

Rock/Pop/Rap-ture...(and all that Jazz!)

A career in the arts typically requires tending to a tenuous balance between personally meaningful- and commercial work. The installation at the Power Station fired on both cylinders - a commercial project intertwined with my own life. When Stephen Weber, Director of BerkleeNYC - initiated a dialog about creating an homage to the sprit of the iconic recording studio, he didn't know how personally invested I had already felt about the place. A block away from my art studio of thirty years in a neighborhood that helped form my artistic vision, it was a place my musician wife had spent much time. Moreover, it was the beating heart of my best friend from high school who worked there after college, and died soon thereafter. During my preparation for the project I uncovered a decades-old demo tape he recorded in Studio C that set the soundtrack for my endeavor, and became a literal cornerstone of the installation.

Artists are de-facto documentarians of their times. So while on the surface the painting celebrates some of music's biggest stars who recorded at the Power Station, there are many themes embedded within it that betray my feelings about contemporary societal trends and the artist's journey within the bounds of power systems that support a career.

Ascension

As an acknowledgement to the re-birth I feel our society currently needs, the painting's composition is inspired by works of the Renaissance, with the theme of devotion is presented as the rapturous bliss artists often display while engaged in their passion.

Descension

Seeking a way to illustrate the metaphysical nature of music, I serendipitously learned from Stephen of Nona Hendrix's interest in cyborg-ism, and consequently made her the conduit through which the spirit of the deceased "band members" projected onto the cloud above inspire their colleagues below. The rings of CD grist rotate around enormous gears - symbolically representing the music industry - that artists must navigate to enable a career. But proximity can lead to peril as when Cyndi Lauper's boot accidentally touches the discharge from the machine (after "inadvertently" getting hit in the face by Madonna as they spar for center stage.) Two decades ago my kids sometimes played with Cyndi's son at an UWS playground. I showed them Richard Avedon's iconic photo of her that I used as reference for the painting, to which my son asked, "Why is she screaming, Daddy?" The answer introduces another theme in the painting: the battle for the spotlight...

Attention

I am a critic of the celebrity worship culture the painting is designed to evoke but, understanding the lure of Instagram, a void is left in the center of the composition to invite a visitor to become the lead singer of the band assembled behind them. A spotlight, hot mic, and stage fog enhance the fantasy. While the void is intended to ensure none of the artists in the composition are cropped from view, it also pays homage to Tony Bongiovi, the creator of the original Power Station in a tangental, self-indulgent, art world-y context: riffing on the idea of Robert Smithson's Site/Non-Site paradigm, the outline of the negative space in the center of the painting takes the shape of Bongiovi's native state, New Jersey.

Insurrection

Certain artists are depicted in a way that illustrates part of their history. For example, Bruce Springsteen's depiction was inspired by his early-career contract dispute that resulted in being locked out of the studio for a couple of years. His indomitable spirit shines through as he breaks the restraints (including a shackle that binds his foot to the ground), imposed by those attempting to constrain him. Adjacent to him, Lyn Manuel Miranda bursts through the walls of the building as a metaphor for his paradigm-busting artistic output as he crashes into the scene.

Tension

There is a focused dialog within the painting on the subject of race. I am acutely aware of my inherent white privilege, having grown up in a small, majority Native American town where many of the white minority claimed this country was somehow their birthright. The reckoning going on in our culture right now is long overdue, but too many people avoid enjoining the dialog out of fear of confrontation. The subject arose during the preparation for this project when some Berklee faculty members pointed out that the then center of the composition, John Meyer, had made some insensitive and inflammatory statements in his past. My "safe" path at that point would have been to excise Meyer, a Berklee alum and archetypal rock star who had recorded at the Power Station, from the painting. Instead, it became an opportunity to initiate dialogues about not only race, but also of cancel culture. To me, the measure of someone's value is found in their heart, and I personally don't believe Meyer ever set out to hurt anyone with his comments. So he remained in the painting, but is depicted mid-comeuppance: displaced from center stage when the police (Sting) are called in. As a sign of his privilege, however, Meyer is "relegated" to just-out-of-center-stage status, between Herbie Hancock and Esperanza Spaulding - two jazz geniuses of our time. No genuine reckoning will be achieved without dialogue, understanding, and forgiveness.

The subject of race is visually represented in the composition as well. On the left side of the frame is an audio mixer that conflates the notion of musical tones with those of flesh tones. The levels can be adjusted to infuse the desired balances of hues (with labels borrowed from the cosmetics industry) through subjective measurement. The editorializing occurs on the canvas, where the woodwork above the control room window becomes a DNA ladder of sorts comprised of a depiction human skin tones that lighten as they ascend. Adjacent to this, a dark-toned worker putti has broken free of his shackles just above the tower as a light-skinned, blond haired cellist-putti soars unencumbered beyond the top of the ladder.

Like the lions Patience and Fortitude guarding the entrance of the New York Public Library, Diana Ross and Missy Eliot flank the entrance to the composition. While taken a couple of generations apart, the similarities within their two images comments on the pace of change. As an additional rumination on race vis-a-vis industry acceptance, I indicated my memory of the debate around skin bleaching when the young Diana Ross was close with Michael Jackson. Just below where she sits is a machine that symbolically adjusts the pigments in Ms. Ross' skin.

Construction

The entirety of the rest of the assemblage surrounding the painting serves, as mentioned, as a frame. It is intended to help set the context for the action occurring within it, while offering many surprises of its own. For example, the shrine to Brittany Spears is offered as an allegory: a precautionary tale of the risk of being sucked into and ground up by the machine in the pursuit of fame.

Instruction

At its core, the piece is a catalyst for discussion about music and the music industry, and the spirit of innovation enabled by risk takers such as Tony Bongiovi.