



Currents 31: Robert Melee

# The Conventional Life of Robert Melee

## Con-ven-tion-al

PRONUNCIATION: ken-'vench-nel, -'ven(t)-she-nel

FUNCTION: *adjective*

**1:** formed by agreement or compact

**3a:** according with a mode of artistic representation that simplifies or provides symbols or substitutes for natural forms

**b:** of traditional design

*Definitions from the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*

## Con-ven-tion

PRONUNCIATION: ken-'ven(t)-shen

FUNCTION: *noun*

ETYMOLOGY: Middle English, from Middle French or Latin; Middle French, from Latin *convention-*, *conventio*, from *convenire*

**3a:** usage or custom especially in social matters **b:** a rule of conduct or behavior **c:** a practice in bidding or playing that *conveys* information between partners in a card game (as bridge) **d:** an established technique, practice, or device (as in literature or the theater)

**WHAT IS OUTRAGEOUS? WHAT IS NORMAL? HOW CAN WE KNOW THE DIFFERENCE?** These are the types of questions that might come to you as you first look upon the art of Robert Melee. His latest installation is a 20 by 20-foot room that at first appears to be an ordinary, yet colorful, take-off on the conventional suburban interior. Yet as the viewer walks down a short corridor, s/he makes a very abrupt shift from a world whose conventions are understood to one in which the boundaries of normal behavior are no longer clear. Composed of fake wood paneling, marbled with drippy melting paint colors—acid green, yellow, flesh, baby blue—the artifice of Melee's environment formally reinforces the viewers own experience, in which what seems natural and conventional is revealed to be merely a surface that conceals darker truths.

In order to enact this transformation, Melee incorporates film, video, photography, painting and sculpture in an elaborate mock suburban installation.

The artist takes the ordinary—a white cube whose agreed upon purpose is to exhibit contemporary art—and transforms it into a suburban interior, complete with fake wood paneling and furniture wall units, family memorabilia, and brightly colored wall sculptures and paintings. It is the type of domestic setting that strikes a familiar note of recognition—so common to American post-war reality. Yet upon further viewing, Melee's work while seemingly innocently reproducing the mundane actually transforms a certain kind of middle-class suburban experience into an abject, even perverse tableau.

The room is furnished with three multi-colored striped curtains, *High Life #1*, *High Life #2*, *High Life #3*, a home entertainment unit, a “bottle cap” painting *Inanimate Electo Substitution*, and a collection of photographs *protected* by a slightly yellowed vinyl slipcover, *Mommy Smoking* (all works 2004). Like any object in Melee's world, the curtains have multiple points of reference.

While clearly window treatments, the three wall-length curtains uncannily recall the popular game show prop, in which by choosing the right curtain—will it be curtain #1, #2, or #3?—the contestant is given the potential opportunity to transform his/her mundane existence into the spectacular and glamorous. Moreover, Melee's curtains are hard and shiny, having been dipped in plaster and painted in bright enamel paints. The varying width of their strips gives the impression of movement, but it is only an illusion. The curtains can't be pulled back anymore than choosing the right curtain can change your life.

The home entertainment unit contains four vintage televisions that feature a common item: Melee's home movies of himself, his flamboyant mother and friends, framed photographs, and treasured bottles of liquor. Each TV plays a different movie. The particular selection included in this exhibition consists of *Times Square* (1996),



*Marbleized Mommy*, 2001. Video still

*Untitled Photo Composition*, 2003. Plastic slipcovered framed black and white photographs and C-prints on enamel painted wood, colored vinyl and gold elastic cord. 48x48 inches. Collection Norman and Norah Stone. Courtesy Thea Westreich. Art Advisory.

*Party Girl Mommy* (1996), and *Winter* (2002), *Marbleize Mommy* (2002), and *Arnie's Chore* (1997). The home movies, like the photographs, are from a set of expanding, but interchangeable moments in Melee's life and his mother's life, clearly staged for the camera and clearly not like the typical self-made recordings of birthday parties and family reunions. The artist wields these images with the same casualness and offhand sensibility as his color palette of acid greens, orange, cream, violet, white and blue, yet the subject-matter of these movies often stops first-time viewers in their tracks, and even makes seasoned viewers, rethink their understanding of his work.

In *Marbleize Mommy*, Robert is shown painting the sagging flesh of his mother's breast with the same color palette and decorative technique, as the walls of the room that the viewer currently occupies. As a result, one can't help but both feel implicated and a little queasy in the artist's bizarre domestic

world. It's this feeling of complicity that is perhaps the most disturbing as it is safe to say that most viewers have neither "marbleized" their mothers nor wished to. Yet, taking analysis to a step beyond the prosaic, the work raises more significant questions: for one, why, do viewers who would never mistake reality with "reality TV" confuse the artifice and theatricality of Melee's home movies with reality? In another video work, *Times Square*, the artist seems to respond to such confusion. Here the cliché, wholesome young couple from the sticks comes to the big city to make their mark on Broadway. Yet every aspect of their venture is exaggerated and mannered: wearing costume-like clothing and theatrical make-up, they don't simply walk down the street, but high kick, do split leaps and turn cartwheels in the middle of the busy avenue. Their every movement telegraphs their theatrical ambitions so much so that they can no longer behave as if they are ever off-camera.

Melee subjects his family history and abstract painting to the same sensationalistic and gleefully artificial treatment. Every action recorded by Melee—whether as film or "bottle cap" painting, whether of his mother or his friends—bears this sense of being on camera: a quality that the artist himself describes as "Baloneyism." Baloney, a meat product of uncertain makeup, seems like the perfect metaphor for Melee's art: the basic materials are familiar and even banal, yet their effect is disturbing and jarring.

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