Michel Majerus

Progressive Aesthetics

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Michel Majerus: This brand is your brand, this brand is my brand

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Right:
Michel Majerus, *yet sometimes what is read successfully, stops us with its meaning, no. II*, 1998. Digital print on self-adhesive foil on aluminum, lacquer paint on aluminum, 109⅝ × 190¹⁵⁄₁₆ × 6⅛ in. / 278.5 × 485 × 15.5 cm. Private collection. Installation view: Manifesta 2, Kino Utopolis, Luxembourg, 1998

Below:
Michel Majerus, *o.T. (supermarkt)*, 1992. Acrylic on cotton, two parts, 117 5⁄16 × 111 in. each / 298 × 282 cm each. Private Collection. Courtesy neugerriemschneider, Berlin, and Matthew Marks Gallery. Installation view: Kontra supermarket, Fellbach, Germany, 1993

To take ~~art history~~ art seriously ~~but not the way to approach it~~. This theoretical way to approach it (which in turn ~~is~~ cannot be taken seriously) is coated ~~through~~ by the fact that it's simply about qualitatively 'good' products. The significance of these works results simply from the products themselves. No explanation is needed. Gobble it up or leave it.
—Michel Majerus, *Notizen Notes 1995*[1]

Michel Majerus's paintings are firmly rooted in the artist's here-and-now of Berlin (and, to a lesser extent, New York and Los Angeles) in the 1990s and early 2000s. His overt and youth-centric pop culture references—sneakers, video game consoles and characters, techno album covers, and junk food wrappers among them—range from Super Mario Bros. to Super Soakers. Nostalgia-inducing though it may be, Majerus's oeuvre is not only a time capsule of fad products and dated graphic design. The artist also appropriated freely from contemporary art and art history. Copying imagery and stylistic tropes from other well-known artists, Majerus incorporated such easily identifiable subjects and gestures as Andy Warhol's skulls, Gerhard Richter's smears, and Frank Stella's stripes into his own works. Making little distinction between the "brands" he encountered in exhibition catalogues and those he found in shopping malls, Majerus described his creative impulse in these simple terms: "I paint everything I get my fingers on that is important."[2]

Replicating other artists' motifs and techniques—even entire paintings—and intermixing these art historical hallmarks with sundry references to consumer culture, Majerus pushed painting in a new direction. His own signature style (or "brand," as he understood this to mean) is a kind of mise en abyme of Pop art, wherein iconic artworks and logos are referenced indiscriminately and treated on equal terms. Working at the dawn of the internet age, Majerus anticipated the way products, advertisements, and artworks now comingle on our computer and phone screens as we click casually back and forth between various websites and social media platforms. But even before such virtual browsing was possible, Majerus plucked images, colors, fonts, and patterns from the realms of fine art and marketing alike and flattened these into the original virtual window: painting.

Yet sometimes what is read successfully, stops us with its meaning

Majerus embraced the language of consumer culture right out of the gate. One of his first exhibitions, installed while he was still a student at the State Academy of Fine Arts Stuttgart, took place at a supermarket in the city's Fellbach district, in 1993. A single billboard-size painting, *o.T. (supermarkt)* (1992), in which the words *blöder*

1 Michel Majerus, *Notizen Notes 1995*, ed. Michel Majerus Estate and Brigitte Franzen (Cologne: Walther König, 2018), 40.

Scheißarsch ("idiotic shitass") appear next to a cartoon bear wearing a yellow T-shirt decorated with its own likeness, was presented above an Andreas Gursky–worthy cooler filled with juices, sodas, and yogurts.

The disconnect between the cartoon bear's smiling expression and the offensive tagline is typical of Majerus's playful critique of marketing strategies. If the fact that the bear sports a shirt emblazoned with its own ridiculous likeness reads as a joke, it also reinforces the omnipotence of branding. The importance of a marketable identity is something Majerus would continue to explore throughout his career, culminating with the development of his very own logo.

