

Reaction to the Lecture by R. Kenton Nelson

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Pasadena Session - Castle Green
UNIVERSITY OF HARTFORD
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R. Kenton Nelson (b.1954, Los Angeles California) attended, but insisted he wasn't much of a student at California State University, Long Beach, 1977-1979 and Otis Parsons Art Institute in 1979. His love of painting stems from his great uncle, Roberto Montenegro (1885 - 1968), one of the Mexican muralists to come out of the early half of the 20th C. Montenegro's towering influence on Nelson stems from his abilities as well as his circle of peers; Diego Rivera (1886–1957), Pablo Picasso (1881 – 1973), Juan Gris (1887 – 1927), Jean Cocteau (1889 - 1963) and Marc Chagall (1887 – 1985),. Nelson was removed from his great uncle's by distance, time and influence, but seemed to find his own visual vocabulary in the Post War Southern California that was shaping so much of the idealism of the United States, and he world. The California entertainment industry delivered the ideal world on celluloid and television sets, depicting neighborhoods without crabgrass or skinned knees. Nelson's work seems to reflect that ideal, but with a tongue in cheek humor that knocks the



Roberto Montenegro
Toy Soldiers
gouache on paper
17-1/2 x 13 inches



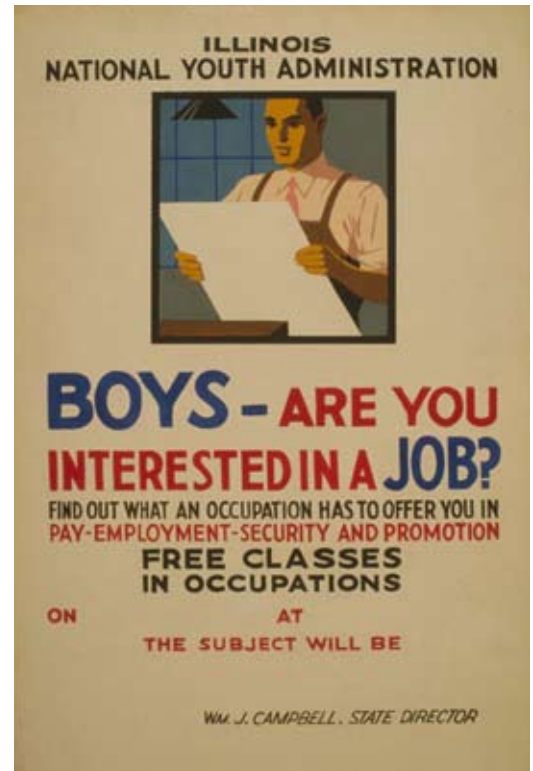
R. Kenton Nelson
Evelyn
The New Yorker - June 19 & 26, 2000
Oil on canvas



Robert Muchley
Protect your hands! : You work with them.
 Pennsylvania : Federal Art Project, [1936]
 Poster promoting safety in the workplace
 Work Projects Administration Poster Collection
 Library of Congress

balance off center. He had soaked in all of the polish, sun and glamour of late fifties and merged it with the idealistic innocence of the Depression era Regionalism of the 1930s.

Nelson's work brings quite a few modern masters to mind. His pallet reminded me of David Hockney (b.1937) pools form the late 1960s, while his elegant figures in pristine landscapes seemed similar, yet less noir, than Jack Vettriano (b.1951).



Poster for Illinois branch of the National Youth Administration promoting educational opportunities for young men seeking training for employment.
 Illinois : Federal Art Project, 1936 or 1937
 Library of Congress



David Hockney
A Bigger Splash, 1967
 acrylic on canvas
 96 x 96 inches
 Tate Gallery, London

Hockney's pools have the same high key and sunlight as Nelson. Crisp So-Cal light bathes the swimmers as they lounge pool-side.



Top:
R.Kenton Nelson
One of the Skidmore Girls
2005
oil on canvas

Below:
Dennis Gray
Ferrari 250 TR Spyder Scaglietti
2008
photograph
Vintage Racecar Magazine

There is an undercurrent of adoration of the female form, less sexually charged than Vettriano, but equally stated beneath the loosely draped clothing. Nelson celebrates the form, fashioning and plasticizing the bodies until they become as obvious as Ferrari beneath a car cover.

Where both Vettriano and Nelson compose their models in formal poses, Nelson's characters seem to enjoy living in their world, not forced to feign interest.

The poster work of the WPA and railroad-advertising posters from the same era seem to carry a heavy footprint on Nelson's work. The repeated use of low angle perspective gives a hint of the heroic, if not propagandizing the chosen theme. He elevates the mundane to an iconic level, practically translating humble objects into objects of reverence. His studies of clothespins, fire hydrants and



Jack Vettriano
Night in the City, 1998
32 x 28 inches
oil on canvas



R. Kenton Nelson
With Regulation, 2003
oil on canvas



Wayne Thiebaud
One Paint Can, 1988
 11.75 x 12 inches
 oil on canvas



R. Kenton Nelson
Regional Bird, 1999
 18 x 18 inches
 oil on panel



Wayne Thiebaud
Harvest Display
 The New Yorker - November 24 2008
 oil on canvas



R. Kenton Nelson
Mrs. Brach's Amusement
 Pasadena Weekly, December 2006
 oil on canvas

water sprinklers reveal their form-following-function simplicity – nearly a celebration of classic industrial design.

