



Early in his career as a copyist, André Pretorius was given a large commission about which his agent was especially taciturn. He was handed transparencies of a collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings—twenty works in all including a Van Gogh, a Renoir, two Monets, and an Alfred Sisley—and was told to reproduce them, to scale, in oils. Pretorius, a painter who lives in Brooklyn, produces most of his replicas for clients of a prominent auction house. The rationale behind his very specialized industry is that a client, faced with the prospect of parting with a treasured work, may want a memento to ease the strain of separation. This particular assignment was unusual in that the client was a buyer rather than a seller. The replicas were commissioned before the paintings had even left the holding room of the auction house, and they were needed, he was told, for “insurance reasons.”

A practice that shares so many of its techniques with forgery naturally generates some anxiety about fraud. At first Pretorius attributed the general reticence surrounding the job to this, but as it turned out, the explanation was more absurd than unethical. The client in this case was a collector from Florida who did a huge volume of business with the

auction house, buying and then reselling millions of dollars worth of art at a time. In addition to being an art lover, the collector was also an avid boatsman and kept an eighty-foot yacht that he used to entertain friends and business contacts. It had occurred to him that his newest purchases would go well on the boat. His advisers, as well as the horror-stricken auction house, forbade the installation on the grounds that humidity and salt air didn't promote the proper conservation of paintings. The replicas were a compromise: one set of paintings for the house, one set for the yacht. The paintings were made and sent to Florida, where they embarked on their endless voyage.

André Pretorius was born in Bloemfontien, South Africa and moved as a young man to New York, where he attended Cooper Union in the early 90s. He is very tall and walks with the habitual slight stoop of someone accustomed to ducking in the confined stairwells of New York apartment buildings or looking closely at small paintings. After graduating from Cooper Union's fine art program, where he only began painting in his senior year, he supported himself as an assistant to a decorative painter who specialized in high-end domestic murals. Pretorius and the other members of the crew—typically recent art students like himself—executed pastiches of historical paintings on the walls and ceilings of apartments all over New York. The house style was Rococo: Watteaus and Fragonards, verdant depictions of French pastoral life, cropped or combined to fit specific architectural spaces and decorating schemes.

Soon afterward Pretorius was recruited by Jeffrey Deitch, then working for the auction house, who needed someone to copy a painting for a client. The work in question was a small portrait by the Italian pre-Impressionist Boroni, showing a young woman standing in front of the Duomo in Florence. For Pretorius, who was by then skilled at duplicating complex 18th-century landscapes on the ceiling, an easel painting was a simple matter. Once his reliability had been established the jobs got more frequent and demanding: three of the same Van Gogh, multiple Picassos, a Rothko, and a Frida Kahlo. Later commissions included several large canvases by the English painter Alfred Munnings, several Georgia O'Keeffes, as well as a sideline gig making paintings for films: *Ocean's Eleven*, *Two Weeks Notice*, and *Gangs of New York*. Pretorius now takes on about three or four commissions a month in order to supplement the income from his own art. As a painter with a day job as a painter, Pretorius is mindful of the possibility of confusing one art with the other: he is at pains to keep his work separate from his work.

Advances in digital reproduction have made copying art cheaper and easier, facilitating a booming industry in replicas of all kinds and prices. A high-resolution, color-corrected digital photograph of a painting can be printed, at actual size, onto a canvas, using archival inks. The canvas

is stretched and completed by a painter who adds oil or acrylic paint to the image, replicating the texture of the original painting while using the printed reproduction as a guide. This technique guarantees fidelity to the original that is harder to achieve working by hand, while providing the physical qualities of oil paint that a strictly mechanical reproduction lacks. It is used in many contexts. In the nationwide studios of Thomas Kincaid, whose semi-unique, limited-edition paintings are produced in bulk, trained assistants put highlights and textural effects onto oil paintings made over photo-lithographs. A number of companies such as Shenzen Artlover operate in the village of Dafen, southern China, employing approximately ten thousand painters to produce five million replicas of European oil paintings per year.

