

Applying a range of Critical Theories, identify and discuss an artwork of your own choosing



Maya Rochat is a contemporary artist, renowned for her experimental approach throughout her art. Using her photographic skills as a base for her work and her wider skills to play with layering, she physically changes the saturations and textures of her work. This artwork amongst her "*A Rock is a River*" collection called "*Meta Tree*" (2017) portrays exactly that with the layers imposed over it adding an artificial alteration that opposes the subject at the centre being a natural. I believe, by looking into the theory of semiotics and considering how Rochat's final pieces such as this were gathered, it will allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the artist's intentions. Furthermore, I will consider the implications of how this work has been created in a modern context and why that may affect how we interpret its meaning.

Image: "*A Rock is a River (Meta Tree)*"

Rochat realised early within her studies at ECAL University in Switzerland how restrictive the typical approach of photography was, choosing to instead pioneer in experimenting with the creation of editing images further within the printing stage. Looking at the image, it will only be truly appreciated by breaking it down into each element and observing what they mean individually compared to together. The theory of semiotics plays heavy into the identification of every aspect of the image, seeing this photograph as a sign holding a signifier. This means "the form that the sign takes and the signified as the concept to which it refers" (Chandler, 2007 pg15) are both tied together by whatever is depicted within the piece that we have had an association developed with. The base shot is of a tree initially preserved as a photograph, the tree itself then acting as a signifier that evokes related concepts of nature, life and greenery. The signified, however, is presented to us in a way different from our day-to-day experience of a "tree"; bark that is ordinarily brown in colour has been augmented in production to oversaturate into a purple. It prompts us to address that aspect of the work on its own, too, with the reason for the colouration being the use of additional chemicals in the print. Added manually by Rochat herself, it actively went against the assumed intentions of gathering the image. The colour of "pink" itself widely signifies positives in how we interpret imagery and themes, in western culture being associated with love, compassion and sensitivity. Despite this, the method of presenting this colour contrasts with the medium it was implemented through. It is imposed onto the nature, life, greenery signified by the tree via chemicals and resulting in the original signifier to be altered. As a result, it changes how we interpret the sign.

As the piece was created in 2017, surrounding contexts of the time are important to consider. 2016 had held the title of the hottest year to date (before the current year of 2023), induced by the worsening state of climate change on the planet. With this outside context to apply to the time of creation, and considering the process of Rochat's "*Meta Tree*", her process of overlaying chemicals onto the image of nature is a reflection on the pressing issue of global warming at the time being brought further into the focus of the general public. Herself distorting what had previously had the signification of life and nature with a chemical process is a

physical demonstration of what they (industry) were doing to nature (the earth). These are both adjacent to the form that is the artwork, but by breaking down the language and visual associations surrounding it, it allows the viewer to read deeper into the piece. “The meaning is always there to *present* the form; the form is always there to *outdistance* the meaning” (Barthes, 1957 pg122) can easily be applied here in seeing how both what has been preserved and presented, especially with the mediums used being integral to the overarching topic at hand, both meaning and execution feed into each other.

To conclude then, being able to evaluate every single aspect of a piece of art, both in terms of its production stages and the method of mediation to create the final piece, is crucial to fully comprehending what the creator intended or even beyond that. RoCHAT being a leading example within the field of photography in how to combine traditional photography with an emerging popularity in physically augmenting the image provides an excellent example in how to isolate these different components. With each new layer stripped back and challenging what is depicted in “*Meta Tree*” on a level of meaning-making and language that comes with semiotics, it grows a deeper appreciation for the individual elements of the art as well as when they come together as a cohesive work.

Bibliography

- Daniel Chandler (2007) *Semiotics The Basics*. 2nd edn. Routledge.
- Roland Barthes (1957) *Mythologies*. The Noonday Press.