Majerus's work was again displayed in a commercial setting during Manifesta 2, which took place in 1998 across a variety of venues in the artist's native Luxembourg. On this occasion, the artist presented a large-scale painting and screenprint on aluminum in the lobby of the Utopolis cinema. Hung next to one of the multiplex movie theater's concession stands, *yet sometimes what is read successfully, stops us with its meaning, no. II* (1998) looked right at home next to advertisements for Coca-Cola, a popcorn machine, and a cooler full of soft drinks. Unlike Majerus's "idiotic shitass" painting, which parodies manipulative advertising campaigns, his depiction of a huge Nike sneaker bursting forth from a psychedelic background of rainbow squiggles embraces the graphic shapes and eye-catching colors used to sell products. It also seems to promote a real product (the Nike high-top whose logo is prominently displayed). The work is a prime example of how Majerus appropriated a visual vocabulary with very specific associations and used these familiar tropes to say something new. Presenting viewers with an explicit challenge, Majerus tells us that the meaning of his work, if "read successfully," should give us pause.

In developing his own aesthetic, Majerus borrowed from other artists' artworks as freely as he did from package designs and advertisements. The fact that he initially encountered much of the art that interested him in the form of reproductions in magazines or exhibition catalogues had a significant impact on how he incorporated these references into his paintings. Describing their art school days, Majerus's friend (later partner) and fellow artist Heike-Karin Föll noted: "Except at Stirling's Neue Staatsgalerie, the Kunstverein, or documenta, international art was something we only ever saw on postcards, in catalogues, and magazines."[3] Majerus's personal library, which is housed at the Michel Majerus Estate in Berlin, reflects the artist's primary interest in painting and, more specifically, which artists' work he was looking at as reproductions. Among his many exhibition catalogues are monographs dedicated to Francesco Clemente, Paul Gauguin, Gilbert & George, Arshile Gorky, Henri de

3 Heike-Karin Föll, "'A Good Idea': Reflections on Works by Michel Majerus from 1992," in *Michel Majerus*, ed. Ulrike Gross and Charlotte Laubard (Berlin: Distanz, 2012), 37–38.

Toulouse-Lautrec, Richard Prince, Julian Schnabel, and Frank Stella. Notably there are at least twenty Warhol catalogues.

