

The Imagery and Symbolism of Matt Sesow's Paintings

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Since 1994, Matt Sesow has consistently relied on a unique set of "icons" and imagery to help communicate the meaning of his paintings. Below are descriptions, written by Sesow, as to how these reoccurring and significant "visual clues" might be used to help people better understand the story and intention of a Matt Sesow painting.



The Bunny is a character I attribute to being a bit of 'self portrait' icon. it refers to the idea that a bunny is neither predator nor prey to people or other animals. historically and from the beginning, the bunny has represented me, as the little boy on the grassy runway, happily scurrying around... then, out of nowhere, being struck by a foe or a predator, like a fox or a rabid dog, but my predator was an airplane. In the current sense, it relates to my intent not harm others (being a vegetarian and 'pacifist')... although a 'violent' or unsettled darkness exists within me, as I suppose does with others which conveniently might help explain the other things going on around most of my bunnies in several of the paintings.

The bunny's mouth is often represented to resemble my 'trauma scar' icon. It's a nod to the fact that I 'talk about it' and that I paint feelings related to trauma and how they might relate to innocence/childhood.

The Trauma Scar: Having experienced a series of surgeries as a child following the accident which claimed my left hand, i continue to remember one surgery in particular which left a scar, still visible, on my left arm which resulted in a line with 3 dashes. The surgery was to 'shorten the muscle' so that i would be able to more easily bend my arm. the doctors said it was so i could scratch my nose with what was left of my left arm. The shortening of the muscle surgery was quite painful... to this day, pressure or a 'hit' to the scar, causes pain... a reminder 'icon'.



The Trauma Cup:

A trauma cup is a place to put, keep, hold, and 'produce' the emotion. I think of my apartment/studio as the trauma cup. sometimes it has to be in my mind... I think of painting as a trauma cup. it is a place where i can let loose of inhibitions and explode in a variety of manner... typically with paint. it is where most of what you see as my paintings are produced. without the trauma cup, i would not be able to paint, i would not be 'healthy'. the trauma cup has been a key to my healing.



Lips and Teeth:

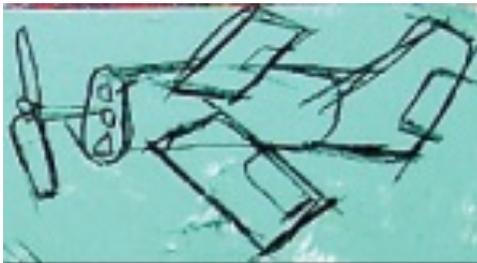
My favorite color is 'soviet red'... a nod to the intensity of the propaganda posters used during the cold war, that's why the lips have to be pure red. When i started painting, i was frustrated

by the static nature of paintings. by using slashing lines and 'punching the painting' i try to get motion and emotion. by using huge lips, and long rows of teeth, i want the viewer to see or guess if there is a smile, a frown, a grimace, yelling, screaming, reaction. emotion.



The Casket:

I feel that this image/icon is fairly self-explanatory; however, I use it to remind myself that I am very lucky to be alive. The trauma scar on the casket represents the feeling others have that the person is deceased. sometimes I put flags on the casket. having been alive during the wars with Iraq and Afghanistan, I oftentimes put the flags of those countries or America in my paintings... when making a statement about the war/occupations.



The Airplane:

For my paintings, the airplane has represented evil... it is the 'great amputator', the bomber, the one that destroys summer evenings. it usually shows up when i 'paint by remembers' and when trying to make a statement about one of the many aggressive actions countries with power take against innocent civilians (as if the civilian is the bunny).



The Eyes:

As many, i see the eyes as a pathway to the soul, the 'tell no lies' part of everybody. I use eye color to help tell the story of my subject. two orange is evil or aggressive, two blue is innocent

or ignorant, one blue and one orange is balanced. A mix of blue and orange on each pupil represents a sort of 'self actualization' or complexity/mystery (in other words, the translation is left to the viewer). One eye hidden or closed produces the same effect.



The Rising Phoenix:

The Rising Phoenix, as it usually appears to be rising, represents the idea of a body/animal/bird rising from despair and defeat to fight and continue to fly, despite impossible odds (having one wing). To me it represents my current state of mind while creating the painting, or the state of mind of the person(s) in the painting. It is a barometer of mental state... am i up, down, or just coasting? If the phoenix/bird is pointing down, then that signifies depression, failure or self loathing... that i must try harder. If the phoenix/bird is pointed horizontal, it signifies a confidence in self without need or desire to change or challenge; however, there is no struggle and thus not much artistic growth. A rising or a declining phoenix is the best for good art and means that i am being challenged.



