



New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences



Volume 4, Issue 11, (2017) 232-239

ISSN : 2547-881

www.prosoc.eu

Selected Paper of 6th World Conference on Design and Arts (WCDA 2017), 29 June–01 July 2017, University of Zagreb, Zagreb – Croatia

Lowbrow Art Movement as a Subculture Art and its Effects on Visual Design

Irem Bilgi ^{a*}, Faculty of fine arts, Gazi University, 06500 Ankara, Turkey

Suggested Citation:

Bilgi, I. (2017). Lowbrow art movement as a subculture art and its effects on visual design. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences*. [Online]. 4(11), 232-239. Available from: www.prosoc.eu

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Ayse Cakir Ilhan, Ankara University, Turkey.

©2017 SciencePark Research, Organization & Counseling. All rights reserved.

Abstract

Beginning in Los Angeles, California, in the 1970s, and also known as pop surrealism, the Lowbrow art movement was born as a part of punk music, comic books, street and skateboard cultures and is seen in all fields of art. This study is the reflection of the Lowbrow art movement on visual design fields such as illustration graphic design and typography, animation and designer toys. Lowbrow artists were difficult to be adopted in the arts and design fields in the first years of the movement, because they did not have a diploma in fine arts and came from the street culture. But in recent years, Lowbrow artists have proved themselves and have begun to produce art and design works that are exhibited in different fields. The aim of this study is to emphasise the importance of Lowbrow art, which is seen as a subculture today.

Keywords: Lowbrow, pop surrealism, street art, illustration, designer toy, subculture, visual design.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Irem Bilgi, Faculty of fine arts, Gazi University, 06500 Ankara, Turkey.
E-mail address: irembilgi@gazi.edu.tr / Tel.: +90 312 425 76 75

1. Definition of Lowbrow and development process

Lowbrow art, which emerged in Los Angeles in the late 1970s, is based on works of underground cartoon artists exhibited in alternative galleries in New York and California.

The roots of Lowbrow art are based on the hot rod (usually the art of modifying old American cars of the 1930s or 1940s) and surfing cultures (designs made on wave surfboards, became a pioneer of a visual culture) in Southern California in the 1950s.

According to many sources, the definition of Lowbrow art has common points with the contents of designer toys. For e.g., Esaak have itemised the characteristics of Lowbrow art as follows:

- Lowbrow is born from street culture and underground.
- Lowbrow contains humour. Sometimes humour is fun, and sometimes it can give rise to impish and sarcastic interpretations.
- Lowbrow contains mainly popular culture icons.
- For the moment, most Lowbrow artists have not been approved by critics/galleries/curators, but many publications, whose content consists of only Lowbrow, especially 'Juxtapoz' magazine, can be seen (Esaak, 1994).

In addition to the definition of Esaak, it can be said that Lowbrow art is more acceptable today than it was in 1994. Furthermore, the Juxtapoz magazine can be seen as an important asset for the approval of Lowbrow art. Artist-designer Robert Williams, founder of Juxtapoz magazine, is seen as the pioneer of Lowbrow art.

1.1. Robert Williams – pioneer of the Lowbrow concept

According to Robert Williams, one of the first masters of Pop Surrealism is formed of story illustrations, comic book arts, science-fiction, movie posters, music arts and posters, psychedelic and punk rock arts, cycling arts, surfboards, skateboards, graffiti arts, tattoo arts and pin-up arts (Dumka, 2014).

According to Goldstein, Robert Williams defined Lowbrow art in fields such as illustrations, comics, science fiction, film and music poster art, animation, psychedelic and punk rock art, hot rod and bicycle art, surfing, skateboarding graphics, graffiti art and pin-up art.

Robert Williams notes that Lowbrow artists are influenced by the Bohemia Syndrome, which is the revolutionary, anarchist and antisocial movements in the 15th century. After the Bohemian Syndrome, it was inspired by French romantic artists such as Gauguin, Delacroix, Van Gogh and Cezanne, who lived in the 19th century. Apart from these romantic expressionists, Dadaists, cubists, existential poets, hippies, flower children and anti-illegal motorcyclists have influenced the Lowbrow art movement in the 21st century (Williams, 1998). Williams pointed out that the current reflection of Bohemian art does not consist solely of oil paintings but also contains fields such as illustrations, poster art, hot rod art, street art and comics.

Robert Williams found the Juxtapoz magazine in 1994 to reinforce the acceptability of Lowbrow art (Figure 1). The Hi-Fructose magazine, which started publishing in 2005, is also considered as a strong source of the movement (Figure 2).

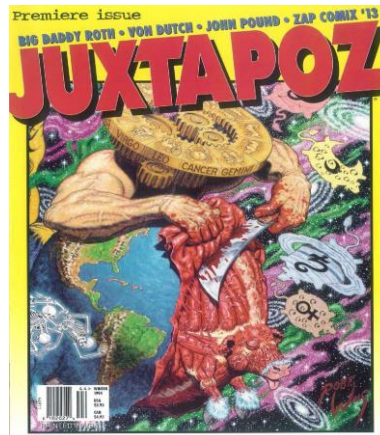


Figure 1. Juxtapose magazine second issue cover (Becer, 2008)



Figure 2. Hi-Fructose magazine second issue cover

Robert Williams revised the techniques of the old master painters on the canvas with a new perspective and re-addressed them with subjects containing monsters and bizarre creatures (Givens, 2013).

