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Why Size Matters in New Art Exhibits

By Georgette Gouveia



Justin Allen's 6-inch "Red Grill" featured in *Size Matters: XS,* at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill, through Nov. 10.

When it comes to new art exhibits in the Hudson Valley, size matters. That's the title of a new show opening Sunday at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill that features 31 plus-size paintings - at least one dimension of each is 6 feet - by the likes of Janis Avotins, Jonathan Meese and Neo Rauch.

"Size Matters: XXL - recent large-scale paintings" complements "Size Matters: XS - recent small-scale paintings," in which the 35 works range from about the size of a business card to 24 square inches.

Scale is also on the minds of the curators at Purchase College's Neuberger Museum of Art, where a new show of Richard Pettibone's miniature copies of abstract paintings in the collection has just opened.

"Miniaturizing Modernism: Richard Pettibone Paints the Neuberger's Rickey Collection" contains prints and other works that George and Edith Rickey donated to the museum, along with the tiny "mementos" - as Edith Rickey called them - that Pettibone created from photographs.

Size plays a role, too, in a couple of long-standing traditions on the other side of the Hudson.

Through Sept. 23, Edward Hopper House Art Center in Nyack presents its 14th annual "Small Matters of Great Importance" exhibit, a national juried show in which none of the more than 50 works in various media is bigger than a ruler in any dimension. This will be followed Nov. 14 by "The 32nd Annual Miniature and Dollhouse Show, Faery Tales and Tiny Treasures" at the Historical Society of Rockland County in New City. Past exhibits have featured everything from little houses and quilts to tiny Western towns. This year, the historical society plans to explore the magic of the miniscule. For the curators of these exhibits, size isn't a gimmick. It is key to a work's essence. "The size of a painting is something that plays out in the history of art," says Paul Brewer, executive director of the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art. "Religious icons and illuminated manuscripts were small works for devotional purposes. Large murals and frescoes with mythic, narrative scenes were capable of communicating with the public from a distance."

Whether a work was large or small often depended on the function of the artist's commission. Today, it may depend on how it fits an artist's style and intentions. Brewer says that Jonathan Meese's expansive "Fort Knox" (2005-06) - a mixed-media work measuring 144 by 236 inches - and Neo Rauch's allegorical 2001 oil painting "Einfall" (83 by 118 inches) couldn't be contained by small canvases.

Conversely, he adds, Justin Allen's "Red Grill" (2003-05) and "Ice Fire Hydrant" (2006-07) - oil-on-masonite works that are less than 12 inches - have an intense photo-realism that would be too laborious to create on a large scale.

Not that small works aren't labor-intensive, too, he says: "I think different skills come into play."

Like a miner, the miniaturist bores in, while the muralist, like a fisherman, casts a wide net. This, some curators say, is more a question of temperament than talent. "It's a difference of personality," says Delia Tolz, curator of exhibits at the Historical Society of Rockland County.

But Tracy Fitzpatrick, who curated the Pettibone show with the students in her Introduction to Museum Studies seminar last spring, says the size of a work is a measure of both the artist's skill and taste.

It's also about locality. Pettibone - who got his start making teeny versions of Andy Warhol's Campbell Soup cans - was commissioned by the Rickeys in 1973 to create souvenirs of their collection, which they hung in the "Pettibone Parlor" of their home. The small matters in the Hopper House's "Small Matters of Great Importance" show suit the intimacy of the Victorian structure, the childhood home of painter Edward Hopper. "Manageability" is a word that echoes in curators' conversations about small works. "Houses are huge. You can't take them in all at once," Tolz says. "But a miniature house is very approachable."

When it comes to size in art - as in fashion - it's hard to generalize. While Leontine Temsky, a founding member of Hopper House, says there has been a trend toward massive works that have museums building extensions, HVCCA's Brewer says that the center's large-scale exhibit resulted from co-founder Marc Straus' opposite observation:

"What he was seeing was a lot of artists moving away from grand-scale gestures to a more intimate pose. Small works, because they are so small, reflect a more meditative approach to the picture plane."

Certainly, the center's factory-like dimensions also play a part in mounting a large-scale show.

"One of the things we were looking to do ... was to take up the entire visual field," Brewer says.

What threads these exhibits -and makes them particularly intriguing - is the role that size plays in perspective.

Fitzpatrick says the Pettibone show is arranged "so people can ... compare what he did and the artists of the corresponding originals did."

That Pettibone's paintings were made from photos - and are, therefore, copies of copies - raises questions about how reproductions affect our sense of size.

"There are two ways they skew art," Fitzpatrick says. "One is scale. You look at a slide, and you don't know how big or small a work is. The other is texture."

Nothing surprises, however, quite like encountering an iconic work that you've known first from reproductions and discovering its titanic size is only metaphoric.

Temsky experienced that surprise with Salvador Dali's "The Persistence of Memory" (1931), the Surrealistic landscape of melting watches, on view at The Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. It is 9.4-by-13 inches.

"It's tiny, and it was hard to realize that," she says.

For Tolz and Brewer, it was the "Mona Lisa" (1503-07), which is 30-by-21 inches. "I thought, 'Oh my God, it's small,'" Tolz says of the Leonardo da Vinci masterwork, which hangs behind a glass and rope in Paris' Musee du Louvre.

"Scale," Brewer adds, "is a context. When you remove a painting from its context, and it gets turned into a slide or a book, it changes your experience."