

# MODERN PAINTERS

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A couple of years ago, the Museum of Modern Art, New York published a catalogue of highlights from among the 4,000 or so objects in its design collection. In St. Paulia Antonelli, the curator of MoMA's design department, proudly boasts that "the Museum's authoritative curatorial choices of over nearly 75 years have done nothing less than establish modern design among the arts. It has taken Mercurio Mercier little more than a decade to do the same."

*Drum and Bass 2* (2002) is the 39-year-old Frenchman's homage to Piet Mondrian. It is a set of black Regupak shelves (only assembled) with a number of low-cost plastic objects placed on them. In these terms the work seems to have nothing to do with Mondrian's best-known paintings – the so-called black grid with their blacked-in primary colours and avoidance of any form of figurative. But the objects on Mercier's shelves are also sorted by colour – a group of red box files, a vibrant yellow work lamp and cables and a stack of bright blue storage trays. Surprisingly, the composition bears an uncanny, even eerily

resemblance to Mondrian's paintings. The principal differences between the two seem to be that for the Dutchman's essential line precision, Mercier has substituted machine-made objects, and whereas the Dutch artist sought to move away from figurative references, the young man has created a sculpture that is inherently figurative (perhaps as it is made of clearly identifiable consumer brands) and then explored the fact that anyone with a knowledge of twentieth-century art will have been conditioned to connect this arrangement with Mondrian. Mercier treats the surface like the high culture of equivalent of Piet's oil painting. And as a side effect he turns Mondrian into an endlessly reproducible formula (indeed, *Drum and Bass 2* is one of a series of such works) in a sense.

So, in its title implies, *Drum and Bass 2* is a recycled, renewed and updated version of one of Mondrian's design strategies. It's Mondrianism for a world of DIY experiences you could go to one, buy all the variously coloured parts, stick them on your wall and make a 'Drum and Bass' of your own. But it is also art for a world which responds like Mondrian's record players and filing cabinets with as much

enthusiasm as they do paintings, sculpture and any other form of modern art. It is no surprise when Mercier describes the work as an interpretation of the much discussed space 'between the museum and the experiential'. While MoMA was busy publishing their design catalogue, Mercier was producing *Good and Plenty After Rodchenko* (2003), one of a series of works that is quite obviously located between these two cultural poles. It consists of a frame of Good & Plenty fat-free licorice candy (artificially flavoured) arranged according to the design of the Russian artist's 'modern Spatial Construction No. 21' (1930-1). Where Rodchenko sought to avoid every trace of subjective authorship in his work, Mercier has a girly, visible contemporary consumer taste. At first glance it would appear that Mercier has subverted the concepts that he behind the predecessor's work as much as he possibly can (generally by interpreting an art created to respond to the Soviet factory with a production that looks like it came out of Warhol's Factory

or from a shop assistant with too much time on his hands). Yet far from betraying Rodchenko's principles, Mercier is being faithful to the spirit of the Russian's work. The latter's materials – plywood, cardboard, wooden slats and boards – were selected to reflect the materials of the newly industrialised world in which he lived (Rodchenko went on to develop a fascination with wood mills and the way they stacked their products); Mercier is simply following suit. Furthermore, in the case of the works after both Rodchenko and Mondrian, Mercier has approached formulae devised by artists who are commonly identified as the founders of Utopianist abstraction (in sculpture and painting respectively) and then brutally reintroduced their work to the realities of today's everyday life. As much as he is dragging supermarket goods into the museum, he is dragging art out of the museum and into the more popular culture of Kmart. Beneath the work's evident humour, important values are being put to the test. Mercier's *Good and Plenty* now belongs to JP Morgan Chase & Co, a \$1.1 trillion

financial services provider. Take out the cross in the middle and *Good and Plenty* is very similar in form to their logo. Perhaps, indeed, the artwork better describes a company that claims to be supporting millions of consumers around the world. Mercier is probably quite pleased about this; connections are essentially what his work (which includes a number of sculptural experiments with electric plugs and light fittings) is about. Indeed, quite often the links his work provokes the viewer to make can reach quite dizzying proportions (in *Drum and Bass 2*, for example, is Mercier's use of objects manufactured in China a reference to Mondrian's interest in Eastern mysticism? – according to the artist it is). And while his work raises myriad questions it is rarely absolutely clear about what answers it expects you to find. His most recent solo exhibition, which took place at Galerie Chez Valentin in October of last year, featured a belt-driven aluminium turntable and an untitled painting of what looked like a multi-faceted diamond or ruby. Mercier (who works across a bewildering array

of media) described the exhibition as a 'snapshot of where I'm at'. He had noticeably moved away from making art that is overly about art (as much as that is at all possible today). Instead he seemed to be moving towards an investigation of the nature of connectivity itself. The diamond painting is a complex collection of planes and patterns which forms an Escher-like maze of flattened space. The belt-drive system (in which a smaller wheel turns a larger wheel) articulates a system of dependence with a beautiful electric hum. On the dining table in Mercier's tiny Paris apartment (which houses a collection of twentieth-century designer objects of which many museums would be proud) is a sealed biosphere full of water, oxygenating plants and creeping midget shrimp. It sits there like a crystal ball. If it predicts a future it is one in which everything is recycled, everything is connected and everything is part of a carefully controlled system designed to look good, entertain and amuse. At once prison and paradise, it is exactly the territory that Mercier explores.

From the *Good and Plenty After Rodchenko*, 2003, cardboard packages, 100 x 100 x 100 cm.



Emerging Artists Collections and Connections  
Mathieu Mercier: modern art for a modern life  
by Mark Rappolt