The market for commissioned replicas is a specialized subset of the copy industry, in which artists command higher fees and deliver a level of attention and craftsmanship well above that of a mass-produced replica. Given the small size of the field and its air of gray-market furtiveness, practitioners regard one another with the wary interest of fellow criminals. Pretorius described a competitor in Amsterdam, whose skills as a copyist were highly sought after but who, as a rule, only reproduced Van Goghs. "I'm just a hit man," he said. "That guy's a serial killer."¹

For higher-end jobs, Pretorius works from scratch, gridding off the reproduction of a painting and transferring the composition to the canvas manually. For quicker copies, he paints directly on top of digital reproductions printed onto canvases or panels. As with any freelance work, speed of execution is of paramount importance to making money. Pretorius' largest commission came from a collector who had lost \$150 million worth of art in a divorce settlement—Modiglianis, Bonnard, Pissaros, Renoirs—and wanted quick copies—made before the works were auctioned off by his ex-wife. For this project, Pretorius toured the auction house with a set of digital reproductions of each work, made notes about color discrepancies and texture effects, and painted the twenty copies in two months.

Barring the occasional instance in which a client wants a replica to display publicly in place of the original (a benign form of fraud much like wearing paste jewelry to a gala), the purpose of Pretorius's copy is sentimental. It is intended not only to look like the original but also to evoke the same feelings in its owner as the original had. In this respect the success or failure of the replica often hinges on Pretorius's ability to simulate the physical condition of the painting—its patina of age and wear—which is sometimes its most evocative attribute.

Often before going up for auction a painting is cleaned and restored, which can substantially alter its appearance. Pretorius is encouraged by the auction house to base his replicas on the pre-restoration appearance of a painting, the version that the client has lived with and become attached to.

He has developed methods for simulating the discoloration and decay of old varnishes using contemporary materials: a coat of matte medium, when applied over a coat of slower-drying gold-leaf sizing, creates a surface tension imbalance that results in large, antique-looking cracks. A thin wash of earth-toned acrylics, brushed into the craquelure of the faux-varnish, dampens the brightness of fresh oil paint and completes the instant patina of the work.

Copying modern or contemporary paintings demands different applications of craft, and presents different problems. Pretorius was once hired to make a Warhol on spec for a prospective client of the auction house. For this job Pretorius matched the color of the original silk screen (a portrait of Elizabeth Taylor on a red ground) to the digitally printed canvas, stretched it, and sent it out for approval. Ultimately the client balked at licensing the replica, which created a minor legal issue. Under United States copyright law, works of art are protected from unauthorized reproduction for seventy years after the death of the artist. When the copyright on a work of art expires, making it part of the public domain, it is tacitly understood that the owner of the work controls the rights to its reproduction. But unlike most of the Impressionist works that Pretorius copies, the Warhol image was still protected by copyright and monitored by the watchful eye of the Warhol Foundation. This meant that the replica had to be unmade: the duplicate portrait was cut corner to corner with an X-acto knife, folded in half, and consigned to the dumpster.

Two mock 18th-century portraits Pretorius made for Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* came to an even worse end. In the climactic scene of the film, depicting the Civil War draft riots, a long montage of destruction pans the exterior of a well-kept building in flames. Two quick shots take us inside, where a head-and-torso painting of a well-dressed gentleman hangs in a dark room, framed by a curtain of fire.



A third, longer shot shows a close-up of a second painting: a child's smiling face, which blisters, blackens, and splits as it is consumed by flames. The elapsed time of the scene is four seconds. For this sequence of the film, Pretorius made three separate paintings. Each was made according to the distance from which it would be filmed: ten feet, five feet, and six inches. The child's portrait required a high degree of finish and took Pretorius several days to complete. The portrait of the man, which reads as an academic oil painting while on screen, was so loosely painted that it looks more like an Impressionist work in actuality.

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Though deception is a key part of his work, Pretorius is careful to monitor the context into which his replicas will be inserted. While the auction house emphasizes the sentimental purpose of the copies, it is always possible that some are intended for fraudulent, if not illegal, use. It's easy to imagine a simple scenario in which this could occur: a family trust owns a work of art. A member of the family decides to commission a replica, auction the original, keep the money, and substitute the replica. Given the power of context in deception—the same painting in the same frame, positioned as always above the mantle in the living room—even a reasonably well-executed copy could elude discovery for some time.

Years ago Pretorius was hired by an interior decorator in Miami to make a half-scale Cy Twombly chalkboard painting, based on one of the artist's signature works from the 60s. The painting would be hung in a house in Palm Beach. Pretorius doesn't attempt to simulate the paintings he copies on a material level: stretchers and canvases are new, and surfaces are treated with acrylic gessoes rather than any period-specific preparations. In the case of the Twombly, flipping the canvas over to reveal its brand-new support would be enough to dispel the illusion of its authenticity. But, he recalls, "if you just looked at the surface, it *really* looked like one."