One of the angles that define Lowbrow art is the characteristic of the narrative: Most of the illustrations in this movement tell a story. For example, they are seen as a movie frame, animation cell or comic strip panel. This characteristic of narrative makes the Lowbrow art concrete and defined. Lowbrow-style illustrations represent people, places and concrete forms and are very rarely described abstract (Jordan, 2005).

2. The effects of Lowbrow on visual design

Because of the limited target group of Lowbrow art, it is impossible to use it in all design fields. For this reason, the visual design fields influenced by Lowbrow art have been examined in a limited way. These design areas are determined as illustration, poster design, typography, animation and designer toy.

Many illustrators influenced by Lowbrow make illustrations for fields such as album covers, magazines and concert posters (Jordan, 2005, p. 11). The illustrator, designer Mark Ryden, considered to be the father of Lowbrow art, addresses the issues of contemporary society in an uncomfortable manner. Ryden uses historical and mythological figures and pop icons together (Figure 3). In the

picture, Ryden created a composition by drawing the portrait of the famous American singer Katy Perry and combined it with the mythological and historical figures on the background.



Figure 3. Marc Ryden, The Hollywood Reporter, 2014

Ryden is a well-regarded artist in Lowbrow and a graphic designer at the same time. Mark Ryden is known for his cover design for Michael Jackson's *Dangerous* album in 1991 (Figure 4), 'One Hot Minute' album cover made in 1995 for Red Hot Chili Peppers group, and the cover of the famous writer Stephen King's book named 'Desperation' (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Mark Ryden, 'Dangerous' album cover, 1991

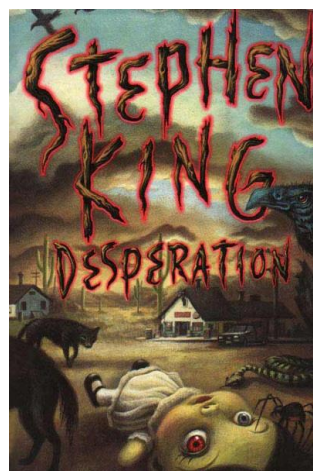


Figure 5. Mark Ryden, 'Desperation' book cover, 1996

Unlike Mark Ryden, designers such as Alex Gross, Ray Caesar (Figure 6), Jason Limon, Hikari Shimoda, Todd Schorr, and Victor Castillo (Figure 7) also produce Lowbrow-style illustrations.



Figure 6. The collector study, 2014, Ray Caesar



Figure 7. Where is my mind, 2016, Victor Castillo

Typography, one of the fields of design that affects the Lowbrow movement, provides not only writing style in visual design, but also integrity by providing product or image a stain and form value. Becer (2008, p. 184) stated that typographic message is verbal, visual and vocal, and noted that typographical elements are viewed, visually perceived, heard and interpreted audibly in the order in which they are spoken and verbally interpreted. It is therefore not a coincidence that the typography in Lowbrow designs animates a 'whole'.

In Lowbrow designs, typography is generally created with handwritten fonts. By creating different points, colours and handwriting fonts, typography becomes a visual design product. The Barcelona-born designer, Hugo Jose Maria Corral, applies the Lowbrow style typography designs on different surfaces (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Hugo Jose Maria Corral, typography designs on cars and helmets, 2016

Lowbrow reflects its own subjects on typography because typography alone is a visual element in the movement. Lowbrow art's strong characteristics of comic book value, uncomfortable style and colourful identity can be seen in typography. Saltz (2009, p. 58) pointed out that many characters are

intentionally amorphous or naive or do not follow the characteristics of the traditional type of design. As can be seen in Figures 9 and 10, Lowbrow style designers utilise these characteristics of typography while conveying their message.



Figure 9. Ed Pincombe, Cold Blooded, 2015



Figure 10. Mitchell Greenwod, people are disgusting, 2014

After illustration and graphic design, Lowbrow started to take place in the cartoon and animation sector from the beginning of the 1990s. The most intense animation example of Lowbrow art style and philosophy, which often uses sarcastic and offensive themes, can be seen in the Ren & Stimpy TV cartoon (Figure 11).

