

Metamodernism

& Metamodern Artworks

Much can be written about metamodern art, but what's a better way to explain such a complex concept than by showing pictures of metamodern art accompanied by a short analysis relating them to metamodernism? This essay is exactly that; an overview of some metamodern artworks by different contemporary artists, with an explanation why this art is considered metamodern. Because I'm a painter myself I will mostly focus on paintings.

One artist that's presented by Vermeulen en van den Akker as one of the examples of metamodernism, is Glen Rubsamen. Rubsamen (1957) is an American visual artist and writer who lives in Los Angeles, California and Dusseldorf. He is primarily working with painting and photography. His work is characterized by an interest in situations in nature of great dramatic intensity in the Romantic tradition, like sunrises and sunsets or images of the apocalypse and exuberant vegetation.



Glen Rubsamen, *Quasi Objects*, 2012



The Night Shade, 2014

Through daring combinations of different perspectives and intense foreshortening of the objects and trees, he shows an uninhabited and almost aggressive world where an assaulted nature makes us think of the devastating after-effects of some environmental catastrophe. These characteristics, combined with the absence of a human presence, create an atmosphere charged with austere quietness and spirituality.

Adam Miller (1979) and Martin Wittfooth (1981), both also American painters and both based in New York, have begun working with entirely new pictorial mythologies.



Adam Miller, *Gathering Manna*, 2012



Martin Wittfooth, *Stilts*, 2014

Miller and Wittfooth both employ traditional mythic iconography to frame their critique on the ecological crisis. Wittfooth explores disquieting themes of industry and nature, unhinged evolution, the clash of old ideologies with modern fears and the ever growing shadow of the human footprint on this earth. These themes are set in atmospheric landscapes and realised through a combination of symbolism, juxtaposition of visual narratives and the displacement of expected realities. Miller explores the intersection between mythology, ecology and humanism. His paintings are inspired by Baroque and take

a polytheistic approach to contemporary folklore, questions of progress and the experience of human narrative in the face of technological change and the struggle to find meaning in a world poised between expansion and decay.

For these artists symbols and the rigors of traditional craft become strategies of aesthetic rebuke and rebellion against postmodern kitsch and commodity¹. Their work exudes an ideological line of thought which is in direct connection with the metamodern paradigm.

One of my favourite Dutch artists is Koen Vermeule (1965). I consider his work as metamodern, because his work touches upon some key elements of New Romanticism.

Vermeule paints high-contrast landscapes; empty, Dutch landscapes. He also depicts people, sometimes together, but more often alone. Most of the time these figures convey a contemporary type of loneliness while residing in an indefinable, yet recognizable environment.



Koen Vermeule, *Stomping Ground*, 2017

Vermeule prefers extraordinary weather conditions, such as the moment the sun has reached its zenith and shines most intensely, or the moment right before it sets and casts long

shadows. But also the moment just after the rain has stopped, when the streets are still wet and people are just starting to move on. For the viewer his paintings seem to be able to make time stand still for a little while. His work invites for reflection and contemplation on mostly mundane situations in contemporary life.

Another artist that's one of the great examples in Vermeulen en van den Akker's essay, is David Thorpe. He was born in 1972 in London, but is now based in Germany. Thorpe makes installations, sculptures, collages, paintings and drawings in which he depicts alternative communities. This tradition has won on popularity the last decade, with Rob Voerman, Charles Avery and Bettina Krieg as other important interpreters. Thorpe's communities are, as the artist has repeatedly indicated, utopias.



David Thorpe, *The Language of the Cosmos*, 2010

Some works portray sustainable technological progress, like the many collages of futuristic buildings made from steel, glass, sand and wood. In other works the harmonious interface with nature becomes the central subject.

However, Thorpe is not merely naïve in his sincere longing to create utopias. His work can also be perceived as a commentary on the utopian project itself. His attractive worlds are all composed of references to failed attempts to realize utopias. Almost all Thorpe's utopias are also uninhabited, as if people would disturb the peace.