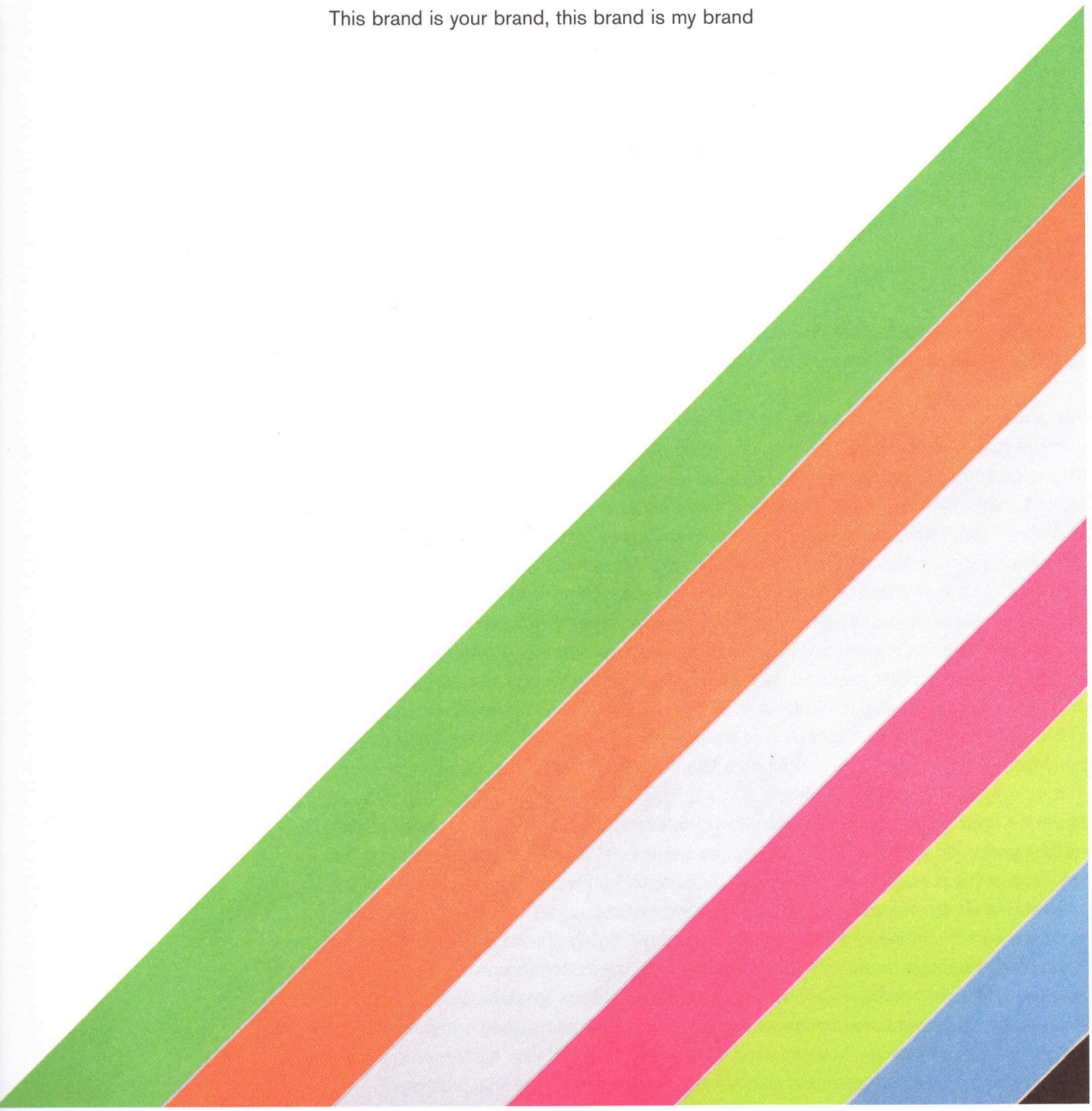
The archives at the artist's estate also include actual product packages that inspired many of Majerus's works: Overdose ice cream bar wrappers (like the one featured in Majerus's 1997 painting *overdose*), a Swiffer mop package, and part of an Ariel Alpine laundry detergent box, to name a few. Majerus's studio archives also include Xeroxes and clippings of art reviews and exhibition catalogues. Among these, a selection of several pages from the catalogue accompanying the seminal "Westkunst" exhibition held in Cologne in 1981, which features installation shots with works by some of Majerus's favorite artists, including de Kooning, Schnabel, Stella, and Warhol. Taken as a whole, Majerus's primary and secondary reference materials offer a fascinating glimpse into the artist's aesthetic interests—an eclectic mashup of pop culture and art—and confirm how he understood all of this to be part of the same visual language of branding. In his view, Stella's stripes are as iconic as the Nike swoosh and a candy bar wrapper carries as much weight as a Warhol skull.

Majerus's habit of looking at reproductions of artworks and installation photographs of exhibitions forged a strong visual connection between these subjects and products he saw advertised in magazines and on TV. The remove from which he observed much of international art that appealed to him is something he also sought to recreate for his real-world encounters. In the mid-1990s Majerus began carrying around a Sony Handycam, a small video camera to record visual inspiration he came upon in his daily life: concert posters, graffiti, billboards, music videos, and the like. Sometimes he used stills from these video snippets as references when he made paintings. As another means of flattening his source materials, Majerus used a Xerox machine and later a scanner to create smooth photographic collages that also served as sketches for his final paintings.

