

Max Mason: Baseball Catalog Essay

I confess up front that I have been a Max Mason fan for a very long time. The fact that I am also a hardcore baseball fan may help you to understand how I first became acquainted with the artist, but it does not explain why I believe that he is one of America's best painters. In fact, the narrative component of his work is but one element of its appeal. The sustaining power of his work is in the end about talent, a gift that few possess and even fewer are capable of exploiting. There is a reason why painting has for hundreds of years been the most revered of the visual arts – it is extremely difficult to master. The painting process has been compared to a battle of wits between the medium and the artist and it is a struggle that Max Mason has not only won but has done so decisively. He is a master technician in addition to being enormously creative and it is this combination of talents that has made him so very successful and why I believe that he ranks among the very elite practitioners of the painting art.

Like many others, I have been troubled in recent years by the often repeated comment that painting is either dead or on its death bed. The argument states that all that can be said in paint has already been said. One need only review the last few major museum annuals to realize that in the "official" art world, paint on canvas has been deemed anachronistic. It supposedly has been supplanted by digital technology or Duchampian object making or even room installations commenting upon some sociological ill. Max Mason's work causes us to realize that painting continues to be relevant and that narrative painting, in particular, remains at the core of American art. In fact it is Max Mason who causes us to recall why it is that we fell in love with painting to begin with.

What I have always appreciated in Max's work is the boldness of his application of the medium. To use a baseball reference, "he goes right after the hitter and doesn't back down." Translation: he's not afraid to take chances. This is particularly true of his use of color or it's intensity. He'll use a heavy application of paint to enrich the surface even in situations where it may be somewhat risky. He's willing to explore possibilities and simply to be daring. As Rauschenberg once said, "There are far more interesting things than being right." So it is that Max Mason will attempt unusual compositions or to place the viewer in an illogical vantage point. In fact it is the unusual viewpoint that has become a key to the magic of the work. Long before ESPN placed cameras on catcher's helmets or on pitching rubbers, Max was offering visual perspectives of the grand old game which had not previously been accomplished.

And while I associate Max Mason with baseball imagery, his work certainly moves beyond that subject into landscape and still life. But no matter the subject or theme, what makes the work sing is his ability to work with surface and light. When you think about it, the truly great artists through time have taken the commonest of subjects and converted them into objects of great aesthetic worth through their knowledge of color, light and form. Mason does this with boxes on a table or runners on the bases. His understanding of his craft and his total immersion into the formal elements has been the basis of his consistency as an artist. Cezanne knew that there were no shortcuts to success, only hard work and continual exploration. Max Mason also knows this.

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