

Mark Dean Veca: The Mundane and the Sublime

David Pagel

In the early 1960s, Andy Warhol made a bunch of paintings of Campbell's soup cans. They looked a lot like the real thing—only bigger, a bit simplified, and a little messier. People immediately saw that Warhol's soups cans had a lot in common with the mass-produced ones they could find on the shelves of markets and grocery stores in cities all over the country, if not the world. The rest is history: Pop was born and art never would be the same again. Gone was the idea that painting hovered above the signs and symbols of everyday life—including the labels and trademarks of mass-marketed brands. In its place was an art that did not pretend to stand apart from the to-and-fro of ordinary existence. Unafraid to get its hands dirty with the accessible, often immediately recognizable images of commercial culture, Pop was embraced by viewers who may not have had any interest in abstract painting, particularly as it was being enshrined in museums—and marketed in galleries. What got overlooked by these enthusiasts was the fact that Warhol's soup cans were already in conversation with Abstract Expressionism, with the painters who made its increasingly celebrated paintings, and with the people who saw those works as standing apart from mundane reality, which includes mistakes and failures and near-misses, along with jaw-dropping, mind-blowing successes.

A commercial illustrator who grew up in Pittsburgh, Warhol never felt that he belonged to the generation of painters that was coming to prominence when he was just beginning to come into his own as an artist. The macho bravura of their abstract paintings did not suit him. As a gay man, he did not share their affection for confrontational posturing, particularly as it unfolded during drunken arguments (and fistfights) in bars in Manhattan. But Warhol knew what they were doing in their studios. When they talked shop he listened. The language they used was neither academic nor theoretical. It was vernacular. The Abstract Expressionists said that they wanted to make paintings that had 'juice,' otherwise known as vitality, energy, and power, or what my father calls 'vim and vigor.' When that didn't happen, they said that the puddles, smears, and streaks of paint that covered their canvases was nothing more than 'soup,' a goopy muddle

of colors, textures, and shapes that had not congealed or coalesced into a spontaneous composition with life in it. Think primordial stew, but with nothing bubbling up from it.

So, rather than struggle to make ‘soup’ or to make paintings that had ‘juice,’ Warhol simply painted and silkscreened the labels of both commercial products, the first on canvases and the second on smoothly sanded wood boxes. Out of respect for the Abstract Expressionists—and his affection for dry wit, wry humor, and deadpan silliness—he put some distance between his work and theirs. Warhol’s canvases parroted their failures—the ‘soup’ not the ‘juice.’ When he went for the ‘juice,’ he stuck to sculpture: boxlike forms that recalled Minimalist sculptures while also resembling the cardboard boxes in which cans of Campbell’s Tomato Juice and Mott’s Apple Juice were delivered to markets and delis.

The rest, again, is history. Warhol’s ‘failed’ paintings succeeded—on a scale that matched (and surpassed) that of the Abstract Expressionist works he riffed off of. His juice sculptures never got the same traction. But they are part of his argument about art’s connection to everyday life and the essential links between a work’s impact and its accessibility, its influence, and its place in the hearts and minds of viewers. In a sense, Warhol used otherwise unremarkable consumer goods to camouflage his desire to make art that stood on its own, that was original, potent, and authentic. There’s humility to that approach, as well as a kind of good-old-American pragmatism and an endearing lack of egocentric self-involvement. There is also great ambition, especially in Warhol’s desire to make art that did not seek acceptance from the establishment so much as it sought to change the rules of the game—the standards and protocols in which art was relegated to an overspecialized sanctuary and cut off from the rough-and-tumble world of commercial culture. In another sense, Warhol’s soup cans and juice boxes demonstrate that when it comes to art you can eat your cake and have it too. You don’t need to escape reality to find beauty, transcendence, and inspiration, but can find it just about anywhere, certainly in images of the ordinary stuff sold in markets and grocery stores.

That is exactly where Mark Dean Veca’s art begins—but with a difference. Rather than using the labels and logos and trademarks of popular products to create symbolic surrogates of Abstract Expressionist paintings, the L.A. artist uses familiar images and iconic

emblems as the framework on which to hang his own hand-painted abstractions, all of which are made up of a mesmerizing mixture of wickedly energized lines, razor-sharp contours, whiplash cartoons, all-or-nothing contrasts, head-spinning scale-shifts, and all manner of camouflaged imagery—some wildly unexpected, some brilliantly appropriate, and others perfectly inexplicable.

Narrative and nonsense come together in Veca's abstract images, which run the gamut from graffiti-style murals to sketchbook-page drawings and include, in between, immersive, room-size installations, billboard-scale acrylics on canvas, and domestically sized pen-and-ink drawings. Where Warhol proposed that the slick lines and crisp images of product labels and corporate logos could stand in for the 'juice' and 'soup' beneath their squeaky-clean surfaces, Veca makes room, on the sprawling surfaces of his eye-popping works, for all of that messy stuff. He uses immediately recognizable trademarks, ubiquitous advertisements, and iconic cartoon characters to pry open some space for his own idiosyncratic handiwork, which struts its shape-shifting stuff in spaces stolen (also known as appropriated) from established channels of communication.