The Star:

This symbol is associated to the business model i use for the sale and marketing of my paintings. It is my nod to the socialist polity. The idea that original paintings (not prints) are for the masses, for the people, not just a select few within the bourgeois.



The Bull:

This is a symbol i began to embrace and develop while preparing for my first solo exhibition in Europe ('sesow in barcelona', 2009). i was extremely nervous and felt vulnerable. but i realized that rather than be a bunny, i needed to be a bull. a controlled bull. i needed confidence and strength. the bull represents an update to the 'controlled chaos' that ruled my paintings in the 1990's. the 90's were my decade of 'victim paintings'. the new century was about growth and confidence for me. the bull is smiling. he is nice. you won't eat him. and he won't attack you. but he is very

strong, confident, and he oftentimes has a bunny, a rising phoenix, a trauma cup, or a star inside to keep him honest and to make him remember and remain slightly vulnerable.



The Red Circle:

The red circle is about focusing the viewer on the importance of a story being told by the painting. most times, the circle is to draw the viewer around the unique characteristics of one of the figures in the painting. what makes the circled object unique.

Oftentimes the circle will be around a word, which is a nod to a trip i took to new york city in the 90's after being contacted by an art magazine publisher. the magazine invited me to the city to talk about my art... a close bus ride from dc, i naturally accepted. the magazine publisher raved about my art, the art of the fresh 1990's matt sesow. his advice to me was to write words on my paintings. after i told him i had no money to advertise in his magazine i left the city... but i kept the advice.



The Stomach:

The stomach of my subjects is oftentimes a self-portrait stomach. it symbolizes the true nature or biology of 'the painted'. the person being highlighted may seem confident and in control; however the stomach is extended and swirling. it is full of self-doubt, stress, and a general feeling of uncomfortable. It is my stomach when anybody looks at my paintings. it is my stomach at every opening i ever attend that has one or 100 of my paintings. it is the look of full and satiated, but the feeling is empty and unsure.



The Dogs:

'The dogs' are a result of a multitude of influences. first, they associate comfortably with the tag i had been given at the early part of my art career as a folk or outsider artist. to me they are crude, colorful, and loud. the primary influence of my dog paintings were birthed while i was at my first artist residency, in ciudad colon, costa rica (2003). i was juried into an art commune to paint for one month. the location was perfect, and it was my first away-paint-only trip. i found the residency to be inspirational, i painted over 100 works, but the largest influence was the 'interruption' of other artists, interested tourists, and the constant barking dogs. so my dogs, my 'folk art dogs', are representative and dedicated to artists being asked to create 'on demand' and in non-familiar surroundings.... with the best intentions.

like all my paintings, they are a message to myself, a reminder, a historical marker.

'the dogs' are very successful. so to me, that makes them even more meaningful. they are like a complex rising phoenix of multi-colors, but also very noisy.



The Raised Fist:

The raised fist represents resistance and struggle against doing the things that are expected of me. especially when considering the pressure to stick in the computer engineering software field of the 1990's. it was from the corporate internet software boom that i was birthed. my art and expression happened in the evenings and on weekends, as if in secret. i would attend corporate meetings on mondays with paint splattered all over my hand and arm.

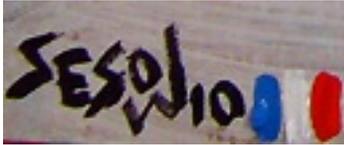


i might as well have raised my fist at the meeting and declared myself an artist. a nod to the raised fist icon of the black panthers is a result of my liberal arts education in college and semester of african american studies.



The Breasts / Nipples:

Pointy-extended-nipples represent the innate desire, and the 'look but don't touch.



The Signature:

Pronunciation of my name can be difficult ("see-so"). i adopted my signature style to try to help people in pronouncing my name, putting the 'W' low. When i paint overseas or in unique situations, i put an icon next to my signature to identify the situation in which the painting was created (france/spain/africa/etc...)



The Three Circles:

Loosely, it is a nod to Christian upbringing and the trinity., to not loose faith. more directly, it signifies 'knowledge, mastery, and experience'... the object with the 3 circles has a skill or ability that can not be easily conquered. many times it deals with



flight. when there are more than 3 circles, it signifies false mastery and over compensating. the 3 circles relate to the trauma scar and it's 3 dashes (circles representing 'in progress' or incomplete and without edge/the sharp line).



The Guardian Angel:

After being hit by the airplane in 1975 and awakening in the hospital in the intensive care unit, i have a vague, likely romanticized memory, of being presented with a choice of to go in peace and die or choose to live with a challenging and interesting life. it's as if i had some sort of guardian angel giving me direction. anyways, i remember choosing the interesting life path. i put the guardian angels in my paintings at the most important moments.

