Honors Thesis Proposal

for

Threads of Identity: Marisol's Exploration of Self

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Topic Summary:

Marisol Escobar is a Venezuelan American artist who has been active since her first exhibition at The Leo Castelli Gallery in New York City in 1957.1 Preferring to go by only her first name, Marisol's primary repertoire consists of sculptural works. Arguably, the height of her popularity occurred in the 1950s and 1960s when she frequently exhibited with the Pop Art greats, including Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Tom Wesselmann.2 After the 1980s, however, Marisol withdrew from the public spotlight. The resulting decrease of public interest led to a gap in scholarly study, particularly in the 1990s. She is, therefore, understudied in the broad scheme of contemporary art history, despite having a wide influence on its development. It can also be argued that the content and style of Marisol's work differed greatly from that of Warhol or Lichtenstein, as the majority of her work in the '50s and '60s included self-portraiture. This aspect of self-reference in service to the exploration of self-identity makes Marisol's works timeless, while also placing her outside of any Pop art categorization. Therefore, I will discuss Marisol's body of work, iconography, and style as it pertains to her self-portraiture in the past three decades in order to trace her influence on Postmodern art, which focuses on multiculturalism, identity, and critique of social and cultural roles.

Literature Review:

I have researched books, articles, and media relating to Marisol. Many newspapers, magazines, and journal articles dating from the 1950s to the 1980s mention Marisol. Coverage

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2 Ibid.
on her after the 1980s seems to be sporadic, in part due to her solitary nature—although there have been recent attempts at creating retrospective texts and exhibitions. Not including biographic encyclopedias and brief exhibition reviews, in the over 70 sources that I have researched it seems serious scholarly discussion on Marisol was less active in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This is in spite of the fact that Marisol was the sole feature of a Neuberger Museum of Art exhibition in 2001 and later collaborated with the Neuhoff Edelman Gallery in New York City in 2008 to create a retrospective exhibition.\textsuperscript{3} The popular 2011 exhibition \textit{Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists, 1958-1968} also featured one of her most famous works, the equestrian sculpture of 1963 \textit{John Wayne}.\textsuperscript{4} The reason for the sporadic and outdated nature of the literature on her recent work—despite her presence in contemporary exhibitions—can be interpreted in light of her resistance to fame and her awkward position in the history of art. Much of the material written on her, even today, appears to focus on her more popular work, and contemporary research on her seems to hold onto clichés of Modernist and formalist art history, which are outdated by today’s standards. This fact is especially glaring when considering her significant contributions to the visual language used for self-representation in Postmodern art. This is why any detailed discussion of her more contemporary work is important.

Marisol is also increasing in popularity. Proof of her recent rise in relevancy includes a handful of exhibitions featuring her work in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, such as the all-important Neuhoff Edelman Gallery and Neuberger Museum of Art retrospectives.\textsuperscript{5} This trend appears to be continuing, as a forthcoming retrospective is slated for the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art in Tennessee in the spring of 2014 according to their website, http://brooksmuseum.org. The

\textsuperscript{5} Carol Diehl, “Eye of the Heart,” 158; Nancy Grove, “Marisol,” 74.
museum hopes it to be a momentous occasion that will re-establish her recognition as a dominant post-World War II artistic force in America.

It seems that late in life Marisol has begun to receive the recognition that she deserves—whether or not she wants it. The slow buildup of her public interest during the beginning of the 21st century, as seen in an increase of public exhibition of her works, is quickly gaining momentum. Therefore, any research relating to Marisol is both timely and beneficial to the study of art. Furthermore, the navigation of Postmodern issues like multiculturalism, identity, and gender have re-defined the contemporary discussion of art and culture, and Marisol’s artwork should receive a similar updated approach of understanding.

Research Question:

Marisol holds a curious position in art history, stranded between the formalism of the ’50s and ’60s male dominant Pop movement and the conceptual experimentation and radicalism of the 1970s. Never truly fitting into either period, she is considered to be simultaneously both obscure and famous, serving either role at different times in her career. It is important to note, however, that she “didn’t have any difficulty” in pursuing a career as a female artist, and instead felt encouraged by her male peers early on.6 Due to her wish for solitude and her odd placement in the art history storyline, Marisol never quite reached the timeless fame of Andy Warhol nor ever felt particularly prosecuted for being a female artist.7

Due to these bizarre conditions, Marisol is usually inconsequentially placed in a closing paragraph on Pop art in an art survey textbook, right before the discussion of “Minimal

