

# Missoulian

## Pills, art and euphoria

**BEN BLOCH for the Missoulian | Posted: Thursday, November 18, 2004 12:00 am**

Exploring the powers of medication and creation

Twelve years ago, there were no commercials for prescription medications on television. Now, as we all know, advertisements for drugs like Zoloft, Nexium (the purple pill), Viagra, Ambien and Vioxx are rampant. Tagged with logos and slogans, it seems as if they are everywhere we turn.

Thus the subject of pills - and their current prominence in the culture - makes them into a curious topic (and material) that easily finds metaphors in art.

First, consider the function of a pill. When the physical object is eaten and dissolved, the effect is intensely transformative. It alters our emotions as well as our physical sensations. Today's pharmaceuticals could - perhaps should - be considered the equivalent of the alchemists' potions from centuries past.

The way that pills take effect within the body is most often a mystery to the person who takes the pill. We might know what kind of feeling to expect, but short of a Ph.D. in chemistry, the reasons for a pill's effects have a miraculous aspect to them.

It is for this reason that so much folklore, old and new, uses the allegory of the "magic pill," as in "The Matrix," the film that made the choice between "the red pill" and "the blue pill" into an epic philosophical decision.

Second, consider the visual allure of pills. They are perfect, small, mass replicated, imprinted and/or stylized units of material designed for the purpose of bodily ingestion.

An assortment of pills, grouped together in numbers as they often are, is almost always an image with the right balance of unity and variety. Unity because pills are all designed with the same general function in mind: to slip down the throat and dissolve as easily as possible. Yet their variety comes from the fact that we must be able to distinguish one type of pill from another. Some we use to sleep, some to boost our energy, others to improve our mood or to relieve pain.

One well-known contemporary artist who works with pills - both as a subject and as a material - is Fred Tomaselli. In his paintings, Tomaselli creates intricate compositions using a wide variety of small objects: plants, insects, and, most prominently, dozens of different pills.

A statement on his work explains that using psycho-active plants, toxins and pills "raises the question of whether the act of ingesting chemicals and the visual pleasures of looking at art are parallel experiences transporting one into another reality.

"Painting has traditionally been seen as a window onto another reality, a kind of rectangular utopia of relief. (He) is interested in the relationship between this myth and the broader culture that contains it. Š (his) work aims to be escapist while simultaneously exploring the perceptual and cultural dynamics of escapism."

Not only do Tomaselli's arrangements remind viewers of both Eastern and Western art practices, but also of both Eastern and Western medical practices, and perhaps most importantly, of medical practice as art.

Another fascinating art project using pills in a more direct way is a now infamous -and ever more relevant - performance by Yugoslavia-born artist Marina Abramovic. In a 1974 public performance in a gallery in Zagreb, she took two medications - one designed to calm schizophrenics, and one designed to roust catatonic patients. In front of the audience, she allowed the catatonic pill to cause her muscles to contract violently, completely losing control of her body for a 50-minute period.

After a 10-minute break, she took the second pill, which caused her to forget who and where she was for six hours.

Such a performance, it seems to me, where the artist completely gives herself over to chemical effect (and emphasizes the use of pills

to do so) creates a striking metaphor for one being inhabited and transformed by an artistic fervor.

Finally, it's fascinating to consider the value of pills in our society, since in some sense, the potential feelings they offer make them difficult to obtain and pricey - characteristics not dissimilar to works by sought-after artists.

Indeed, it sometimes seems as though we live in an age where the escape and/or mental expansion once offered by "art" may be more often - for better or worse - achieved at the pharmacy.

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