

Field Research Writing: *Brushstrokes*

Standing thirty feet tall and weighing 3,400 pounds, Roy Lichtenstein's *Brushstrokes*, constructed in 1996, is a brightly painted sculpture composed of fabricated aluminum. Visually, it consists of four broad "strokes" intersecting in different planes. Two large sections intersect to form an arch on which the sculpture supports itself. Because of its size and multi-planar nature, the sculpture lends itself to exploration by the viewer, who is free to walk around or through it, even touch it, as it is currently installed as public art in Sciences Park here at Brown University.

Personally I find its bright colors, large scale, and subject matter quite playful and intriguing. Yet, the work often seems dissonant with its surroundings, perhaps due to its bright colors, which seem out of place in the fall and winter, or its placement in an area primarily devoted to scientific inquiry, as it seems to self-reflexively address the artistic community. Overall though, these elements seem to add to its somewhat subversive appeal.

*Brushstrokes* can be informed from a computer graphics perspective in at least two ways. Firstly, it is evocative of what could best be described as a "vector aesthetic". Its edges are cleanly defined, almost as if by paths, and its colors solidly applied, as if they were fills. One section, containing alternating stripes of black and white within a yellow border, even appears to be a pattern fill. Each section of the sculpture also appears to be a discrete object or group of paths, unaffected by adjacent sections, as if it could be ungrouped and rearranged digitally. Secondly, the work's sculptural qualities are reminiscent of 3D computer graphics. Its cleanly defined

geometry and almost-texturelessness seem to allude in that direction, as does the apparent depthlessness of the surface texture. Interestingly, a ready analogy can be made to Cave Painting, as both *Brushstrokes* and Cave Painting attempt to conceive of painting as a three-dimensional art form. Several of the Cave Painting works also seem to exhibit a limited color palette composed primarily of textureless solids as well as sweeping, almost theatrical.

From an art history perspective, one of the aspects that makes *Brushstrokes* so interesting is Lichtenstein's attempt to conceive of painting in sculptural terms. Coming out of the pop art tradition, which focused on appropriating images from popular culture, Lichtenstein was renowned for his comic-like paintings. The bright colors and simple patterns and forms in *Brushstrokes* are similar to those from Lichtenstein's previous paintings based on comics. Pop art is also generally very self-reflexive, meaning that it comments significantly on itself as a work of art or on art discourse more generally. *Brushstrokes* picks up on this tradition by being a playfully self-referential sculpture about painting, calling into question the distinction between the two.

From a semiotics perspective, this blurring of the distinction between painting and sculpture can be interpreted as a challenge to the discourse of art practice more generally. It is often commented on how rigid the distinctions among the arts are within the art academy (be it art theory, art practice, or art criticism). Much like the distinction between computer art and "real" art is upheld by the dominant ideology of the art establishment, the distinction between painting and sculpture is rigidly embedded. In *Brushstrokes*, Lichtenstein challenges this separation, positing a work of art that can be

read as sculpture, as painting, or as both and prompting the viewer to come into conflict with dominant notions of what classifies each.

While the experience of art in and of itself is interesting, the above approaches help further expand the appreciation of visual work by contextualizing the piece either aesthetically, as is the case with a computer graphics perspective, historically, as is the case with art history, and culturally, as is the case with semiotics. Other theories contextualize in different ways, but the important thing to note is that each approach frames the work from a different angle, allowing for new avenues of approach and appreciation.