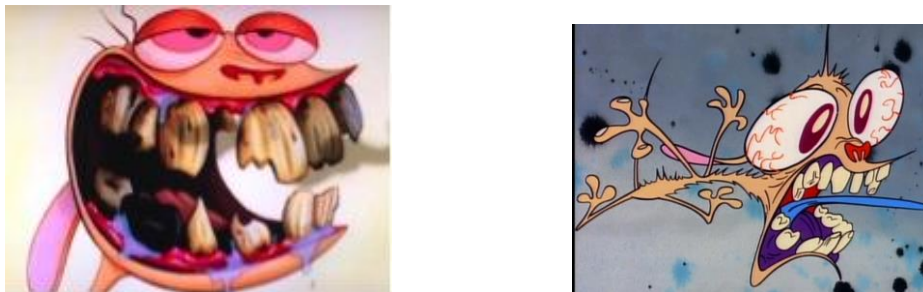


Figure 11. Ren and Stimpy TV cartoon screen examples, 1991–1995

One of the design fields in which the Lowbrow art movement is reflected is the 'designer toys'. Designer toys developed by Hong Kong-born graphical designer Michael Lau at the beginning of the early 90s, were the three-dimensional toys created by graphic designers and illustrators for exhibition or creating a collection (Bilgi, 2016, p. 26). Graphic designers such as Frank Kozik, Paul Budnitz, Tim Biskup, Kaws and J*RYU are known for their designer toys inspired by Lowbrow art.

Designer toys, in one sense, may be said to be the three-dimensional form of Lowbrow art, because the basic philosophy and style of Lowbrow art is reflected in designer toys as it is. Some Lowbrow artists are seen to have turned the characters they used in their illustrations into designer toys. Designer Gary Baseman is one of the most successful examples in this situation (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Designer Toy, Gary Baseman: Creamy, Illustration: Gary Baseman

Frank Kozik, one of the most important designers in the development of the designer toy concept, reflects the Lowbrow art style with the vinyl 'Labbit' designer toy he produces (Figure 13). Another example of designer toys is the 'Astro Boy' (Tetsuwan Atomu), which is considered the first anime of Japan in 1951, animated by the designer Brian Donnelly, known as Kaws, with his sarcastic style (Figure 14). The Lowbrow art movement's cartoon and comic style characteristics can be seen in this example.



Figure 13. Frank Kozik, Smorkin Labbit, 2013



Figure 14. KAWS, Astro Boy, 2013

3. Conclusion

The Lowbrow art movement has been the subject of this research because it is a field that is not adequately explored in the academic literature, as opposed to being a new and vibrant movement. At the same time, Lowbrow is not just about plastic arts; it has also been influential in fields covering visual design. Visual design fields such as illustration, graphic design and typography, animation and designer toys, which are included in the research scope, can be given as proof to this.

Rapidly developing in the beginning of the 1990s, Lowbrow movement has given a new perspective to subculture and street culture. According to Williams (1998), Lowbrow art hopes to break down social barriers by introducing new, powerful and consumer works. It can be argued that Lowbrow's ironic, critical and uncomfortable narrative has also led to its acceptance in today's art and design environment.

Lowbrow artists and designers are exhibited in modern museums such as the Museum of Modern Art - New York, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, the Otis College of Art + Design, the Los Angeles County Museum, and the Laguna Art Museum. In addition, the annual 'Pictoplasma Festival and Conference' in Berlin, Germany, welcomes Lowbrow designers in the context of contemporary art and design in fields such as character design and illustration animation. In Turkey, the 'Milk' art gallery and store opened in Istanbul in 2009 exhibits products and works in Lowbrow art, urban art and street art fields.

The fields of visual design are always interwoven with artistic movements and theories. The Lowbrow art movement has also begun to be reflected in design since the early 1990s. However, while Lowbrow has a sufficient narrative form, it will not have much effect on the necessary fields of design as long as it is referred to as a street art or subculture art. Therefore, designer candidates can be directed to the Lowbrow movement by adding innovations such as studies of Lowbrow field in the field of design education in the world and in the Turkey course curriculum.

References

- Becer, E. (2008). *İletişim ve Grafik Tasarım*. Ankara, Turkey: Dost Kitabevi Yayınları.
- Bilgi, I. (2016). *Gunumuzde Tasarım Oyuncak Kavrami ve Gelisimi* (Master's thesis). Gazi University, Ankara, Turkey.
- d'Errico, C. (2016). *Pop painting: inspiration and techniques from the pop surrealism art phenomenon*. New York, NY: Crown Publishing.
- Dumka, B. (2013). *Pop surrealism, Dina Goldstein and the revolution in contemporary art in the doll house*. Retrieved from <http://inthedollhouse.net/wpcontent/uploads/2014/02/Pop-Surrealism-and-Dina-Goldstein.pdf>
- Esaak, S. (1994). The Lowbrow movement - art History 101 basics. *About.com*. Retrieved from <http://arthistory.about.com/od/arthistory101/a/lowbrow.htm>
- Givens, J. R. (2013). *Lowbrow art: the unlikely defender of art history's tradition* (Master's thesis). Arkansas State University, Jonesboro.
- Goldstein, D. *Pop surrealism, Dina Goldstein and the revolution in contemporary art*. Retrieved from <http://www.dinagoldstein.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/05/Pop-Surrealism-and-Dina-Goldstein.pdf>
- Jordan, M. D. (2005). *Weirdo deluxe: the wild world of pop surrealism & Lowbrow art*. Hong Kong, China: Chronicle Books.
- Saltz, I. (2009). *Typography essentials: 100 design principles for working with type*. Gloucester, MA: Rockport Publishers.
- Williams, R. (1998). *The Lowbrow art of Robert Williams*. Hong Kong, China: Last Gasp of San Francisco.