He was working in a large studio building on Varick street at the time, and a fellow tenant —"a painter, a real purist"—happened to walk by and catch Pretorius in mid-copy, perched over the canvas with chalk in hand, emulating one of Twombly's studiously careless pictographic scrawls. Despite Pretorius's explanation, the neighbor took offense, and voiced his outrage at length. A friend of Pretorius', a painter named Ray Abeyta, who also took replica commissions, heard the story and found it amusing. He decided to take the matter to the supreme arbiter of contemporary moral dilemmas: Randy Cohen, author of the *New York Times* column "The Ethicist." Abeyta wrote:

I am an artist, and I support my family by painting reproductions of the work of more famous artists, a common practice in the tradition

of painting. However, some say this is akin to stealing the famous artists' work. Is it right for a wealthy client to commission a copy of a work available in the original? Is it wrong for an artist to accept the job?²

Before writing the column, Cohen called Abeyta, and his initial assessment was negative. “[Cohen] said, ‘I think what you guys are doing is really low-down,’” recalls Pretorius. Abeyta argued on behalf of the practice, citing its historical precedents: the Renaissance use of engravings to allow the circulation of an image to a wider audience, and the tradition in Chinese painting of emulating the works of previous masters. Eventually Cohen reversed his opinion and gave the copyists a clean ethical bill of health. After the column was published Abeyta got a flood of calls from people wanting paintings reproduced. He resolved a family dispute by making two copies of the same painting for twin daughters of a minor art collector. But, as if to qualify his endorsement of the practice, Cohen also wrote:

In a sense, great work is immune to imitation anyway. It's one thing to say you're going to paint a picture in the manner of Pollock, quite another to do it well. Your knockoff will inevitably lack essential Pollock qualities. The words “bad imitation” are a tautology: all imitations are inferior to—or at least different from—the original.³

Cohen's assured dismissal of the copyist's art rested on a concept of imitation with roots reaching back to Plato: if nature imitates the idea, and art is the imitation of nature, then art's imitation of art has departed quite far from truth. But even within the culture of the visual arts—which is generally more sympathetic to mimesis—copying elicits mixed feelings. In the connoisseur, copies produce the anxiety of acumen, the fear that a faux-Pollock may not only contain the essential qualities of the original, but that we may come to prefer it to the real thing. But imitations also produce an enjoyment similar to that of a trompe l'oeil effect: the minor thrill of a contained perceptual crisis.

Pretorius's work can be situated between two related art practices that engage directly with the pleasure and anxiety of replication: appropriation art and forgery. In the early 80s, appropriation was a central term in a set of art practices intended to rewrite the rules of authorship in the visual arts. Artists such as Sherrie Levine, Haim Steinbach, and Richard Prince borrowed images and objects from art history, advertising, and the marketplace in order to question what role context plays in establishing the meaning and value of a work of art. The discourse surrounding these practices was a composite of ideas from diverse sources: Walter Benjamin's attack on the auratic quality of the unique work of art,

Roland Barthes's thesis of the death of the author, and Jean Baudrillard's economic analyses of signs.

Intended to critique the modernist ideal of innovation, the appropriation art of the 80s manifested itself primarily in sculpture, photography, and video: genres peripheral to the key American modernist pursuit of painting. But a tradition of appropriation artists who focused on painting had been active in the United States much earlier, and with a more ambiguous relationship to their subject matter. Elaine Sturtevant began exhibiting her meticulously remade versions of Andy Warhols, Frank Stellas, and other important paintings in the 60s. In a nearly parallel development, Richard Pettibone made exquisite miniature versions of similar works: Warhol's soup cans, Jasper Johns's flags, Lichtenstein's comic strips. Beginning in the early 80s, Mike Bidlo spent twenty years working through the techniques of modernist masters, from Picasso to Pollock, reconstructing their methodologies and often recreating their signature works as a form of performance art. He once painted Picasso's *Guernica* in public, at the Gagosian gallery in Los Angeles. It took him, he said, “about the same time it took Picasso.”⁴

Extending Marcel Duchamp's premise of the readymade—going so far as to reproduce the artist's famous urinal and bottle rack—Bidlo explored the fetishism at work in our relationship to modernist art. Though discussed in relation to more politicized appropriation artists like Levine and Prince, Bidlo's work was less a critique of originality than an attempt to isolate it experimentally. It was also self-consciously close to another type of third-order mimesis, forgery. And in the popular imagination, Bidlo's work has tended to push the same emotional buttons that forgery does: outrage coupled with the admiration of skillful deception.