Richtering and "Cool Wool"

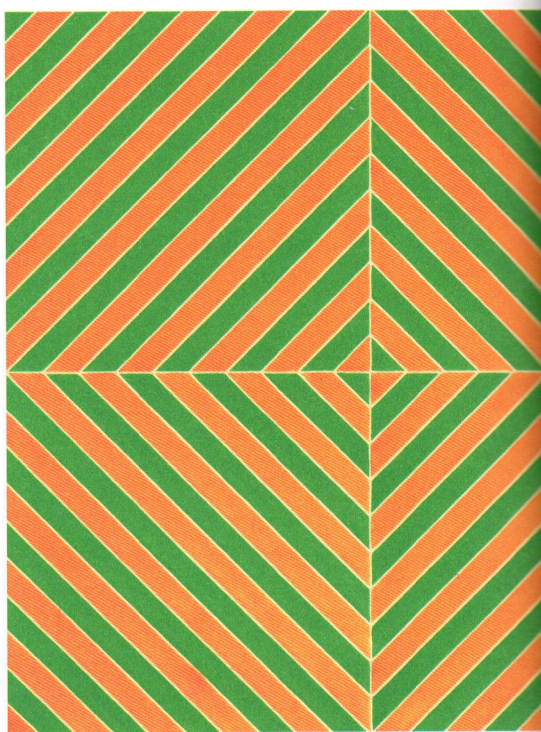
In paintings like *plastic* and *Depression* (both 2002), Majerus used a squeegee to smear paint across the canvas. In addition to being interested in this technique's formal and textural possibilities, Majerus was acutely aware of its close association with another painter, Gerhard Richter, who began using a squeegee as part of his painting practice in 1980. Acknowledging the resulting painterly blur as a veritable Richter trademark, Majerus referred to his own use of the squeegee as "Richtering."[4] In *Depression*, Majerus's "Richtering" nearly effaces his own name from the composition. With this seemingly self-deprecating gesture, Majerus pays homage to a famous painter while also managing to reduce him to one effortless mark.

4 Föll, "'A Good Idea.'" *Michel Majerus*, 45.



Above:
Michel Majerus, *pressure groups 2*, 2002. Acrylic on cotton, 118⅛ × 118⅛ × 4 in. / 300 × 300 × 10.2 cm. Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Germany

Right:
Frank Stella, *Fez (2)*, 1964. Fluorescent alkyd on canvas, 77 × 77 in. / 195.6 × 195.6 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Lita Hornick



"Richtering" is a quintessential example of Majerus forming his own brand by referring to other artists using a unique combination of reverence and ridicule. Updating the way Richter's squeegee brought mechanization into the painting process, Majerus brought the model of a non-authorial creation into the digital age. Several paintings from 2001, which certainly call to mind Richter's smears and blurs, are actually based on the smooth traces made with Photoshop's smudge tool. By translating this computerized stroke back onto canvas, Majerus endorses digital techniques while ultimately affirming his allegiance to the analog medium of painting.

Like Richter's squeegee, Christopher Wool's stencil lettering appealed to Majerus as a form of semi-mechanized painting. Wool's hallmark black-and-white "word paintings," which he began making with homemade stencils in the 1980s, inspired Majerus to stack the black stenciled words "cool" and "wool" on a white background in an untitled 1992 painting. Majerus's appropriation of Wool's style as well as his last name is a visual and lexical acknowledgement of a fellow artist's recognizability, with just a hint of friendly mockery. Interestingly, while Majerus did make screenprints on aluminum (a support associated with both Richter and Wool), his references to these artists are painted acrylic on canvas or cotton, yet another example of Majerus's dedication to the traditional craft of painting.

Yesterday, today, and tomorrow I am being Frank Stella

In an email to Heike-Karin Föll from 2002, Majerus wrote: "Yesterday, today, and tomorrow I am being Frank Stella, as I am painting my triangles. They're going to be in quite garish neon colors, because I have not done any color tests at all."[5] The resulting "Pressure Groups" paintings from 2002 feature diagonal stripes of uniform thickness that evoke Stella—winking at the older artist's impressive monopoly on concentric bands of color—without quoting him directly. As did Richter and Wool, Stella provided Majerus with a style that is easy to replicate and riff on, but also deeply—inextricably, even—linked to another artist's identity.