In a sense, Veca's self-styled lines, forms, and figures spring up like weeds in the cracks in sidewalks, their unexpected appearance revealing three things: 1.) that things rarely go as planned, particularly when they are done with top-down authority; 2.) that surprises often provide life's most profound pleasures; and, 3.) that true beauty springs from such unanticipated, out-of-nowhere confrontations—when business-as-usual has a monkey-wrench thrown into its smoothly functioning machinery. That is Veca's specialty. Worming its way into the chinks in the armor, the gaps in the system, and the cracks in the pavement, his densely detailed works invite viewers of all shapes and stripes to dive into his world of worlds-within-worlds, where the imagination runs wild and every element is energized by an ethos of freewheeling inclusivity, engaging playfulness, come-one, come-all accessibility, user-friendly gregariousness, and democratic—even anarchistic—liveliness.

There's something about Veca's art that makes you want to talk about it—to tell others about its pleasures and to point out discoveries that they might have missed. Nothing if not a conversation-starter, his cartoon abstractions and riffs on standardized figures are all about social interaction. Rather than taking us inside our own heads—or into

that of the artist—they compel us to come out of our shells and discuss, in public, what we see, feel, and think. You don't even have to like Veca's punchy pictures to do that. Conflict and contradiction are built into his works, all of which make room for disagreement and other forms of civilized discord. After all, an art that springs from the cracks in the sidewalk and the glitches in various well-oiled systems cannot possibly want to settle into any kind of authoritarian homogeneity, singularity of purpose, or uniformity of interpretation. The whole point is to make room for conflict, for rough edges, for loose ends, for ongoing interaction, for ever-changing understanding, and for playful re-visioning. That is what civilization has been about since its beginning. In Veca's hands, complexity and conflict make for works that invite—and reward—second looks, as well as thirds, fourths, and so on.

Put bluntly, Veca's paintings are raucous disruptions of corporate culture's attempt to make us behave like Pavlov's dog—reacting, automatically and without reflection, to pre-programmed stimuli. To transform kneejerk *reactions* into more complex *responses*, Veca starts with familiar trademarks, famous logos, ubiquitous symbols, and iconic cartoon characters, as well as with anonymous signs from around the neighborhood. Only a split-second or so is required for viewers to recognize Mickey Mouse from Disneyland, Charley the Tuna from Chicken of the Sea, the black bear from the flag of California, the presidential seal from the United States government, and the Mad Hatter from *Alice in Wonderland* as well as the trademarked names of Everlast boxing supplies, Marshall audio equipment, Nike sneakers, Apple computers, Warhol's dollar-sign paintings, and a homemade sign advertising breakfast burritos. Then, just as quickly, you notice that the trademarks and logos have been pirated. You don't need to be a copyright attorney or intellectual property lawyer to understand that Veca's versions of such corporate symbols are neither official nor sanctioned by the companies whose symbols they mimic. And that's when things take a turn for the weird.

Unlike most unlicensed riffs off of readily recognized brands, Veca's devilishly dense images never try to pass themselves off as the real thing. Neither a counterfeiter nor a deceiver, his aim, as an artist, is a lot more ambitious than profitable imitation. At the same time, his wicked images distinguish themselves from other forms of aesthetic

sabotage: Veca's, perverse pictures of animated blobs, lumps, and links, which sometimes look scatological and at others like bowls full of saucy spaghetti, do not play the blame game, point fingers at evil corporations, or pretend that he, as the artist, knows all the answers. On the contrary, his terrifically ambiguous forms and figures draw our imaginations into action, compelling viewers to interpret his slippery imagery howsoever we see fit. Veca's indeterminate works transform our over-exposure to the ubiquitous signs and symbols of modern life the possibility of seeing something new. That is what screamingly unique works of art do: Impossible to make sense of quickly, they make us make time for curiosity—not to mention contemplation and all the doubts that go along with self-reflection.

Think of Veca's crisp, vivid images as if they depict both the labels that wrap cans of soup and the soup contained in the cans: the tangles of noodles swimming in the broth of chicken noodle soup; the lusciously plump beans that make bean with bacon so hearty; the mishmash of vegetables, meat, and pasta in aromatic minestrone; the mushy loveliness of cream of mushroom; the soothing smoothness of tomato; and the tangy exoticism of pepper pot, a tripe-based dish introduced to Colonial Americans by African and Caribbean slaves at the time of the Revolutionary War. Also think of the canvases and panels the Abstract Expressionists might have described as having 'juice.' These include Jackson Pollock's whiplash drips, Willem DeKooning's vigorous stabs and smears of wet-on-wet paint, Mark Rothko's expanding and contracting fields of humming color, and Lee Krasner's high-keyed collisions of charged gestures, gritty textures, and dissonant tints. Veca's radically inclusive paintings, drawings, murals, and installations bring what Warhol stepped away from back into the picture. Viewers are the big winners. His labyrinthine images treat us to a contemporary rendition of primal stew. Burbbling up from its depths is life in all its confusing, chaotic complexity: Comic and tragic, hilarious and heart breaking, Veca's art makes room for the mundane and the sublime. Juicy and soupy, it is well worth getting lost in.