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A New Angle on the Walls

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA



Claudio Papapietro for The Wall Street Journal

Whitney Museum of American Art curator Scott Rothkopf at the museum's Wade Guyton exhibit. He has also curated a new exhibit, 'Sinister Pop.'

With a series of successful exhibitions that have tilted toward the contemporary and trained new eyes on the past, Scott Rothkopf has established himself as a notable new-guard curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Mr. Rothkopf, who is 36, arrived at the museum in 2009, after working as an editor

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at Artforum magazine, and his list of momentous shows has grown steadily since. The Whitney is currently hosting his spellbinding mid-career survey of Wade Guyton, the New York artist whose work includes sculpture, aspects of installation and large-scale paintings made by way of reconstituted computer printers. He has also co-curated (with Whitney chief curator Donna De Salvo) a big show opening Thursday, "Sinister Pop," a revisionist look at the darker side of pop art.

On a recent afternoon at the Whitney, with Guyton's art on the walls and "Sinister Pop" yet to be installed, Mr. Rothkopf spoke with the Journal about the magic of machines, migratory images and the art of curation.

The Wade Guyton show has earned a lot of notice around town.

Among artists I speak to, and especially younger artists, there's a sense of excitement about a generation having its moment at a museum like the Whitney. Getting to see the work of a 40-year-old artist presented with a certain conviction and seriousness, whether one likes that artist or not, is an opportunity.

The paintings suggest an exacting aesthetic sense as well as a comfort with mistakes. How do you reconcile those as a curator?

Different things go wrong for different reasons. He always wants them to feel printed, where you have a sense of the printer at work. Each time he gets a new machine he has to learn that machine. It's like breaking in a horse: He's got to teach it things and learn how to ride it. When he first started making these works, the Epson warranty would be voided if they knew he was printing on canvas. He would have to hide his work when the repairman came, because he was afraid they would see. But even though the works are mechanized, there's a tremendous interaction between him as an artist, his hand moving the canvas through, and the machine. That interaction has a lot to do with how his work ends up looking in the end.

The layout of the show is unusual. How did you arrive upon the design?

One of the challenges that any curator faces when doing a retrospective or a survey is how you're going to tell a story. Wade is still young so we wanted it to feel open-ended, so you could imagine this wasn't an end-point but a mid-point in a narrative arc. We were inspired by the original designs that Marcel Breuer made for this building, with panels that could fit in a grid in different dimensions. The idea of images moving through the work is something that the exhibition helps makes visible. We started thinking about the way that his work often grows from layers on his computer screen. Imagine a bunch of windows open on top of one another, where you see the edge of a painting on the screen on top of a sofa you're buying, how all that information stacks up.

How collaborative is that process between artist and curator?

It was extremely collaborative. We planned this show within an inch of its life, like no other exhibition I've worked on or probably will.

How so?

Being a curator is like being an author of a story about someone's work, or maybe the editor of their oeuvre as it exists. Sometimes a curator acts as a producer or sounding-board, but I think my way of working has tended to be a little more editorial or authorial. I want part of my perspective as a curator to be evident in the exhibition. Not to upstage the artist—if you're a really good curator, you're invisible, because it's the artist and the work that is supposed to come forward. But I'm interested in collaborative endeavors where there's a point of view of what an artist has done that may be different than their own view, and then figuring out how to express that in a way that feels true to their vision.



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The soft leather sofas are nice.

The sofas are from Wade's studio. He didn't want standard exhibition furniture in his show, so he asked if we could bring them in. People love them. I've seen families sitting on them. I've seen mothers nursing on them. I feel like we should always have sofas in the museum now, though I guess they wouldn't fit with every show.

For the upcoming "Sinister Pop" show, why revisit pop art now?

Donna De Salvo, the chief curator of the museum, is a great pop expert and did a lot of amazing pop shows in her career. We were interested in a kind of inter-generational dialogue between the two of us, with her familiarity with pop art and all the work she's done on it and my looking at it from a slightly different perspective. We went through the entire collection from roughly 1958 until the early '70s, and the more we looked at it all, the more we were interested in a really dark side of pop that was expressed in the work.

What kind of darkness?

Pop art in general is often seen as a celebration of postwar consumer culture, but we got more and more involved in these very dark and malevolent characteristics that we were finding. Some of them had to do with excessive or conspicuous consumption, or the alienation of the dystopic American landscape. There was a whole thread that had to do with the depiction of women in the period. There are a number of works in the show with women being attacked by animals, which at the time might have seemed sexy or amusing but now is concerning. It was a dark and complicated time in America and the world. There were wars going on, a very contentious election, the economy was in dire straits. We thought it was a good moment to look at that work from the '60s.

What kind of perspective did you bring to it?

Sometimes looking as an outsider can be extremely helpful. Having not been there the first time that work was shown can make you less prejudiced toward it. You can see with different eyes. It will be interesting in 20 years to see what a younger curator does with Wade Guyton's work. Maybe they won't connect it to all the things that I think about it, the way that images travel from my iPhone to my computer, the curious transition we're living with between printed newspapers and the iPad. That moment will be over, and they might see Wade's work and express something about it that is new and perhaps even more interesting because of their remove.

What is the most surprising aspect of a curator's job?

I've been surprised by how many different parts of my brain this job uses. You feel responsible for so many different aspects of an exhibition: the book, the lighting, how thick the walls are, whether the labels are screened in black or in gray, whether you can get someone to part with a painting in Switzerland and, if they say yes, how you can afford to bring it here. Then a curator is also like a shrink to the artists they are working with. You are taking a person and making them very vulnerable in presenting their life's work to the world. I tell artists: I don't care if people think you are a great artist. What I care about the most is that people think you are a better artist when they leave the show than when they came in. That's my job.

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