

## **Bloomberg Space:** 'Essays, 13 October – 2 December 2006', 2006



### **Bloomberg SPACE 50 Finsbury Square London, EC2A 1HD**

Bertrand Lavier

13 October – 2 December 2006

One of the most inventive and influential French artists of his generation, Bertrand Lavier focuses on the convoluted relationship between art and reality – where are the limits of art and how much is the look of art influenced by what we expect of it? Superimposition is a distinctive characteristic of Lavier's work, often elevating everyday objects to the level of artworks. *La Bocca* (2005) stacks the iconic lip-shaped sofa (originally produced in 1970) based on Salvador Dali's famous Mae West sofa of 1936 on top of a chest freezer, forcing the idea of hot and cold together. By filming Mark Rothko's painting *Four Darks in Red* (1958) on 35mm film, Lavier attempts to capture the experience of this painting. Transferred to video and projected actual size, it is both a documentation of the original work and a piece in its own right. In this provocative work Lavier takes a popular artist, whose work fulfils prescribed expectations of modern art, and raises questions about value and exchange. *Empress of India II* (2005) is a remake of one of Frank Stella's striped works in coloured neon. Lavier regards these works as paintings but in light. The shift in material makes clear reference to advertising, surrendering the art object, in part, to the world of communications and design. *Empress of India II* (2005) glows with an intensity that appears to leave behind its origin as painting, yet still fulfils Stella's declared intentions of "What you see is what you see".

#### **Curators**

Sacha Craddock, Stephen Hepworth, Graham Gussin



*'It's a question of destabilizing the center of gravity from all the available formal vocabulary.'*

– Bertrand Lavier

Bertrand Lavier explores form using a number of strategies. These overlap and interlink allowing each field of activity to be revisited and reformed by the artist and the viewer. Lavier describes his practice as being like 'a series of construction sites' that he can work on at any time and in any order, giving an overall sense that nothing is resolved but rather reconsidered through an ongoing process. He is fascinated both by the notion of pure form and by the question of what it is that might constitute a work of art. His investigations bring about a contradictory sense of weightlessness and gravity.

Rothko's painting, *Four Darks in Red* (1958), is animated through the process of filming it. Made to move fractionally because of the medium of film, the painting is probed in order to reveal differences between subjectivity and objectivity. A reproduction, which somehow acts as a mirror on the work and the viewer, it literally interprets Rothko's intention for painting to become a moving field of focus and colour. Film is an illusion, and so is painting...

*Empress of India II* (2005) also takes painting as its starting point. It takes Frank Stella's work and turns it into an emblem using fluorescent light to edge the work towards an insignia of the type seen in advertising. It plays with the relationship between formal composition, hard-edged abstraction and pop iconography, forcing us to question our preconceptions of origin and style. Signature style and trademark become confused, as is design and ideology; the work is rich in connotation and meaning. As with the Rothko painting, the employment of a specific medium highlights a link between artistic intention and the way in which that is consumed, re-thought and re-interpreted.

*La Bocca/Bosch* (2005) works with a more immediate notion of collision and uses the sculptural concerns of heavy and light, warm and cold within its structure. A fridge - a cold store for food, a cold, heavy rectangle like a minimalist form, a white cube. On top of this Dali's design for a sofa based on Mae West's lips. There is warmth in the image of lips and that of a sofa, a mouth that may consume the goods held below. Opening and closing, Surrealism and Minimalism, decadence and function, cold air and warm air, a collision that floats in front of us like a mirage.

