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The Aesthetics of May Stevens' Big Daddy Series: How an Artist's Stylistic Choice Influences Political Symbolism

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The Aesthetics of May Stevens' Big Daddy Series

How an artist's stylistic choice influences political symbolism

The Big Daddy Series

May Stevens completed the Big Daddy series between 1967-1976. The overarching theme of this collection is centered around American oppression and the Vietnam War. Initial inspiration, however, was found in her father's racist and sexist ideologies. The male figure of Big Daddy defines her paintings, transcending her stylistic development. The grotesque male figure is based on a photograph of her father. Big Daddy takes its place as an abstracted form representing the larger meaning of her work, but also as a deeply personal representation of her life.



May Stevens, *Big Daddy Paper Doll*, 1968. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 108in.



May Stevens, *Big Daddy with Hats*, 1971. Screenprint, 23 x 22 3/16in.



May Stevens, *Pax Americana*, 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 38in.



May Stevens, *Metamorphosis*, 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 90in.

In *Big Daddy Paper Doll*, Stevens shows the male figure taking on different roles. An executioner or Ku Klux Klansman, a soldier, a police officer, and a bloodied butcher. *Pax Americana* shows Big Daddy draped in an American flag, the clear helmet accentuating his phallic-shaped head as his slightly grinning gaze meets up with the viewer.

Living Room is one of the earliest works in this series. It shows her father and mother in a darkened living room illuminated by a television. Stevens uses the screen to show the passive American attitude towards the Vietnam War, as families would eat dinner watching possibly graphic news coverage. This painting features a more traditional impasto oil paint technique and a softer palette, creating a somber effect. The series evolves as Stevens switches to mostly acrylic creating a new highly stylized Big Daddy.

"My work embodies my understanding and response to the world or certain aspects of it in forms that hopefully make it moving and memorable."



May Stevens, *Living Room*, 1967. Oil in canvas, 64 1/2 x 80in.

Political Art & Aesthetics → Living Room & Big Daddy

Political art should be communicable and provide a set of values which are then appreciated by the viewer. These values are determined by the artist, who then uses specific stylistic choices to present them to the viewer.

In Stevens' case, the values of the Big Daddy series appear in layers. First, is her opposition to her father's ideologies, which then leads to the themes of racism and sexism. The political landscape surrounding the Vietnam War becomes the third layer and finally, American oppression.

To convey these values she uses the Big Daddy figure which she 'copies and pastes' into different backdrops and settings. Her stylisation of subject matter makes it evident to the viewer what she wants to represent.

By looking at *Living Room* in comparison to the rest of the Big Daddy series, a couple of things are evident.

- Paintings from 1968 and onward are more stylized and use flatter, more clarified forms.
- The Big Daddy figure becomes pale and simplistic. He is usually against a blue backdrop.
- Objects such as the bulldog, American flag, and distinctive costumes are used as recurrent motifs.

Living Room shows the first step in her development toward creating effective political art. The inclusion of her mother and lack of apparent political imagery shows the more personal aspect of her connection to the Big Daddy figure. Whereas the rest of her series allows the viewer to more easily appreciate her values.