

Chicago Contemporary Art Seminar

Gulsah Mursaloglu interviews Rebecca Shore
April 2014 Interview

Gulsah Mursaloglu: When did silhouettes first enter into your work?

Rebecca Shore: In 2008, but initially the silhouettes were of invented forms, not found. By 2009 I was starting to use found shapes from my own photos, from artwork, and from catalogues and advertising.

GM: While looking at your silhouette work I feel as if I'm a kid looking at a box full of treasures in front of me. It is very exciting to go into the paintings and try to discover the silhouettes and what they are representing; finding a pair of sunglasses right next to an exclamation point or discovering a spoon in the corner of a painting. How do you decide on which silhouettes to combine while working on a painting? What is usually the departure point for you?

RS: It always took a lot of moving the silhouette shapes around, and often replacing them with other choices before I would settle on an arrangement. I made the shapes on tracing paper, cut them out, and moved them around as a way to plan the paintings. This allowed maximum flexibility. I made hundreds of shapes, many of which I did not get to use (yet). I may have thought of this process from the years when I made quilts and worked in the same way.

I like to imagine what it would be like to live in another time or place, and these paintings let me do that. They also solve the problem of loving objects but not wanting to collect them. I can collect them and arrange them in my paintings.

GM: Silhouettes are often used as a way of abstracting the actual object/figure. They can be viewed as symbols or metaphors for other things. How do you think about them? What is your specific relationship with the silhouettes?

RS: I don't think of them as symbols in a generalized or universal sense. They are representations of things that I have encountered in a variety of ways: daily life, childhood, family history, art history, and popular culture. I usually have a specific association. Some examples are: a cat in a child's drawing that my sister showed me; a wedge shoe that I saw in the New York Times; the shape of Jan's hair in an episode of The Office; a part of the robe of the Madonna in a painting by Sassetta, and a Chippendale drawer pull.

But I realize that my own experience of the shapes can be very different from the experiences of others. I have the key to what the shape is whereas others may be pondering and guessing its identity. By removing the interior visual information to make

it into a silhouette, I make the object's identity ambiguous. The viewer can then speculate as to what the shapes are and what the relationships between them might be.

GM: Silhouettes in your painting come as very specific shapes, but they also have very specific color choices. It often strikes me as though there is a color-coding system behind them. How do you decide on your color choices while working with the silhouettes?

RS: The colors often took many tries, and very slight adjustments to work out. I didn't have a formula, and I was endlessly humbled and surprised by what I discovered. Interestingly the original color of the object seldom ends up working in the painting. The challenge was to make the painting work as a whole at the same time as having the relationship be right between each shape and its color. I don't think that I employ any color coding system.

GM: While composing/arranging the pieces do you think of them as systems or structures or do you think of them more in terms of the narrative content?

RS: I think of them as collections or arrangements of things that are part of my life, and of others' lives individually, but also representative of different cultures and times. There are a few paintings that have many human figures that work more as narratives, but that has not been my first interest.