In an earlier work, Majerus made an even more direct reference to Stella. Included in Majerus's first institutional solo show at the Kunsthalle Basel, in 1996, *Weißes Bild* (1994) features a flat, but otherwise faithful rendering of Stella's three-dimensional 1987 painting on aluminum, *Bene come il sale*. Comprising forms, colors, and patterns from Stella's "Cones and Pillars" series, Majerus's copy of *Bene come il sale* is partially obscured by thick strokes of white paint that have been layered on top of the

ve:
hel Majerus, *7 Trophäen, auf Verhandlungsgeschick ten (2)* (7 Trophies that cate negotiation skills [2]), 5. Acrylic on half-linen, × 55⅛ in. / 160 × 140 cm. ate collection

nt:
y Warhol, *Skull*, 1976. thetic polymer paint and screen ink on canvas, × 19 in. / 38.1 × 48.3 cm. lection of Anthony D'Offay

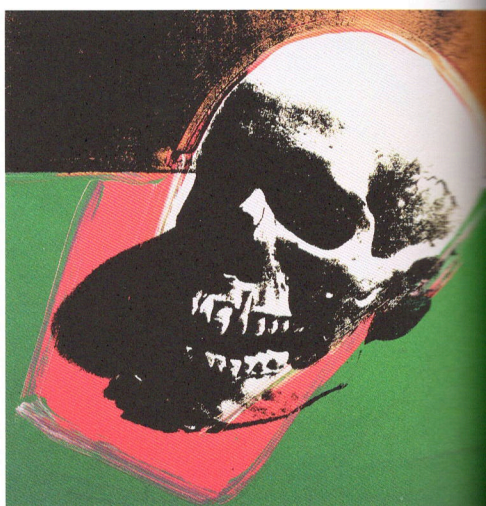


image. This could be Majerus mocking Stella's famous defense of Minimalism ("What you see is what you see"), but, more likely, the whiting-out is a reference to yet another of Majerus's favorite artist-subjects. *Weißes Bild*, whose title translates to "white image," is also a nod to Robert Ryman and his signature white brushstrokes. Just a year after painting *Weißes Bild*, Majerus wrote in his journal: "A good painting often becomes more important and better when it is next to another good painting, to which it is entirely unrelated."[6] *Weißes Bild* visualizes this theory and takes it one step further, literally fusing two paintings bearing two painters' signature styles on one canvas.

Appropriating appropriation

Artistic collaborations were long of interest to Majerus. Early in his career, he worked as part of the artist collective 3K-NH, which he cofounded in 1992. His oeuvre also includes numerous imaginary collaborations—like *Weißes Bild*—wherein Majerus evokes artists who never worked together and, in a sense, collaborates with them as well. It is not surprising that Majerus latched on to an actual collaboration between two of the best-known artists of the twentieth century: Jean-Michel Basquiat and Warhol. In a 1999–2000 series, Majerus reproduced an untitled 1984 collaborative painting by Warhol and Basquiat at least a dozen times. The original collaboration features iconic imagery by both artists, notably logos for General Electric and Arm & Hammer by Warhol and a black skeletal figure with a crown by Basquiat. Majerus copied this work in its entirety, making a screenprint of the composition and printing this onto identical, nearly square canvases. In Majerus's version, the original imagery is pushed to the left of the composition and slightly cropped, creating more empty space on the right, which is where the artist made his own mark. Inserting himself into this infamous creative partnership, Majerus added one element: a stroke of paint, lacquer, or blots of paint on the right side of the composition (each version in a different color).