One could assemble a lineage of late-20th-century forgers to parallel that of the appropriation artists. Eric Hebborn was a semi-successful painter and private art dealer who in the late 50s turned to emulating the works of the old masters. He copied the styles of painters as diverse as Mantegna and Rubens, working with carefully selected antique papers, paints, and canvases, and eventually passing his homages off as originals. In his autobiography he boasted of selling thousands of his own forgeries to collectors and museums, and railed against the pretensions of connoisseurship in the art world. Chang Dai-chien is said to have produced over 30,000 paintings in his lifetime, in a wide variety of Eastern and Western styles and techniques. The exact extent of his oeuvre is unclear because he sold many of these as works by the original masters. His command of multiple historical styles of Chinese painting was extensive, and fifteen years after his death, museums are still working to cull his forgeries from their collections.

John Myatt, a self-taught English forger, produced hundreds of fake Chagalls, Matisse's, Graham Sutherlands, and others in the 1980s.

He worked in collusion with John Drewe, an art dealer who acted as his agent. Drewe fabricated and altered documents to ensure the success of the forgeries—presented as atypical works by twentieth-century masters—and passed them off at auction and on the private market. Once the enterprise was uncovered, Myatt revealed the unorthodox details of his method: the modern masterpieces, which had until then deceived the world, were painted using enamel paints thinned with κ-γ Jelly.

Appropriation and forgery thematize authorship in different ways. Time and again in accounts of the lives of forgers one finds the exaggerated affectation of an artistic persona, mirroring the forger's imitation of an artist's style: John Myatt was better known as a minor pop-music star before he took up painting. Chang Dai-chien wore archaic Buddhist robes and kept monkeys and tigers as pets on his estate in Brazil. And Eric Hebborn, in true Caravaggist manner, was bludgeoned to death in Rome.

Compared to the forgers, appropriationists tend to turn themselves into ciphers. Mike Bidlo describes his work in self-consciously impersonal terms, emphasizing the subordination of artistic ego involved in his practice. Richard Pettibone maintains a level of personal privacy that is at odds with the prominence of his work. And Elaine Sturtevant often drops her first name in print, to both efface and draw attention to the issue of gender in the meaning of her work.

Forgery is romantic, appropriation is not. In forgery, deception reinforces the central values of Western art: authenticity, genius, craft, and uniqueness. When we are taken in by a forgery, the extent of our personal connoisseurship is called into question, but the concept of connoisseurship remains intact. Appropriation, however, questions the system of thought in which knowing the original from the copy is meaningful.

Always subject to popular misunderstanding, the discourse of appropriation art starts to unravel when it encounters the language of commerce. Sherrie Levine's appropriations of Walker Evans's photographs were suppressed in a copyright lawsuit filed by Evans's estate. Richard Prince is often engaged in legal disputes over the ownership of the images he employs. But there are more felicitous examples: after spending years making his own Jackson Pollocks, Mike Bidlo was hired by the producers of the movie *Pollock* to teach actor Ed Harris how to make the artist's paintings on-screen, effectively distilling a life's work of philosophical speculation on the artistic act into a single lesson in Method acting. And as Haim Steinbach began appropriating more and more valuable objects for his sculptures, he ran into a dilemma of appraisal:

When my work began to be successful, each piece—the shelves with objects—was priced the way you price a work of art: Here's a work of art, and this is what the price is. Of course, that becomes a problem,

because if my work is going for \$12,000, what happens when you have a group of objects worth \$30,000?⁵

Conversely, forgers can also recontextualize their work, emphasizing its conceptual interest to followers of contemporary art. Following his arrest and nominal jail sentence, John Myatt experienced a minor career renaissance, marketing himself as a painter of “genuine fakes.” The public discussion of his work now alludes, in reverse, to the same issues of originality and context that characterize appropriation art:

In an age when a broken-down hut can win the Turner prize and Damien Hirst can make millions flogging “spot” paintings produced by teams of assistants, Myatt is hoping that his venture will be seen as a refreshing take on the question of what constitutes art. “So many things today are invented,” he says. “I think genuine fakes slot into that rather nicely. With a fake painting, you're free to ask, does it go with the curtains? You can't do that with a genuine Van Gogh because it's worth millions.”⁶



When I visited Pretorius in his home studio, on the top floor of an incongruously small wooden house on a block of warehouses in Greenpoint, he'd just returned from a week in Indiana. A prominent family there owned an architecturally important home and had decided to open it to the public as a walk-through museum. To curtail the cost of insurance for the project, they were considering replacing their collection of 19th- and early-20th-century art with replicas. This way, spectators could walk through the actual house but view ersatz artworks, much like visitors to Lascaux who enter a real cave to be shown meticulous re-creations of its cave paintings. Pretorius arrived with a group of wooden panels overlaid

with printed reproductions of many of the family's works. His job was to check the color accuracy of the panels and produce a few samples of his work to show the clients. This entailed setting up his travel easel in the hall of the house and working from the paintings in situ as the family went about its business.