As Nelson talked about his work, I noticed the cropping was nothing like the styles of those I felt were his influences. His ability to design and zoom in on partial forms, often requires the viewer to complete the painting beyond the frame. Nelson plays with the eye and it's sense of visual hierarchy when observing something new. His latest work mimics the camera lens with depth of field blurring of objects and figures outside of the focal plane. We look in on a play, often in its third act, with very little visual information to construct the plot.

The ability to merge the intrigue of a mysterious progression with the skillful execution of the objects requires the viewer to dwell and ponder the piece in forensic state. Nelson's intellect and craft create objects of intrigue and beauty. This is where the break between Nelson the illustrator, and R. Kenton Nelson



R. Kenton Nelson
Improving One's Viewpoint #1, 2003
oil on canvas



R. Kenton Nelson
Improving One's Viewpoint #2
The New Yorker - April 21 & 28, 2003
oil on canvas

the painter diverge in the minds of many critics. The mind-set that the illustrator needs coddle the viewer with obvious clues and direct narrative and the painter reveals his soul isn't necessarily the standard in Nelson's work. He is able to straddle the narration while holding many of his secrets to himself. The layers of intrigue allow the work to enhance a parallel theme, while possibly illustrating a sonnet known only to the artist. In this manner, Nelson is able to paint his "gallery" work, and still have a commercial applicability (see New Yorker cover/ Bridge Jumper). Like fellow California painter Wayne Thiebaud (b. 1920), Nelson is able to see his work used in the publishing world, beyond its initial intended use. The additional broadcasting of his imagery increases the public awareness of his work while increasing the value of the pieces used in publication.



The tour of Nelson's studio on the afternoon of November 13th showed a strong reflection of the work that is executed there. His painting studio, nestled down a private alley shaded with lush avocado trees, was tidy, clean and well organized. Multiple oil paintings in various stages of finish were spaced along the back wall. His various collections of books and objects were placed to inspire, not detract from the work at hand. The light was good with a well thought out gable window. Nelson's skills as a carpenter were also evident in the courtyard, where he was building a small glassed in gazebo with salvaged windows. Early tile murals were mounted on two of the walls around the property. The separate tile studio revealed the same fastidiously organized and tidy work area.

The tile work that Nelson says is nearly an obsession, has the same effect of viewing a Chuck

Close (b. 1940) painting for the first time
– square pixels of half inch square tiles merge
at a distance to create the mosaic version
of one of Nelson’s previously executed
images. The scale and tactile quality of the
pieces lend them to public installations or
architectural accents. I have worked on similar
public installations as studio assistant to
Hiroshi Murata (b. 1941) creating permanent
installation of a monumental size, and can
relate that it is a thrill to execute a piece on
that scale and prominence.



Chuck Close
Self-Portrait, 1997
oil on canvas
8' 6" x 7'
Museum of
Modern Art
New York, NY



Nelson's Tile Studio, 2009
Pasadena, CA
photograph - P. Zdepski

The initial time spent to develop a method of

R. Kenton Nelson
Clarissa's Hair, Tile Mosaic, 2009
Pasadena, CA
photograph - P. Zdepski



translating Nelson's paintings to mosaic has been considerable, involving a computer programmer to digitize the work, grid-map and color assign each quadrant with a limited choice of pallet colors. Nelson has executed a number of these mosaics, only to have them return from gallery exhibitions. He mentioned that his father-in-law wondered why he was throwing so much money at the mosaic series without any promise financial return...

- Nelson's eyes lit as he told the illustrators in the class that he yearned for a huge industrial wall, the size of a grain elevator to place one of his mosaics... that was his ultimate goal for these works.

Permanence, scale and public location; Nelson has come full circle. The early influence of his great uncle Roberto's mural work has become a similar reality for Nelson. He is now able to envision his iconic imagery side-by-side with Montenegro's in the public eye - separated by time, but not necessarily style, region or expertise.



Hiroshi Murata
Space Garden, 1984-87
 Port Authority of NY/NJ 42nd Street Bus Terminal, New York, NY
 Aluminum, Steel, Automotive Paint
 8 x 28 feet
 photograph - Hiroshi Murata



Hiroshi Murata
Resolution, 1990-91
 State Capitol Building, Trenton, NJ
 Wood Veneer, Steel
 7'4" x 64'
 photograph - Nancy Silvia
 author in blue plaid

1. http://www.noyolaanticuarios.com/bios/Roberto_Montenegro/
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2. *Prose and Cons - Paintings of R. Kenton Nelson*
 Milton Court Publishing
 Pasadena Museum of California Art,
 Pasadena CA
 2005

3. *Sotheby's Gleneagles Hotel*
 September 1, 2004
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