

Beg Borrow and Steal

By Brooke A. Minto

A new exhibit from the Rubell Family Collection explores the anxiety of influence in contemporary art

For their latest installation, *Beg Borrow and Steal*, the Rubell Family Collection selected a provocative title for an exhibition that elucidates on copycat tendencies in contemporary art practice. The exhibition also illustrates this distinctive family's passion for collecting art over the past 40 years—a passion that has yielded and celebrated some of the most thought-provoking artworks of our time.

It was during their regular practice of visiting with artists in their studios that Don and Mera Rubell posed the routine question, "What are your influences?" to the New York-based artist Kelley Walker. Walker immediately acknowledged artists such as Cady Noland and Richard Prince. Although these artistic references may not be surprising—considering their shared interest in appropriating a seemingly random assortment of images pertaining to consumerism and mass media depicting the so-called American Dream—his eagerness to acknowledge these influences was refreshing. With creative techniques ranging from digitally scanning and altering images, inkjet printing canvases and photo silk-screening, the artist's innovative use of new technology updates the pop cultural co-option which began in the 1980s by a generation of artists, to whom Walker openly pays tribute as he creates a new iconography with altered and resonant meanings for the present historical moment.

When recalling this studio encounter with Kelley Walker, Mera Rubell references a cliché often attributed to Pablo Picasso: "Good artists borrow; great artists steal." From there, the current re-visioning of the collection began. While the question of artistic influence may not be new, what artists choose to borrow or steal, and from whom, is distinct in that it becomes a reflection of their own time—a burdensome notion that literary critic Harold Bloom dubbed *The Anxiety of Influence* in 1973. With more than 60 collection artists included, *Beg Borrow and Steal* reconsiders several artists' attempts to build on the legacies of their predecessors in an effort to present new ideas in a cross-cultural conversation.

To appropriate is to borrow. And in art, appropriation is often the practice of taking an image or found object from another context—art history, advertising, mass media—and combining that appropriated image with new ones. This practice, which in the 80s and 90s became a vehicle for a variety of viewpoints about contemporary society both celebratory and critical, is often associated with the work of Jeff Koons. Known for his giant glossy reproductions of banal objects taken from everyday American life, Koons has appropriated everything from print advertisements and consumer products to cartoon characters, kitsch collectibles and plastic toys.

Although Koons has stated that there are no hidden meanings in his works, his combination of objects culled from art history and popular culture in seminal sculptures—like *New Hoover Convertible* (1980), in which a brand name vacuum is displayed in a Plexiglas case over a row of fluorescent lights—serve to destabilize the visual idioms of commercial merchandising and display in our culture. Likewise, Haim Steinbach's related *ultra lite #2* from 1988 offers up multiple shiny, chromed metal trashcans for the viewers' visual if not actual consumption on attractive department-store shelves.

Like many artists in the current exhibition, the work of Jeff Koons and Maurizio Cattelan, who incorporate replicas of found objects into their sculptures and installations, owes a debt to Dadaist Marcel Duchamp's readymades, which placed decidedly non-artistic objects in an aesthetic context at the beginning of the 20th century. After adding a witty or deadpan title and signing a mass-produced object—porcelain urinal or metal bottle rack—Duchamp would exhibit the work as a readymade sculpture. In that moment, Duchamp's intention was to underscore art's more conceptual and intellectual basis, shifting attention away from the physical act or craft of the works' making.

However, divergent from the Duchampian readymade, more recent appropriations often redraw, repaint or re-photograph its source image or object. Such is the case in Louise Lawler's *Foreground* (1994). A silver gelatin print revealing a minimal open-plan living space in a modernist apartment adorned only by Koons's iconic, high polish sculpture *Rabbit* (1986) on a rectangular white plinth that mirrors the rectangles of the interior's door in the background and kitchen cabinetry in the foreground.

Similarly Mark Leckey's 2004 digital video *Made in 'Eaven* was shot in the artist's empty London studio as the camera lens seemingly rotates around Koons' *Rabbit*. This time the animal sculpture is placed in the center of the empty room. For its presentation in this space, Leckey's video is transferred to 16mm film and projected onto the wall of the exhibition gallery. After a few moments of viewing the projection one realizes that the shiny silver bunny was never in the artist's studio at all, but rather it is a computer-generated image made by an artist fascinated by Koons' work.