Graham Gussin

The title, *La Bocca/ Bosch* (2005) is honest and clear; Bosch is a white goods manufacturer while the *Sofa Bocca* is a 1970s sofa based on Salvador Dali's 1936 design. The Bertrand Lavier piece, a material realisation of this familiar image of Mae West's lips placed upon a chest freezer manufactured by Bosch, manages a distilled approach to real form. Lavier uses a clear vehicle for associative thought; he talks of the direct power of reference, how his objects are not about being 'found' so much, as two real elements that collectively achieve a 'result' that floats between two things. The outline and modelling of a cartoonish mouth, a familiar image translated into a sofa, is placed upon a freezer, which remains more freezer than plinth. Here the reference to food, mouth, eating, storage, is quick and adamant. The mouth, ranging here between cartoon outline and soft furnishing, is huge while the fridge lacks scale within the relationship.

By favouring a more direct association between image and use, Lavier aims to deny apparent artistic strategy and aesthetic consideration. However, this blunt, apparently anti-aesthetic method results in work that is highly charged with formal quality.

Lavier is an artist who has always worked between two and three dimensions to further extend idea. He insists that the layer of paint he applies to the surface of an object works in just the same way as when he places one object on top of another. The confidence with which he works, in his use of reference, is exceptional. He tends to work and re-work over decades, leaving the final decision about an exhibition till relatively late, drawing from an independent formal range that remains recognisably his. He has said, "I have a strange relationship with time. Chronology doesn't count for much with me".

Sacha Craddock



Bertrand Lavier is one of the most inventive and influential European artists of his generation. Since the early 1970s he has been concerned with identifying the paradoxes between reality in all its manifestations, and the corresponding and various representations that can be produced. Most recently he has focused on the convoluted relationship between art and reality - where are the limits of art, and how much is the look of art influenced by what we expect it to look like?

In the early 1980s, Lavier presented the first of his painted objects. These pieces, consisting of objects such as a radio, camera, clock, ladder, are each covered in thick coloured paint exactly matching the original, in such a way that they remain identifiable, and indeed functional. The objects assume a double-identity; they act as a painted image of themselves, whilst also retaining their 'real' identity, both reproduced and represented. Transformed, his choice of everyday items become 'sensualised' physical objects. Their various surfaces smothered with thick luscious paint, the trace of the paintbrush fully evident in the marks that both define and fragment the identity of the original. He renders objects, with which we are familiar as untouchable, recreating them as a new yet identifiable presence; they are both alien and yet very much of this world. Recalling Andy Warhol's elevation of banal items such as the Campbell's soup can into iconic images, Lavier goes further, transforming luxurious status symbols such as a red Ferrari 308 GTS, a grand piano and a yacht into art through this method. With these works he subverts the customary exchange found in much art between high and low (culture), to high and higher, raising further questions about value and equivalence. His works are intensely visual; they are neither paintings, painted sculptures nor sculptures, and as such they evade categorisation.

Superimposition is a distinctive characteristic of Lavier's work. This is particularly evident in the ongoing *Over* series where two objects, chosen because of their uneasy union, are stacked on top of each other. Paying attention to clashes of both form and colour, such as a vertical heater on a metal filing cabinet, these manufactured objects become "grafted" together, bringing about a distinct and unsettling force. Lavier distances himself from Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades (which he regards as having failed to retain their unsettling force) such as the represented urinal *Fountain* (1917) preferring to subvert such tired conventions. *Brandt/Fichet-Bauchet* (1984) is a fridge placed on top of a safe. The safe could be seen to serve the traditional function of the plinth supporting a sculpture in this case a fridge. The title is written as a sum: the safe divided by the fridge, which brings to mind the contents of each: food and money, and creating the idea of a relationship. But for Lavier these works are governed by his formula:  $1 + 1 = 1$ , together these discrete objects become one. This cajoling of objects draws on his early training in horticulture where he learnt about the possibilities created through hybridisation. With his stacked objects he grafts design with design to produce art. *La Bocca/Bosch* (2005) stacks the iconic 1970 lip-shaped sofa (originally produced in 1970) based on Salvador Dali's famous Mae West sofa of 1936 on top of a chest freezer. In this work, the idea of hot and cold are forcibly brought together. Echoing Dali's original installation where he recreated the face of the Hollywood actress from a sculptural montage of objects arranged in a room, Lavier ironically adds a/her legendary chest to her erotically charged lips. *La Bocca* is one of a series of designer chairs that Lavier has chosen to represent both with and without assumed plinths, each in itself is a form of plinth which when unoccupied becomes suggestive of further hybridisation and possibility.