In his studio Pretorius had two identical Matisse's, which I took at first to be an original and his copy, but were in fact two copies: one he had made on site in Indiana, and a second one for another member of the family who had grown up with the work. Compared to many earlier painters, Matisse's technique was straightforward: where an artist like Boroni used a complex series of undercoats and glazes to achieve his effects, an early Matisse is composed of a few translucent washes of turpentine-thinned oils punctuated by daubs of impasto. However, this simplicity made the Matisse harder to duplicate than a traditional oil painting. Rather than employing a formula that could be replicated, copying the Matisse demanded that Pretorius translate the artist's haphazard *alla prima* style into a series of repeatable steps.

Interspersed in his studio with the replicas and related ephemera were Pretorius's own paintings. While staying within a consistent realist style, Pretorius's paintings have changed over the past few years from Pop-surrealist depictions of dreamlike scenarios to increasingly caustic satires of the culture of contemporary art. I asked the artist what, if any, effect his copying has had on his "real" painting. Pretorius deadpanned: "I used to be much more precious about it. I would use thirty or forty glazes to build up a really nice surface. What [copying] has taught me is to do it quick, fast, and cheap. Don't waste your time getting an immaculate surface because nobody really cares and very few people will appreciate it."

It's apparent, however, that the replicas and the originals are related in more ways than Pretorius himself would divulge. The messenger-bag-toting, faux-hawked, blazer-clad youth in *The Prince* (2005),



ANDRÉ PRETORIUS, *THE PRINCE*, 2005. COURTESY ZIEHERSMITH.

could be the great-great-grandson of the unnamed gentleman whose portrait is torched in *Gangs of New York*. Pretorius's presentation of contemporary fashion in the self-consciously stiff, academic manner of early American art is an excoriating satire of both the vagaries of fashion and the pretensions of painting.

These themes of history, originality, and technique are given an even more outré treatment in *Self Portrait* (2007), a *grand machine* of sorts that depicts a digitally rendered ape in a disheveled studio painting an academic portrait of a young artist. The elements of the painting, much like those in Courbet's *The Painter's Studio*, serve as an index of Pretorius's concerns and, as in Courbet's work, establish a hierarchy of representation. The ape is taken from Pretorius's son's favorite video game: "He's Donkey Kong's cousin," says Pretorius, "I think his name is Diddy Kong." Diddy Kong is copying a photograph of a male model wearing a gray collared shirt, suspenders, and paint-splattered pants. The photograph, clipped from a fashion spread in a magazine, is collaged onto the center of the canvas and shown resting on a music stand. The painting on the easel is a blown-up and skewed reproduction of the photo, made by the same printer that produces Pretorius's replica backgrounds. The scene is captured in *medias res*, with the portrait on the easel half-covered with smoothly blended *chiaroscuro* oils. Diddy Kong himself is painted to emulate the simplified renderings of slightly outmoded computer graphics. The ape's studio evokes a midcentury New York bohemia: a grimy radiator, peeling wallpaper, a tin ceiling, and the edge of a tenement window.

The painting's deliberate garishness, its discordant styles, and its jarringly keyed-up palette, seem like a calculated assault on the culture of connoisseurship in which Pretorius finds himself embedded; it is difficult to imagine auction agents and collectors of Impressionist paintings clucking over the nuances of brushwork in Diddy Kong's fur. Yet if one accepts the extravagant terms of the painting, its allegory is much more sophisticated than the classic painter-as-monkey theme. In fact, it presents a specific and bleak model of the state of painting circa 2007: the artist as a mindless extension of entertainment technology, endlessly aping an alienated model of creativity and existing in a space of simulated historicity. Or, as Pretorius calls it, "some kind of postmodern hell."

1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are taken from conversations between the author and André Pretorius, Spring 2007.

2 Randy Cohen, "The Ethicist: The Art of Faking It," *New York Times*, November 19, 2000.

3 Ibid.

4 "Mike Bidlo talks to Robert Rosenblum," *Artforum*, April 2003.

5 "Haim Steinbach talks to Tim Griffin," *Artforum*, April 2003.

6 Mark Honigsbaum, "The Master Forger," *The Guardian*, December 8, 2005.