

# On Andy Messerschmidt & *Monolith Mode*

by: Christopher Atkins

Increasingly we emerge as the possessors of many voices. Each self contains a multiplicity of others, singing different melodies, different verses, and with different rhythms. Nor do these many voices necessarily harmonize. At times they join together, at times they fail to listen one to another, and at times they create a jarring discord.

– Kenneth Gergen

Andy Messerschmidt began his *Agroccult* series almost 20 years ago. The title for the series is a neologism, a combination of agriculture + occult. Making up words acknowledges the limitations of language, creating a continuity between two terms that have, so far, not been combined. Like other neologisms, agroccult is a word as well as a thesis; it's a concept that gives Messerschmidt plenty of room to explore the cultural clash of ideas concerning natural landscapes and belief systems, what he sees as the "fetishization of the Earth" and religious devotions to nature.

The project now includes more than 900 square format paintings, 10 x 10 inches each, a selection of which are on display in his solo exhibition *Monolith Mode* at the Nemeth Art Center. Unpacking the agroccult is like opening a grilled cheese sandwich. Messerschmidt's paintings conflate representations of the natural landscape with the variety of religions. Pick your favorite, they're all here: classical mythology, Islam, Paganism, Capitalism, Animism, Christianity, Buddhism, hippy crystal magic, and deer hunters who live by the motto, "It's better to be thinking about God while hunting than think about hunting in church."

What we call the occult is a way of understanding the world that is yoked with magic and hidden knowledge, very different than fact-based epistemologies. But that, as Messerschmidt would argue, sets up a false binary, "I believe one can't easily mention the word utopia without immediately conjuring up the word dystopia. The sacred becomes profane and vice versa."

Ceremonies and rituals, such as harvest festivals, are repeated cultural expressions that mark and respond to seasonal changes throughout the year. Messerschmidt has painted a variety of celebrations that occur on sites of consecrated ground and desecrated terrain, such as battlefields, the Hajj, and political demonstrations on the National Mall. Like the calendar that sets a pace for our annual celebrations, the grid is a well-known formal arrangement used by artists, especially early modernists and minimalists, that sets a compositional balance with vertical and horizontal lines.

Messerschmidt also uses lines, grids, mirroring, and symmetry as organizing features of his work. The arrangement of Agroccult paintings in Monolith Mode contains 168 squares, arranged 7 high by 24 across. Hanging them in a grid such as this, whether it's the hours in a week or days in a month, makes it easier to see the compositional differences and conceptual repetitions in every square, from left to right and up and down. But the grid, as it was written about by art theorists in the 1970s, has evolved to become the format for social media user experiences, specifically the endless scrolling screenscapes of Instagram, Twitter, and Flipboard.

It can appear as if Messerschmidt's paintings are pulled into random and free-associative directions, riffing on a theme then moving on like an improvisational musician. Multiphrenia is the name for a cultural condition of hyper-engagement that can lead to a fracturing of singular concepts such as truth, authentic, and coherent. Messerschmidt describes this condition as "this generation's biggest asset and boon coupled with an overwhelmingly crippling handicap for artists."

But it's the type of social science-anthropology-cultural studies best performed by artists since it's not footnoted or peer-reviewed as it skims across disciplines, collaging images, and making up the terms as it goes along. It's hard to sip from the firehose but being aware of and in control of this creative mode makes Messerschmidt uniquely capable of expressing the range and contradictions of the images and texts he absorbs.

You'll notice this when you look at his *Altar Ego* and *Death Star* paintings and drawings. They're much larger and more intricate statements about religion, and use formal qualities such as decoration, repetition, and flatness that almost collapse under the weight of what he calls "uber-ornamentation."

Look closely at *Prestige Principle* and you'll see, "arabesques mingled with clip art. Holographic wrapping paper pasted next to wrapping paper run through a scanner. Candy striping meets plastic Easter basket grass. Rorschach blots are imbedded beneath hard edge geometry. Cut wallpaper drips with Halloween blood." These pieces emerged from Messerschmidt's research into religious architecture, specifically the portals, doorways, and gates that mark the progression from one plane to another, like the false doors of Egyptian tombs that served as passages to the afterlife.

The organizing principle of these works is a rigid symmetry; each piece is divided so that the halves meticulously resembles the other. *I Speak With the Disk* is a pen and ink drawing mounted to a piece of machine-routed board. The image resembles a massive insect's compound eye, with dozens of hexagonal ommatidia. It's when you step closer that you see the surface is actually an intricate maze of squiggly guts and brains that cover the 4' diameter surface. There's one way in and one way out but here's a clue: Messerschmidt designed the solution to the maze based on saccades.

These are point-and-line drawings of rapid eye movements that record how the human digests an image. For example, they can be used to chart how someone explores the surface of a computer screen then returns to specific features such as a headline or advertisement. In this case, the solution to the maze is based on a famous saccade experiment from 1968 that recorded how a person looked at a drawing of the bust of Queen Nefertiti.

As I walked through the exhibition, absorbing Messerschmidt's interest in language and history, I thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley's famous poem *Ozymandias*:

I met a traveler from an antique land,  
Who said – "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. . . .  
Near them, on the sand, Half sunk a shattered visage lies,  
whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on  
these lifeless things, The hand that mocked them,  
and the heart that fed;  
And on the pedestal, these words appear:  
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Messerschmidt reminds me of that traveler; he's also a storyteller making his way through a landscape, watching as time and nature make a mockery of the monuments that were built to last forever.