Humour is an important constituent of Bertrand Lavier's work. For *Walt Disney Productions*, based on a 1947 cartoon in which a sceptical Mickey Mouse and an enthusiastic Minnie disagree about modern art, he reproduced the works that were hung in the cartoon museum. Installed life-size in a room with brightly coloured walls and floor the series of abstract paintings and Jean Arp-like sculptures, are pastiches of modern art which have become the real thing. They continue his interest in the play between art, the public perception of art and reality.

The American painter, Mark Rothko's (1903-1970) abstract paintings concentrate on the physical sensations generated by large fields of colour. His enveloping and atmospheric large canvases painted with thin layers of paint yield luminous, optical effects. Suggestive of the vastness of the American landscape, lozenges of exalted light appeared to emanate from ethereal fields of colour, their edges washed and stained with shifting tones creating different luminous intensities. These rectangles appear to float above the painted ground, the spectator in contemplating them may seem to float, too. In filming Rothko's work *Four Darks in Red* (1958) on 35mm film, Bertrand Lavier attempts to capture the experience of this painting. Transferred to video and projected at the same size, it is both a documentation of the original work and a piece in its own right. Transposed to this new medium the works relationship to light is shifted from something that appears to emanate or absorb light to

something made up from it. The optical vibration engendered by Rothko's use of colour and its application is augmented by the mechanics of film. Composed of individual frames that pass through the shutters of both camera and then projector, the painting, while appearing to be fixed, is actually animated, existing in quantifiable time. Lavier's *Four Darks in Red* (2004) continues his interest in destabilising categories, challenging traditional ideas of genre. It is a provocative work that takes a popular artist, whose work fulfils prescribed expectations of modern art, and forcibly raises questions about value and exchange.

In an interview in 1966, the hard-edged minimalist American painter Frank Stella (born 1936) declared "My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object. All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion. What you see is what you see." This statement implicitly criticised the energetic gesturing of the Abstract Expressionists. He challenged their position with a series of works using shaped canvases containing stripes made with the techniques and tools of a house-painter. He believed that by doing this (initially with a series of black works), through demonstrating its making, he showed what a painting is. Lavier has remade a number of Stella's striped works in coloured neon. He regards these works as paintings but in neon. The shift in material makes clear reference to advertising, surrendering the art object, in part, to the world of communications and design, where perhaps it sits more comfortably. Previously, chosen objects or images have remained present in the final work, where as in these neon pieces, Lavier appears to have travelled further from his source. The four intersecting arrowheads in Stella's architectural *Empress of India* (1965) originally in subdued metallic tones of red, green, orange and brown have been replaced in Lavier's *Empress of India II* (2005) with two pairs of shapes in pink and white and blue and white. The work glows with an intensity that appears to leave behind its origin as painting, yet still fulfils Stella's declared intentions. Lavier has refreshed the youthful zeal of a radical artist with electricity and wit.

Bertrand Lavier has said that he likes to devise his exhibitions "more in the spirit of haute couture rather than ready-to-wear." At Bloomberg SPACE, he has chosen to show three recent works: *Four Darks in Red* (2004), *Empress of India II* (2005) and *La Bocca/Bosch* (2005). Speaking at another time of making exhibitions he said "...an exhibition is like a musical score... you can play as if it were classical music...or as if it were jazz, with improvisation... or like techno, taking samples... you can mix them. There are different scores, I cut them, and there you have different functions, there is the display, rewind and fast-forward. I like the musical metaphor. I am the DJ of my exhibition."

Stephen Hepworth