

## **N. Mutt, 2009: Interview with artist Nena Amsler**

by Aimee Lusty

Artist Nena Amsler is no stranger to Duchampian puns, and likewise, exploring the boundaries of art through a combination of formal and conceptual painting. She recently had a solo show at Kristi Engle Gallery (Los Angeles, CA) entitled "N. Mutt 2009," May 2 - May 30. While her primary focus is painting, her current work expands the possibilities of what constitutes a painting.

This exhibition's title, "N. Mutt 2009," is an appropriation from the title of Marcel Duchamp's iconic work, with which he challenged the definition of art. Likewise, Amsler seeks to challenge the definition of "painting." The artist - a "mutt" herself, being a product of two disparate cultures (Switzerland and Peru) - creates paintings crossbred between multiple genres. Utilizing the traditional painter's materials (stretchers, canvas, panels and paint - in this case acrylic), Amsler presents an uncommon array of possibilities that are consistently innovative. Her material explorations; her investigation into the possibilities of painting; the introduction of a loose narrative and references to other contemporary works of art make her practice neither strictly formal nor exclusively conceptual.

Her Duchampian humor is evident throughout the exhibition. While she defines her "paintings" as "acrylic on canvas," in some instances the acrylic is actually acrylic yarn! Most of the pieces in the exhibition are made of several canvases (or panels). She explains that each work can at once be abstract (as a separate canvas or panel) and figurative when they are seen together as a whole.

While Duchamp's influence is strong, Amsler's own humor and visual language prevail. Like Duchamp's work, to avoid misinterpretation, Amsler's highly conceptual work is best explained by herself...

### **What persuaded you to title the exhibition "N. Mutt 2009"?**

In 1917, when Duchamp appropriated a urinal as "art," he questioned the very definition of art. In my exhibition, I wanted to question the definition of "painting." Appropriating the title from arguably the first appropriator, seemed, well, appropriate. (The "N" is the initial of my first name.) I also couldn't help but think that Duchamp must have chuckled to himself at the thought of his "Fountain." This guy knew how to have fun! And of course he demonstrated a new way of thinking about art in the same stroke of genius. While I too wanted to pose some questions - about the process, product and presentation of painting - I promised myself to also have fun. Also, a friend and I began referring to ourselves as "mutts" a while ago. She is Brazilian from Italian ancestry while my mother is Peruvian and my father, though born in Argentina, is actually Swiss. It can be said that nearly everyone in America is somewhat of a mutt, but my friend and I have commiserated that we still don't feel completely assimilated. There are American quirks - like being conversant in pop culture, be it TV programs or particular color combinations, designs and gadgets of certain eras, like the 70's - that always seems to escape us.

When creating the work for this exhibit, I realized that even the individual pieces had a mutt-like quality to them. I'm intrigued by the structural possibilities of paint and its support systems, rather than the "painterly" issues - such as creating illusionistic space or formal compositions - of a more traditionally inclined artist. So, in working with paint as a functional material (as glue, say) or joining canvases like building blocks to create a structure or incorporating text into the work, I embrace "muttness" by integrating two-dimensional and three-dimensional media, figuration and narrative, abstraction and representation.

### **What are your favorite pieces in the show?**

That's a hard one to answer. Thinking about your question, my mind jumped from one piece to the next, resisting the choice. Maybe this is because I see all pieces being part of a whole, both the whole of the individual "figures" they constitute as well as the whole of the scenario that those "figures" occupy. So I guess the process of creating the game plan for that particular gallery space was probably my favorite "piece."

### **What inspired you to "expand the boundaries of what constitutes a painting"?**

I've never been very good at following prescribed conventions, in art or otherwise. Looking back at my evolution as an artist, I've always gravitated to using paint and painting supports in weird and funky ways. Applying paint to a canvas with a brush or palette knife, creating either representative or abstract imagery, seems so boring to me, like walking down the same well-worn road over and over again. This exhibition made it dearer to me that questioning the definition of painting - while utilizing the "tools" of painting itself - is what inspires me.

### **Have you always worked with multiple canvases (or panels)? Or was this approach new to the works for this exhibition?**

The approach is definitely new for me, having evolved, organically, while working on this exhibit. I thought of incorporating games that I could play with the viewers, creating, as Annie Buckley wrote in her beautiful catalog essay, "some Duchampian jokes that thumb their noses at the market with a wink for the audience."

I also wanted to invite the viewer to find a story, either specific or open-ended, connecting multiple canvases/panels along the way as they saw fit. And I liked the idea that individual components of that story, not just necessarily an entire "figure," would be available for purchase, allowing the piece to "decompose" in the process of sales.

### **Aside from Duchamp, who are your other artistic influences?**

Lately, I've been enjoying the work of Martin Kippenberger, who recently had a sprawling retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. His uninhibited willingness to "thumb his nose" at the art establishment, or any and all power structures, I find refreshing.

### **Do you have any upcoming exhibitions or projects planned for the near future?**

I am currently preparing a proposal for an exhibition in another Los Angeles gallery that will continue in the vein of "N. Mutt 2009." This summer and fall I'll have a couple of pieces in the Museum of Amelia (Umbria, Italy) displayed among the regular array of civic artifacts the Museum usually shows. The curator hopes to "expand the boundaries" of where contemporary art can be seen. Music to my ears.