Black-and-white xeroxes of the original presentation of this specific Basquiat-Warhol collaboration at Tony Shafrazi Gallery in 1985 appear among the studio materials housed at the artist's estate and catalogues of similar collaborations between Warhol, Basquiat, and Francesco Clemente were part of Majerus's personal library.[7] Posters for the Tony Shafrazi Gallery show (which Majerus may have also seen as reproductions) featured Warhol and Basquiat in boxing gloves, suggesting a friendly competition between two art world heavyweights. It comes as no surprise that Majerus would be interested in this high-profile artistic collaboration-cum-publicity stunt. Warhol, who made logos for supermarket staple brands like Brillo and Campbell's more famous

6 Majerus, *Notizen Notes*, 293.

7 The books in Majerus's library include *Basquiat, Exposiciones, Museo Revoltella (Trieste)*, edited by Bruno Bischofberger (Milan: Charta, 1999), and *Collaborations: Warhol, Basquia Clemente*, edited by Tilman Osterwold (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1996).

oove:
ichel Majerus, *splash*, 2001.
crylic on cotton, 110¼ ×
57½ in. / 280 × 400 cm.
rivate collection

ight:
avid Hockney, *A Bigger*
plash, 1967. Acrylic paint on
anvas, support: 95½ × 96 ×
/16 in. / 242.5 × 243.9 × 3 cm.
ate. Purchased 1981

than any marketing executive could have ever hoped, is a key reference for Majerus. Basquiat, who also very much harnessed the power of logos with his SAMO© graffiti tag and three-pointed crown, also represents a return to painterly painting in the 1980s that Majerus surely appreciated. For his own part, Majerus adds to this powerhouse duet a simple and rather rugged mark, which stands out as the only "real" paint on each of these canvases. Throwing himself into the ring, Majerus joins the competitive fun, but also raises questions about authorship, artistic license, and appropriation.

Unsurprisingly, Warhol, who not only used pop culture as source material, but himself became a pop culture icon, would provide further fodder for Majerus. In addition to the "MoM Blocks" works, other Majerus paintings feature a skull that is clearly based on Warhol's series of "Skulls" paintings and screenprints from 1976. In his 1995 journal, Majerus wrote: "I want to know where I stand right now with my painting or with painting in general. For this reason I painted a de Kooning, a Baselitz + an Oehlen as a kind of reflective pause. A Warhol skull will possibly follow."[8] Consumer products and celebrity portraits aside, the skull is perhaps the image most closely associated with Warhol. It is telling that Majerus sees the skull as a symbol that can help him recalibrate his own relationship to painting. Describing Warhol's career, Robert Pincus-Witten famously noted that at a certain point, "Warholism had superseded Warhol."[9] This somewhat morbid idea of Warhol's brand eventually overshadowing the artist himself would not have been lost on Majerus. In 2019, the Michel Majerus Estate organized an exhibition titled "majerus wool warhol...skulls and rorschachs," for which curator Peter Pakesch juxtaposed works by Warhol and Wool with works in which Majerus directly references these two artists.

Scavenger hunt

Identifying references to other artists in Majerus's works becomes a fun and addictive detective work. Sometimes the connections are real, but in other cases we can't be sure. Because the artist defined himself through his appropriations—in the spirit of Sturtevant, Louise Lawler, and Richard Prince—even unintentional references can be considered valid in the sense that Majerus himself welcomed all manner of visual connections in his art. While living in Los Angeles in 2001 during a residency program at Pasadena's ArtCenter College of Design, Majerus sent an email to Heike-Karin Föll, in which he described a chance visit to the gallery L.A. Louver, where he saw "a Hockney, one of the lovely early works dating from '69. A naked figure."[10] The painting he saw was not a swimming pool painting like Hockney's famous *The Splash* (1966) or *A Bigger Splash* (1967), but it is interesting to consider the fact that Majerus made

8 Majerus, *Notizen Notes*, 127.
9 Robert Pincus-Witten, "Entries: Big History, Little History," *Arts Magazine* 54 (April 1980): 184.
10 Michel Majerus, "Email from Michel Majerus," in *Michel Majerus: Los Angeles* (Cologne: Walther König, 2004), inside front cover.

several of his own "Splash" paintings in 2001 and 2002. The title of these paintings ostensibly comes from a 1990s water toy called Splash Bombs, whose logo Majerus reproduced in various ways in several paintings. In *splash* (2001), one of the more sober works from this series, the word "splash," written in the recognizable Splash Bombs font, floats against a watery blue-gray background. A band of lighter blue at the right side of the composition suggests the edge of a pool or even a diving board. Whether Majerus's painting is in fact a reference to Hockney is almost irrelevant. So effectively has Majerus integrated the language of fine art and product logos into his own brand of painting, viewers can't help but automatically associate these references as well.

