

Surface Event: the mimetic art of Jason Thompson

by Virginia Maksymowicz

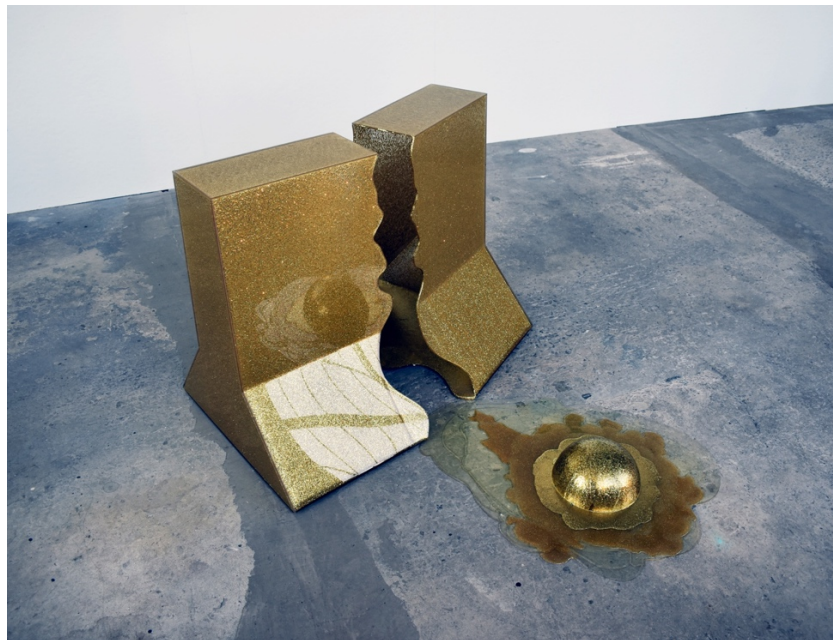
Nature creates similarities. One need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man's. His gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else. Perhaps there is none of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role.
– Walter Benjamin ¹

Mimesis, both as a word and as a concept, traces its lineage to ancient Greece and the philosophers Plato and Aristotle, who wrestled with distinctions between rhetoric and truth, representation and reality, art and life. Contemporary theorists such as Roland Barthes, Theodor Adorno, René Girard, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, among others, have expanded the discourse in ways that have sent many of us spiraling down a poststructuralist rabbit hole.

On the contrary, Michelle Puetz, Curator at the Chicago Film Archives, has attempted to disentangle the dialectic and bring it back to Benjamin's observation. "Mimesis," she wrote, "resists theory and constructs a world of illusion, appearances, aesthetics, and images in which existing worlds are appropriated, changed, and re-interpreted." ²

When understood in this way, Jason Thompson is a mimetic master. Whether through painting, sculpture, video or performance, he magically turns perception upside-down and inside-out. Through manipulation of surface, form and space, everyday objects become distorted and skewed. They, indeed, "behave like something else." Our comprehension of the existing world is challenged and we find ourselves tossed through the looking glass.

Now, on the other side of that mirror, we are confronted by what seems to be a concrete barrier but we are confounded by contradiction.



Barrier, acrylic, epoxy, glitter, stainless steel; 48"x48"x60"; 2018

¹ Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," written 1933, published in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott, New York, 1978, p. 334.

² Michelle Puetz, Ph.D., "Theories of Media: Keywords Glossary," University of Chicago, 2002, retrieved April 29, 2019
<<https://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/mimesis.htm>>

We are not blocked from passage. The obstruction doesn't obstruct; it is cracked open. We could squeeze through if we tried. It looks fragile (the negative space is almost figurative). If we are not careful, we might shatter it. Nonetheless its sheen attracts us. But wait. Is it not a barrier but instead a shell? Is that a yellow-gold egg yolk sunny side up oozing out into a puddle on the floor? Would we want to step in it? Over it? It is so enticing with its form reflected in the surface of the barrier-shell. Is it sticky? Are we allowed to touch it? Do we *want* to touch it? Will we be asked to put Humpty-Dumpty together again?

Turn around and we see a *Broken Obelisk*.