Like Lawler and Leckey, artist Peter Coffin's 2008 *Sculpture Silhouette* (J. Koons 'Balloon Dog' 1986) also refers to one of Koons's now timelessly iconic inflatable figures, while transforming it into a flattened, prop-like black silhouette. In doing so, all three artists critically engage the viewer to reflect and expand upon the existing associations each form's representation evokes.

Generating an endless interplay of associations, these re-presentations of work by Jeff Koons prompt the viewer to project the present onto the recent past, underscoring that art history is constantly being rewritten. Don Rubell acknowledges that "in the pre-modern period, there were always references. Modernity was about everything being new. Appropriation, however, is a return to the history of art."

This provocative act of taking possession of historical symbols and subverting the modernist reverence of originality is no more humorously executed than in the work of Italian-born artist Maurizio Cattelan, who delivers ironic comments on socially controversial subjects. Stepping into a space with Cattelan's *La Rivoluzione Siamo Noi* (*We are the Revolution*, 2000), the viewer disrupts a diminutive effigy of the artist hanging from a Marcel Breuer-designed clothing rack, dressed in Joseph Beuys's canonical felt suit, which the late German artist wore during his legendary performance piece *Isolation Unit* in 1971. Like Beuys, Cattelan uses his own likeness to construct meaning in his work, and the present mini-Cattelan is as insecure about his place in the exhibition gallery as he is about his role in art history.

As Cattelan's work affirms, appropriation is not a method limited by geographic or culturally-specific boundaries. Rather, it is skillfully employed by artists internationally. Li Zhanyang in his present sculpture *History Observed*—Joseph Beuys and Mao Zedong, from the larger installation 'Rent'—Rent Collection Yard (2007), depicts his own view of the contemporary Chinese art scene by bringing together 34 life-size fiberglass figures of local and international renown in an elaborate narrative vignette. Li's characters include both Chinese and Western artists, curators, collectors, gallerists and art students arranged to showcase each figure in a striking pose, whether dramatic, absurd or satirical. The work follows various conceptual themes—paying rent, foot washing, oppressing, dying a martyr, history observed, and so on. Front and center of this motley crew are Joseph Beuys and Mao Zedong (history observed) where the artist has staged one of the most influential figures on the international contemporary art scene today in an implausible and witty sermon-like gesture on the right-hand side of the father figure of revolutionary China.

Similarly, Wang Ziwai's *Hopeless (Women Crying)* from 2007 highlights a predominant concern of Chinese artists today: The existing mass-produced and rhetorically loaded images of the late Chairman as they currently circulate in the popular consciousness. For this reason, Wang's brightly colored and oversized acrylic canvas seems immediately familiar as he pairs two portraits from the 1960s by Americans Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. The iconic pop art imagery draws in the viewer—already accustomed to the Campbell's soup cans and Brillo Box from 1965 that were precursors to appropriation—with name-brand consumer products, from dollar bills and daisies to celebrity portraits. However, Wang challenges these familiar tropes of pop art as he comically re-imagines the Great Leader as part of a damsel-in-distress dream sequence, a kind of visual suggestion of the psychic and moral chaos of the newly commercialized China of the 1990s.

Finally, the transcendently stunning and meaningful *Ton of Tea* (2005) by Ai Weiwei, who is equal parts artist, architectural designer and cultural and social commentator, is a densely compressed and fragile five-foot cube of Chinese loose tea, which formally references the iconic 1970s minimalist cubes of Donald Judd and Carl Andre. While the artist also acknowledges minimalism's predecessors like Neo-Dadaist Jasper Johns as an artist whose work was the catalyst for his entry into the contemporary art world, it's through the many layers of art historical references—from the Duchampian readymade to minimalist forms—that a viewer is able to read and explore the interconnections between Ai's sculptural work and its cultural and historical background.

Whether anticipated or not, *Beg Borrow and Steal* brings together an impressive array of artists from the 1960s to the present, revealing the constant and ongoing exchange of histories and ideas between artists and collectors. It is as much about the creative process as that of the making and meaning of the objects themselves. This indispensable notion is evidenced by the exhibition's telltale Louise Lawler photograph from 1982 *Arranged by Mera and Donald Rubell, New York City*, depicting the Rubells' former living room overflowing with artwork, many of which are now found in their current exhibition. This photograph becomes a working document, depicting *Beg Borrow and Steal* in its earliest incarnation.