

Salt Lake Art Center: Celebrating 75 years, 1931-2006

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Sophie Matisse: *Be Back in 5 Minutes and Zebra Stripe Paintings*

Street Level Gallery, January 28 - May 6, 2006

The exhibition **Sophie Matisse: *Be Back in 5 Minutes and Zebra Stripe Paintings*** brings to Salt Lake City representative work from two distinct series of paintings, ***Be Back in 5 Minutes*** paintings (1997-2002) and the ***Zebra Stripe*** paintings (2005). Both series make use of replicated versions of masterpieces from Western art history. The ***Be Back in 5 Minutes*** paintings use subtraction as the conceptual device through the elimination of the people and animals from the original compositions, while the ***Zebra Stripe*** paintings makes use of addition by the confluence of two painted realities and the reintroduction of people and animals in the copied museum art.

What is immediately apparent in Sophie Matisse's work is she has given a new conceptual twist to the idea of copying museum masterpieces, a practice that was common in art schools prior to the invention of mechanical means of reproduction. Instead of simply copying, her removal of the figures from the historical paintings is entirely new. Sophie has commented on her process: "The absence of a figure does not necessarily imply its complete disappearance. For me, the title and our memory of the figure assures its continuous presence".^[1] I was also struck by how successful these paintings appeared even without their figures. In order to complete her own painting, Sophie had to invent sections of the interiors or landscapes that the figures had originally blocked out. Memory, and the attempt to remember, are at play in the very act of viewing the paintings.

This exhibition includes four paintings from Sophie Matisse's ***Be Back in 5 Minutes*** series including the first one, ***The Monna Lisa (Be Back in 5 Minutes)*** based upon what is perhaps the world's most famous painting, ***Mona Lisa***, by Leonardo da Vinci. In Sophie's painting, the Mona Lisa has left her spot on the balcony, leaving behind a view of the balustrade and the distant Italian river valley in the background. Of all the parodies of da Vinci's great painting, Sophie was the first to actually remove the famous model from the composition. ***Staircase Group*** is a replication of Charles Willson Peale's 1795 painting ***Staircase Group (Portraits of Raphael Peale and Titian Ramsey Peale)***, without the sons of Charles Peale ascending the stairs. Sophie's version also includes an actual wooden step placed at the bottom of the staircase, enhancing the painting's heightened trompe l'oeil effect. In her variation upon Diego Velazquez de Silva's masterpiece ***Las Meninas***, she has removed all the figures: the painter before the easel, the Infanta and courtiers, the royal dog, and the King and Queen (reflected in a mirror across the room). What she has left is the haunting stillness of the empty room. The third painting from this series, ***The Goldfish***, is Sophie's rendition of the familiar painting by Henri Matisse, her great-grandfather, sans the fish.



Sophie Matisse, *The Goldfish*, 1998
oil on canvas, 57 x 38 in.

Not only is Sophie Matisse the great-granddaughter of Henri Matisse; she is also the step-granddaughter of Marcel Duchamp. Her grandfather is the renowned gallery dealer Pierre Matisse. Additionally, she is married to the French Pop artist Alain Jacquet. Whatever advantages the Matisse name and famous relatives afforded her, Sophie found it mostly to be a hindrance. As a young girl, and later as a young woman and aspiring artist, she often felt confused and isolated, and acknowledged that she existed under a "Mount Everest-size shadow" cast by her famous family members.^[2] So, when in 2003, Sophie replicated Pablo Picasso's famous monochromatic painting *Guernica* - in full scale and in her own bold and bright Matissean colors - it is as if she left her own stamp on the giant of 20th Century, just as she both embraced and banished the heroes and heroines of Western art from her ***Be Back in 5 Minutes*** paintings.

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The **Zebra Stripe** series are a dream-like quality of the juxtaposed stripe imagery, a mix of her notebook journalizing and replicated masterpieces, giving her new paintings an intriguing sense of the surreal. First begun in the spring of 2004, many of these works were complete or close to completion. She explains that some of the images painted into the zebra stripe patterns came from daybooks she kept during her student years in Paris during the late 1980's. Journals stuffed with wine labels and watercolors of flowers and fruits.

In these new paintings, the figure is reintroduced through copied museum masterpieces, though often just a detail, as in Sophie's **The Blue Dress**, a work which replicates the lower portion of **Ingres's Portrait of the Comtesse d'Haussonville**, rendering her torso and beautiful, bare arms at rest against the luxurious folds of her dress, interspersed with landscape zebra stripes. The invented patterns in these **Zebra Stripe** paintings tend to lie (visually) over the copied, partially-concealed original masterpieces, creating a constant fluctuation between their inter-relationship. Psychologically, this is Sophie Matisse's means of thrusting her patterns into the foreground, while relegating "art history" to the background.

It should also be noted that Sophie suffers from dyslexia. Her gallery dealer and long time friend Francis Naumann has observed, "She sees things in extremes; left to right, right to left (often confusing the two)," which, he believes, is a critical factor to consider in any attempt to understand the motive of the **Zebra Stripe** paintings.[3] We are treated to a double version of this principle in Sophie's **Garden of Eden I** and **Garden of Eden II**, with images appropriated from Michelangelo's **The Temptation and Expulsion** on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. The portions of Michelangelo's fresco that Sophie Matisse covered over with her own designs in the first painting are revealed in the second painting. This positive and negative reconciliation links the two camouflaged paintings.



Sophie Matisse, **Lion's Den**, 2005
oil and acrylic on canvas, 35 x 36 in.

The range of emotions expressed in Sophie's Zebra Stripe paintings is extremely broad and often augments the mood of the copied picture. Two compositions, **Against Nature** and **Bacchus** feel absolutely right in their juxtaposed imagery of museum picture detail partially obscured by the ribbon-like tatters of French wine labels. In contrast to the gaiety of **Bacchus**, Sophie's **Lion's Den** reveals an unblinking sense of anxiety. A giant blue eye floats in a cloud bank across a detail of Ruben's earthen-color canvas, **Daniel in the Lions Den**. The depicted eye bears a strong resemblance to Rene Magritte's **The False Mirror** (1928, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY), without being an actual replication of the Belgian Surrealists well-known painting.

Whatever we decide to call these new **Zebra Stripe** paintings, it is a good sign that they have become immediately topical. They are proof that Sophie Matisse has co-joined the spirit of conceptualism with the most unlikely muse of contemporary painting, beauty.

excerpt from an essay by Jim Edwards, Salt Lake Art Center's Curator of Exhibitions

[1] Sophie Matisse, interview by Francis Naumann, November 20, 2001. [2] Sophie Matisse, public conversation with Francis Naumann, Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, New York, July 10, 2005. [3] Jim Edwards, Sophie Matisse: Zebra Stripe Paintings (exh. cat.) Francis M. Naumann Fine Arts, New York, 2005.

Sophie Matisse: Be Back in 5 Minutes and Zebra Stripe Paintings opens on January 28, 2006.

The Opening Reception will be on Friday, February 10 from 6 to 9 p.m.

and will be in conjunction with two additional exhibits,

Robert Motherwell: Te Quiero and **Deference to Deffebach**,

in the Main Gallery and Projects Gallery, respectively.

The Salt Lake Art Center is located at 20 South West Temple, Salt Lake City, UT 84101

801-328-4201 or on the web at www.slartcenter.org.

Admission to the galleries is always free.

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