



## *BUY A CARDIGAN AND THE HOLOCAUST PAINTING IS HALF PRICE*

BY YOLI (YOANNA) TERZIYSKA

About eight years ago, before J.Crew arrived in Toronto, I was having a conversation with a colleague at the University of Toronto. He was an Art History PhD from Ohio, who specialized in medieval Italian church frescoes and dressed like the quintessential preppy yuppie: buttoned-down gingham cotton shirts, khaki pants, Clarks. He complained about how he couldn't shop in Toronto, because it hadn't yet caught up with "civilization" by having a J.Crew.

Recently, I found myself wandering one of Toronto's J.Crew locations for the first time. I harbored great expectations, remembering his words. The clothes weren't really my taste, nor was the cacophony of eager shoppers descended after the Christmas holidays to find a bargain among the otherwise pricey attire. What caught my attention instead was their particular choice of visual merchandising: hundreds of art books, for sale, displayed amongst the neatly arranged piles of folded denim and t-shirts, or placed as pedestals for this season's suede leopard print heels. I look at the books' subjects, most of them artist monographs, including Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter, Louise Bourgeois, Wassily Kandinsky, Josef Albers, Abstract America, Robert Smithson, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Dan Flavin, etc.



Via Ivan Ogilvie/Selectism

The impulse for referencing art (especially modern and contemporary) in public locations that ostensibly have very little to do with art seems to go way back. The predilection, of course, seems most commonly to be for Modern Abstraction—you will find modern abstract paintings and their derivatives adorning the walls of neighborhood banks, dentists' waiting rooms, the home décor sections in department stores, and restaurant restrooms. The preponderance of abstract paintings on hotel walls places the art movement in a strange place, hovering between the giant gap of cheap commercial kitsch and high brow—abstraction is, after all, the art of the *modern genius*, though the modern genius today is, arguably, dead.

Looming figures like Pollock and de Kooning dominate the western art historical cannon; they have been written about, referenced, bought, sold, and reproduced on mugs and t-shirts for decades. Now, they stand as consumable idols immortalizing a past, with images of a man smoking a cigarette in his studio surrounded by his good paintings created in a perfect moment, with his perfect gesture. Because these artists and their work stand for something romantic, respected, and bygone, it is almost inevitable that they have entered the commercial sector to help sell a certain image or lifestyle. The average consumer (in stores of the socio-economic calibre of J.Crew) does not need to have an art history degree to recognize that abstraction has a complex history, that it's reputable and often expensive, and maybe that that guy Pollock was an alcoholic.



Looking at the selection of books displayed at J.Crew, I wondered: is there any type of art out there that *cannot* be commercialized? Is there art that can resist? Perhaps not. This may be proven by the presence of several artists in the store's selection that do not fit with the brands that Kandinsky and Pollock now represent—namely, Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer. There are several different editions for the two contemporary German painters carefully displayed on small wooden easels throughout the store, including one Kiefer book found between the "Tilly Cardigan" and J. Crew's custom iPhone cases. The issue with using a book on Kiefer as retail décor is simple: the painter and sculptor's output embodies the horrors of a recent history, in particular, the Holocaust. Common themes that he addresses are concentration camps, World War II Nazi rule and its inhumane sadistic behavior towards Holocaust prisoners, human suffering, death and decay. Kiefer's oeuvre is well respected by critics and academics for its representation of the ugliness of twentieth century history and controversial, taboo issues that few brave to approach today.

Nor does Richter's presence at J.Crew fall short in its problematic nature. Like Kiefer, a number of his paintings concern a dark German past. A book on his portraiture, displayed as a centerpiece above a rack with the 2015 Spring Collection, entails paintings showing the deceased captured criminals from the Red Army Faction (RAF) which took place in the 1970s. The RAF was a criminal socialist group that sprung in opposition to Germany's fascist past, instigating palpably familiar and unwanted radical attitudes within a recovering post-World War II German society. The RAF became a controversial topic, largely kept out of sight, and was later critically addressed by Richter in his haunting 1988 paintings with titles such as *Man Shot Down* and *Dead*. The titles are a stark and unforgiving reflection of the canvas' portayals.



Thus, the issue with having such artists present at J.Crew for decorative purposes is far more sinister than meets the eye. A painful history inadvertently becomes the target of consumerism, carried in the vessel of another casualty: art. Kiefer and Richter command millions of dollars in the art world—just last week Richter became the most expensive living artist in Europe. Their works are inherently commercialized. But there's nevertheless something cynical about seeing their artwork—and what their artwork represents—displayed as a prop to sell an image of luxury, intellect, or Culture. Could these topics, works, and artists become clichéd like Pollock and Kandinsky, and also enter what seems to be the inevitable cycle of popular consumption? Will Kiefer and Richter begin representing a certain label and become celebrities?

I tried to find why J.Crew decided to display art books as eye-catching decoration and merchandise. The answers I received from a representative in visual merchandising were that the editions compliment the store's aesthetic and current product. Their vision is to make creative cross-references between designers and artists, and also promote education. The books do bring pops of color. And the white tees look just fantastic next to a Kiefer.



—Yoli (Yoanna) Terziyska

(All images courtesy of the author, unless otherwise noted)

Posted by Yoli (Yoanna) Terziyska on 2/19/15

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