection, and balance, especially with the notable Avant-garde works of Dadaism (in the 1910s) and later Pop-Art (from the late 1950s): “at least since the days of Dada, for nearly a century now, tastemakers have increasingly questioned the meaning of art by throwing ‘not art’ in our faces” (xxv). Apart from the conception and definition of an artwork, audiences have changed as well during the twentieth century and museum

goers do not question anymore the validity of hybrid works or “the blending of practices” in contemporary artworks (xxv).

Right from the start the author situates the negative perceptions which true art lovers feel towards “Black Velvet Art,” with Elvis’s representation being the epitome of this odd genre, like the juxtaposition of two extremes: “Everyone knows Elvis on velvet is *the* iconic type of bad art—the worst and the lowest of the low” (ix). Further on, the author generously qualifies what is often perceived as bad taste, and therefore brings the fundamental distinction between high art and low art: “Black Velvet as medium and Elvis as subject matter represent all that is tacky, tasteless, earnest, sentimental, worthless, simplistic, poorly crafted, unoriginal, frivolous, redundant, and common” (ix). Because of the abundance of Black Velvet Art works dedicated to the Elvis myth, image, and cosmology, a specific term has even been created in the *Urban Dictionary*: “Velvis” (46). Of course, when I find myself considering these observations, I would point out: didn’t many people say the same remarks one century ago regarding the naïve paintings of the famous French artist known as “Le Douanier Henri Rousseau” (1844-1910)?

Apart from the overly sentimental, sometimes ugly or vulgar images usually displayed on velvet paintings, the most interesting parts of this book are the discussions and the critiques brought by Eliason about the very notions of art and folk art: “Folk art must be defined in terms of: first, its acceptance of and dependence upon a communal aesthetic shared by a group of artists and their audience and shaped and reshaped by them over time” (xxiv). Avoiding any kind of

easy critique targeting this genre from an elitist perspective by experts looking down at what could be labelled as “some low art,” Eliason’s analysis often highlights the sociological dimensions of velvet art and kitsch in general; for example whenever referring to the concept of “Art Worlds,” understood here as networks of people working together in order to create and promote certain forms of creation,

“folklorists often presume that the community that produces the folk art is also the one who consumes it in traditional face-to-face encounters. With black velvet art, one community creates for another, and the tradition represents an interplay of multiple communities’ aesthetic values that emerge for commercial reasons.” (xxiv)

Some portraits and quotes from black velvet artists are included as well in the second half of the book. They explain their vision, the subjects they choose, their markets, and how they adjust to them: “people don’t buy nudes in Tijuana anymore so we don’t paint them,” explains Felix, one featured black velvet artist (xxxv). Selected reproductions are classified according to themes: landscapes, personalities, children, dolls, religion, ladies, etc. The selected characters portrayed in *Black Velvet Art* are varied and sometimes unpredicted: Marilyn Monroe, John Wayne, John Lennon, Aboriginals, plus many unknown figures.

In my view, *Black Velvet Art* is a very interesting book. Despite its undeniable qualities it does leave many aspects unstudied, but other scholars in ethnology and sociology of art could possibly take advantage of this unused material for future research in new directions. For example, one could question how some popular

figures and unknown people can become mythologized and famous, through a series of artistic processes (see, for instance, a black velvet portrait of Monica Lewinsky, xxvi). Apart from the obvious social facts, anthropologists and social scientists must also explore the trivial, derisory, apparently meaningless aspects of social life such as Black Velvet Art. Furthermore, undergraduates who read this book (and not just look at the illustrations) will likely understand how sociological thinking can work, and how ethnographers analyze the phenomena related to popular culture: avoiding the facile critique that rejects “bad taste” in order to focus on how artists create and how some specific audiences (and non-experts) would appreciate what they consider as “true art.” Other academics in cultural studies (or those studying fan cultures, celebrity culture, or cult figures) might want to explore how some cult figures and cultural icons are represented in such works that illustrate what popular culture is all about.

Because it focuses on sociological dimensions and institutionalization of art, *Black Velvet Art* is a rich, clear, and thought-provoking book that questions our common conception of an artwork and the definition of an artist (xxvi). Scholars in folklore, sociology of art, Cultural Studies and American Studies will certainly benefit from it.

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