In what can be considered the culmination of Majerus fusing visual references to consumer culture and art history to create his personal artistic signature, the artist created his own name-based logo. In 2000, Majerus set his first and last names in colorful bubble-letter font and commissioned graphic designer Till Vanish (who notably produced graphic elements for Berlin's Love Parade) to animate the letters so that the text fractures and comes back together in an endless loop of disintegration and reconstitution. Originally presented as a single-channel video installation across twenty-five TV screens, *michel majerus* (2000) conjures the ever-morphing MTV logo that served as an artsy house ad between paid advertisements and music videos. The presentation across a grid of screens recalls Warhol again—specifically his self-portrait screenprints, which feature a repeated image of himself as he wished to be seen and embody what would ultimately be a perfect blend of Warhol the artist and Warhol the brand.

Soon after creating this video work, Majerus took his logo back into painting, making a series of works on canvas—*mm1*, *mm2*, *mm3*, and *mm6* (all 2001)—based on stills from the original animation. These paintings suggest another reference to Robert Ryman, who, in the late 1950s, enlarged his signature so that it functioned as a compositional element in his paintings. They also recall the contemporaneous debut of Josh Smith's "Name Paintings." Like Majerus, Smith began treating his own name as a subject in 2001 and has continued long after Majerus's death. The "Name Paintings" are now one of Smith's most recognizable bodies of work. Both Majerus and Smith were interested in marketing their own (name)brands, while at the same time courting questions about the intersection between art and commerce.

Full circle

Rather than speculating where Majerus would have taken his mise en abyme of Pop art had he lived longer, it is more interesting to look at painters who are working today

and investigating ideas Majerus raised about the intersection of art and branding. In this sense, Majerus's legacy lives on in the work of artists like Joshua Abelow, Leidy Churchman, Jeff Elrod, Oli Epp, Alex Israel, Christian Marclay, and Laura Owens, who, among many others, continue to draw connections between Pop culture, art history, and their own artistic brands. Each picking up on different aspects of Majerus's oeuvre—from Churchman, whose subjects include the Mastercard logo as well as Henri Rousseau's *The Repast of the Lion* (c. 1907), to Abelow, who conflates himself with Barnett Newman in his homage to the latter's "zips"—today's artists are indebted to Majerus's egalitarian approach to appropriation and his embrace of artistic branding. Their relevance and success confirm Majerus's own important contribution to art history.

Even more so than the artists named above, Takashi Murakami has helped cement Majerus's place in the art historical canon. The 2020 exhibition "Takashi Murakami: Michel Majerus Superflat" marked a new (meta) apogee of Majerus's influence. Curated by Tobias Berger and held at the Michel Majerus Estate, the show featured six monumental silkscreen paintings by Murakami. The ensemble of works, which were all made between 2019 and 2020, commemorated Majerus in much the same way Majerus himself paid homage to other artists—through a mix of simultaneously earnest and humorous evocations and direct citations. *Superflat Bubblewrap Michel Majerus* (2019), for instance, riffs on Majerus's "Splash" paintings.

Murakami imitates the bubble-letter font and helical flourishes that Majerus lifted from the Splash Bombs toy but uses them to spell out his own brand, "Superflat," a coinage describing his manga- and anime-influenced style of painting. In the press release for this exhibition, Murakami is quoted describing Majerus's work as "completely dry—opposite to Anselm Kiefer or Gerhard Richter. This is a new freedom in a painting."[11] Coming from one of the most successful artists of his time, this recognition for creating something new—not only worth talking about, but worth copying—adds yet another layer to Majerus's signature evocations and legacy. Majerus, the appropriator of appropriation, has been appropriated. In other words, he is now canonical.

11 "Takashi Murakami: Michel Majerus Superflat" press release, https://michelmajerus.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/murakamiXmajerus_leaflet_singlepage.pdf