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7 Ibid.
Sculpture” or “Minimalism.” Both Wayne Craven and Sam Hunter, the authority on 20th century art for Milton Wolf Brown’s 1979 American Art, textually placed Marisol in such a manner.\(^8\) In an attempt to take her differences from Pop art into consideration, H.H. Amason and Elizabeth C. Mansfield’s History of Modern Art more accurately places Marisol in the final paragraphs of their “Just Look at the Surface” section alongside the discussion of Richard Lindner and Sister Corita, just after discussion of Robert Indiana.\(^9\) Her placement or inclusion in art history is treated in a similar manner to her placement in art historical texts; grouping her chronologically and geographically with the Pop art movement seems correct, but she is more properly grouped in discussions including Kiki Smith or Jeff Koons.

Known more popularly as a mysterious introverted figure than a corporal entity, Marisol is unique in the sense that she has stayed a steady course and kept to an overall artistic vision that consistently expresses her worldview, despite what little she has decided about herself and her identity.\(^10\) Marisol might agree or disagree, but the fact is that she has rarely made grand, sweeping claims or statements in public. Therefore, to observers, she has stayed temperamentally and conceptually stable (despite contradictions presented in interviews, which I will address in my thesis). Marisol has kept her work interesting by staying within defined boundaries of human interest while excluding the gore, hyper-sexuality, or obvious violence that many of her peers used for shock value or social commentary. Her quiet yet intense observation pinpoints the overriding human elements in her subjects and defines it in understandable terms, i.e. visual culture, while avoiding shocking content for its lack of inherent wit. Through my own


careful discussion of this historical context and her biography, I plan to establish a firm argument for Marisol’s development outside of the art of the 1950s and 1960s and to instead place her with global conceptual artists, which is where she belonged long before the movement had gained its momentum in the 1970s.

From my research in my Reading 1 semester I have identified the following aspects of Marisol’s work as the most important in expressing her identity and relating to her perspective: significance of materials, critique of political subjects, use of juxtaposition, application of absurdism, and self-referential portraiture. Truly, they are tools through which she understands a fractured—yet simultaneous—human reality awash with incongruencies. Each mode is used in service of her identity as an artist.

To give a more complete understanding of the nature and scope of my thesis, I will briefly explain some of the key points I will cover on the topic of her use of contrasting elements. Marisol utilized the “push and pull” that she learned from Hans Hoffman in her sculpture by contrasting smooth, two-dimensional formal elements with large blocks of unhewn wood. 11 I will go on to prove that this shows her impulses for abstraction and idealism while also expressing her need for elements that are untouched, both conceptually and literally, by the human hand. By expressing realism (as in, real wood), she is simultaneously denying direct physical representation. Furthermore, this juxtaposition creates uneasiness in the viewer, bringing the viewer into direct confrontation with the sculpture. It is to be understood that—at least early in her career—this aspect of passive aggression toward the viewer was unintentional and subconscious, and as she told Cindy Nemser in the 1970s, “[my sculpture in the ‘60s] were very strong put-downs. I used to get scared of my own work sometimes, working late at night.”12

12 Nemser, Art Talk, 164.
However, my ultimate goal will be to examine Marisol’s work through a critical Postmodern lens in order to uncover her influences on contemporary art and its exploration of identity. I will evaluate the importance of Marisol’s work and its place in history and uncover any influences I am able to discover during the schedule of this project. I will achieve this through the logical construction of an argument based on context, analysis of primary sources, and personal conclusions.

Goals and Methodologies:

In order to supplement the traditional research of both printed and electronic primary sources, articles, books, and critical opinion and review, I plan to see Marisol’s works in person. It is unlikely with my funding and timeline that I will be able to visit New York to see the largest body of her work in the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. As an alternative, I am planning a short trip to Washington D.C. in mid-December in order to see works housed at the National Gallery of Art, Art Museum of the Americas, and a transcript of an interview in the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art. I am particularly interested in this interview transcript as I had to request written permission from both of the interviewees, Marisol and fellow New York City artist Red Grooms. I am still awaiting reply after sending my requests in October but hope to receive permission.

Therefore I will build a contextual narrative based on formal analysis, research, and understanding to explain the “who, what and why” of Marisol’s career as an artist in order to support my claim of her significance as a creator of self-portraits and self-identity.
Thesis Sections and Content:

Marisol’s works are easy to separate chronologically but not ideologically. While it is true that Marisol has entered various artistic phases, her signature style and methods of production have changed little in the last 30 or so years. Therefore, I will organize my thesis into the following chapters: Chapter one, personal life, early American career and fame; Chapter two, historical development of an artist’s presence in American art; Chapter three, subjects, iconography, style, and interpretation of her body of work; and finally Chapter four, Marisol’s relation to later self referential art and influence.

