

Progressive Aesthetics

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**Michel Majerus: This brand is your brand,
this brand is my brand
Mara Hoberman**

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,
acquer paint on aluminum,
109⁵/₁₆ × 190¹⁵/₁₆ × 6¹/₈ 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, 117⁵/₁₆
× 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 come 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.

Scheißbarsch ("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: Distar 2012), 37–38.