Broken Obelisk, wood, steel, epoxy, gold leaf, flocking, paint; 12"x12"x42"; 2018

What is this? Architecture? A corkscrew? Are we looking at a riff on Barnett Newman's rusted, Corten steel piece by the same name (1963-69) or perhaps a vintage Moroccan floor lamp (which is what a what a Google reverse image search returned)? It is orange, with yellow squiggles on it. It looks somewhat functional with a metal auger and bent-finger handle on top. The hybrid form brings to mind the unsettling "pre-verbal" sculptures of contemporary artist Jeanne Jaffe, who describes her work as "a bridge between early somatic sensations and memories, and the symbolic order of language."³

And then we bump into a dragon's tooth . . . no, not a molar from some sort of mythical being. And, no, not one of those "square-pyramidal fortifications of reinforced concrete first used during the Second World War to impede the movement of tanks and mechanized infantry."⁴ The form is decidedly unlike Mario Merz's bunker-inspired, formalist "igloos." Instead, Thompson's *Dragonstooth* mesmerizes us not with regimentation and stark grayness, but with a glittery surface and a rebar loop. It's as if the concrete blocks routinely dropped around Sicily's Mt. Aetna in defence of volcanic eruptions had first been dipped into a lava of molten gold.

³ Leeway Foundation Awards 1999 <https://www.leeway.org/grantees/jeanne_jaffe_laa_99/>, retrieved June 18, 2019.

⁴ World War II Heritage <<http://www.worldwar2heritage.com/en/page/9069/26/Dragons-teeth-New-Abeeel>>. retrieved June 18, 2019.



Dragonstooth, wood, gold leaf, rear, epoxy, glitter; 36"x36"x42"; 2017

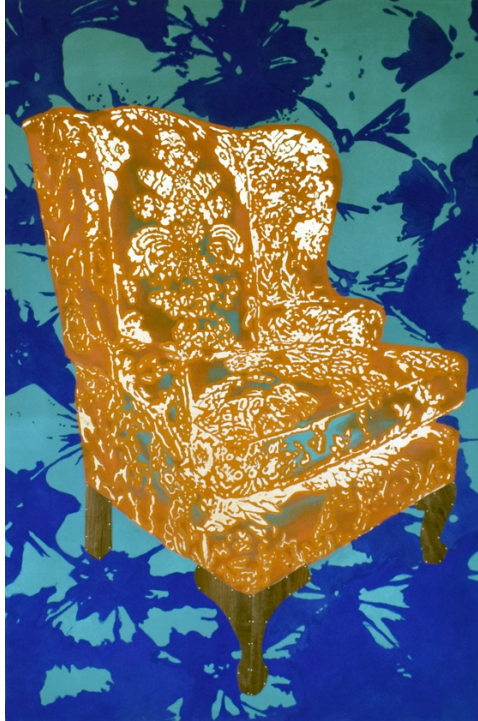
What exactly are we seeing? Light? (Yes, of course . . . but not one of James Turrell's illusions purposely devoid of material substance.) Or are we seeing another kind of construct, a *Dark Construct*, dangling overhead, poking through the panels of a drop ceiling?



Dark Construct 2 (Stalactite), aluminum, protective coating 4'x 2' x 2, 2014

In a sense, Thompson's mimetic approach employs a type of reverse camouflage. While the normal visual aspect of an object is altered, it is not done in a way that causes it to become invisibly absorbed into the background. On the contrary, it becomes hyper-visible, but in a manner that causes the object's ordinary function to disappear.

Whether it's a paper tire—not "tiger"—(*M/T Tire*), or a "more is more" painting of an orange-patterned armchair hovering in front of Warholesque, blue-flowered wallpaper (*Chair*)



Chair, flocking, vinyl flooring, gold leaf, paint; 48"x60"; 2018

or a multicolored wooden carpet that spreads horizontally like butterfly wings (*Rug*) . . . the artist takes us for a spin (maybe in a hot rod fitted with those MT racing tires?).

We circle around and around, looking up, looking down, blinking our eyes, alternating between belief and disbelief.



Orbits, rotating platform with projected video element in center, zebra wood and aluminum; 12'; 2015

While he doesn't actually push us down a rabbit hole, Jason Thompson makes sure we all come away feeling a little bit dizzy.

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