The first chapter will include Marisol’s biography. She had an early interest in drawing and painting, and followed up these interests by engaging in formal and independent study as a teenager.\textsuperscript{13} The fact that she came from a family that supported her artwork and had a father who supported her financially through her early career directly relates to her success later on. Marisol’s early influences, like American comic books and traditional European art methods, can be felt in her more mature work, like her “Self Portrait Looking at the Last Supper.”\textsuperscript{14} It can also be argued that her mixing of styles and content can be traced back to her family’s frequent moving when she was young as well as her multicultural background—being born in France to Venezuelan parents.\textsuperscript{15} The visual cues of Marisol’s navigation of her heritage and gender while living in America is an important framework through which to understand her art work.

The second chapter will explore the development of a native American tradition in art and how it influenced her perspective as an artist living in Los Angeles and, later, New York City. Here I will briefly discuss America’s artistic break with European tradition, ultimately

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
culminating in the Armory Show in 1913 and the development of the avant-garde after World
War I and World War II. After I have established the basis for an examination of American
artists and their visual representations of themselves in their work, I can connect Marisol to this
distinctly American style. Her exposure to early American furniture and artistic tradition in
Maine through William King truly changed her mode as both an artist and person, as at this point
in her career she stopped painting and began sculpting. This exposure came around the same
time she discovered pre-Colombian sculpture of Central and South America. It is, therefore,
from these two distinct traditions that Marisol was able to mold her sculptural style into
something more immediate and personal than her drawing.

The third chapter will contain analysis of specific works’ style and interpretation.
Tentatively, it will include the following subheadings: 1. Role of Materials and Mediums in
Expressing Meaning, 2. Political Critique and Subjects, 3. The Juxtaposition of Forces to Initiate
the Viewer, 4. Absurdism, Wit, and Passive Aggression, and finally 5. Artist as Model: Self
Analysis and Human Observation through Art. However, in order to stay focused on a specific
thesis, subheadings one through four will be written to support my later claims and analysis set
forth in subheading five, rather than stand as individual conclusions on Marisol’s work. I believe
that these chapters will properly cover the topic at hand, providing the “who, what and why” of
Marisol and her significance in art history.

After the discussion of Marisol’s development of identity, the artist throughout American
history in relation to Marisol’s development of identity, and a visual and contextual analysis of
her work, I will conclude my thesis by showing how she carried elements out of her ’60s
and ’70s self-referential sculpture to remain relevant to artistic study today due to her consistent

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16 Wayne Craven, *American Art History*, 446.
art philosophy—particularly in her contemporaneous works. This is ultimately how she can be tied to the visual language of Postmodernism and therefore takes into account her more recent work—which deserves a thorough examination.

Proposed Timeline and Expected Outcomes:

I am on course to complete this project in spring of 2013, congruent with my graduation. I have completed a large majority of my research of primary sources already, although I still have some research that is difficult to both navigate and to put a timeline on. It is very likely that in December I will be able to see works by Marisol in person in Washington, D.C. as well as an interview transcript located at the Archives of American Art. What I am most hopeful about is also the hardest detail to place on a timeline, which is the potential interview of the artist herself. I am still awaiting written acknowledgement of my request, and therefore whatever information I might glean from an interview with her might come too late in my writing semester to be applicable to my project—if the interview occurs at all.

With the completion of my proposal I will move on to forming a detailed outline of my topic, including specific details from the most relevant sources I have discovered in my Reading 1 semester—which I have organized using Zotero Reference Manager. From there, I plan to review my goals and the specifications for my thesis, including formatting and focus. Then, I will place my focus on the formal analysis of the pieces I have viewed in person and print. From that point forward, I plan to spend thirty minutes every day considering, revising, or working on a first draft for the critique of my advisory board members. In this manner, I will be on schedule for a properly formatted draft by March for my thesis formatting review and a well-written thesis
before my defense and submission for publication to the library in April 2013.
REFERENCES


BIBLIOGRAPHY


Goldberg, Jeff. “Pop Artist Marisol—20 Years After Her First Fame—Recalls Her Life and Loves.” *PEOPLE Magazine*, March 24, 1975.