David Thorpe, *Good people*, 2002

Thorpe's longing for sincerity is not at all devoid of irony. He longs for another, utopian society, but at the same time he understands that this kind of longing will never (and probably should never) be granted. He knows his history, he knows where communism and fascism have led to in the past and therefore his naivety is *informed* naivety². Thorpe's informed

naivety is just one of the many expressions of the performative sincerity in contemporary art. Elsewhere we can see it reflected in the revaluation of craftsmanship and sustainability. Artists seem to seize every opportunity to provide a thoroughly deconstructed world with new meaning, no matter how volatile, vague or unreal that may be.

Annabel Daou's video installation *Which Side Are You On?* (2012) seems to get the current *zeitgeist* quite right.



Annabel Daou, *Which Side Are You On?* 2012

It consists of an old television, a still image, a tape recording of the artist asking the titular question, “*Which side are you on?*”-and a recording of people’s answers to that question. That’s it. The television is old, very old. Not even outdated but antique. It shows a still image of something that reminds us of a confession screen.

If you listen closely, you hear a tape recording. It’s a recording of the artist asking various people the question “*Which side are you on?*” along with the answers people have given. Some people take the question very seriously, giving answers such as “*the good side,*” “*the right side,*” “*the side of humanity,*” “*the side of the 99 percent,*” and so on. Others answer with a joke: “*my side,*” “*the dark side*” and “*the sunny side.*” But in every answer you hear doubt in their voices, uncertainty. The question is quite straightforward. So why is it so difficult to give an answer?

With this work Daou draws attention to the double-bind that arises when we are forced to choose a side, or make a choice, between different positions, while knowing that one position can’t be chosen with absolute certainty over all other positions³. And this double-bind is characteristic of our current times.

It’s also significant that Daou’s medium is an old television. Nowadays, the need to choose a position and to define a position goes hand in hand with the continuous flow of information from the internet. On the internet there’re always many, and often conflicting, sources of information that degrades any well-informed opinion to an *educated guess*. Everybody knows that certain things need to be changed; the system, capitalism, democracy, we ourselves. Only nobody seems to know *what* exactly needs to be changed. And especially how we can make this change happen.

Maike Schoorel (1973) is a Dutch artist, currently living in the Netherlands. I believe her work is metamodern. In her paintings she uses classical Dutch themes, such as the group portrait, beach scenes and still life. At first glance, these representations are not recognized in such a way, because they are painted extremely minimal.



Maike Schoorel, *The Picnic*, 2004

Her work takes a great appeal on your viewing powers. If you look closely, you can see that the seemingly monochrome surface is actually made up by painted layers; creamy or thin, white or intense black. If you'll look longer, you'll discover shapes, figures or even a performance. Her subjects can mostly be traced back to classical painting genres, but they also have a distinctly contemporary character. She uses home-made snapshots, photos from her family album or stored memories and dreams as a starting point.

Painted extremely sparingly, the images bring about an interval between seeing and understanding, in which the imagination of the viewer is stimulated.

In an image culture that's dictated by an abundance of rapidly successive stimuli, Schoorel occupies an unique place with her paintings. Seemingly empty, the canvases delay and require a conscious observation of the viewer. With her work she *forces* the viewer to standstill and concentrate.

Conclusion

This list with examples of metamodern art(ists) could be much longer, if I would've had more time for my thesis. However limited it may be, what this list makes clear is that metamodernism is reflected in contemporary art practices.

Artists have the strength and the critical ability to reflect on contemporary society. Therefore art has, many times before, been able to sense social changes early in the process. Many great ideas started with an artistic tendency. This time it is no different.

Bibliography

¹ Vermeulen, T. & Akker, van den R. (2010). Notes on metamodernism. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2. Doi: 10.3402/jac.v2i0.567

² Vermeulen, T.J.V & Akker, R van den (2014). Art Criticism and Metamodernism. *Artpulse*, 19, 3 (22-27). Obtained from: <http://artpulsemagazine.com/art-criticism-and-metamodernism>

³ Vermeulen, T.J.V (2012). Which Side are you on? Obtained from: <http://www.metamodernism.com/2012/06/19/which-side-are-you-on/>