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A Conversation about Marcel Duchamp with
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CASTELLI

Fountain by R. Mutt

Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz



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Charlottesville, NY
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KC: Marcel Duchamp and his work have been a central interest for you throughout your life; you first appropriated his work in 1965 and have revisited it time and time again throughout your career.

In 2014 you returned to one of Marcel Duchamp's most iconic works, *Fountain*, which was the subject of one of your early paintings.

RP: Yes.

KC: Between 2014 and now you have made 40 paintings, which will be on display at Castelli Gallery this fall. These paintings are based on different sources and are much more complex than they may seem at first glance, as Duchamp's own *Fountain* is more complex than it may appear at first glance.

What made you go back, in 2014, to *Fountain*?

RP: I had been working on it before. While doing a series about Brancusi I had made a work that combined Brancusi's *Newborn* with Duchamp's *Fountain* (*Fountain, Newborn*, 2013). At that time I was asked to do a urinal, a *Fountain*, as a commission. And so I started working on it, and in the meantime I had developed a medical condition where I'd lost my vision in my left eye, and so I was painting without really being able to see the work, and so it was—I started doing one, and then I did another one, and I did another one just to see if I could do them at all, you know.

And then I got to seven of those—those are the white ones, based on the replica of the *Fountain* from 1964.

After this I went back to the original *Fountain* from 1917, the source of the Duchamp piece that I'd done 50 years ago, which only exists in the Alfred Stieglitz photograph. I realized it had been published in a magazine called *The Blind Man*, which I was: I had become 'The Blind Man.' *The Blind Man* was

the magazine that had covered the events of the Society of Independent Artists. Now, you know the story of what happened with Duchamp's *Fountain*—Duchamp had submitted the piece under a pseudonym, R. Mutt, to the Society of Independent Artists show because they had advertised it as a no jury, no prizes exhibition. And they rejected it. So it was never seen. Stieglitz photographed it and published it in *The Blind Man*, and that is what made it famous: that photograph, that magazine, and that little statement by Beatrice Wood ("As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges."). It's gone on to become one of the most famous sculptures of the 20th century, and the only people who have seen it are Alfred Stieglitz and the people in the Independents who rejected it. No one has seen it since.

Then, in 1964, Gallery Schwarz in Milan published the edition of Duchamp's readymades. They are all replicas of the originals, they're not really identical. Like, for example, see those *Bicycle Wheels*? See the little black protruding under the seat?

KC: Yes.

RP: The original readymade doesn't have that. It doesn't have that protruding under the seat. Which means that when they made the replica they just took the handle off of a bicycle fork.

KC: After you made the first *Fountain*, the commissioned piece, you didn't stop, you continued to paint more *Fountains*.

RP: Yeah.

KC: You said it's because you wanted to see if you could paint them, because you were having eye trouble.

RP: Yes, that was the first impetus.

KC: And this work does look different from your work in the past.

RP: It's looser. A friend said she wishes she could continue to make me blind [laughs] so that she could—well, I actually had a doctor, I had an ear doctor who said, "Has it happened that people prefer the work you've done since you can't see," and it's like, "Yeah." [Laughs]

KC: Well, is it true that the person who commissioned this work didn't go through with the purchase because it wasn't what he was expecting?

RP: I don't know. He's one of those people. I mean, I got an email where he says his life won't be complete until he has a urinal by me, and, you know, he doesn't, so I guess his life is not complete, but that's another story.

KC: I know the work had been sent to the gallery, and when the sale didn't go through, for whatever reason, you asked to have it back—

RP: Oh, I asked for it back because in the meantime I had done enough paintings that they had become a full series, and I wanted to incorporate it.

KC: And Barbara made you promise not to change it—

RP: Not to repaint it, she said, yep. And I didn't. I added type to it, though. I added the words 'Fountain' and 'Marcel,' because the other ones in the series had them, and I wanted to include this painting in the series.

KC: It's an interesting coincidence: Duchamp's *Fountain* in 1917 was rejected and published in *The Blind Man*, and your *Fountain* was made while you were losing your sight, and then also rejected. And then you went to look for the Stieglitz photo.

RP: Right. The first series I made is based on the 1964 *Fountain*. I then looked at the original *Fountain* that was published in *The Blind Man* and made a series of 12 paintings: they are all based on the Stieglitz photograph and on each of them is written 'The Blind Man.'

KC: You also wrote on them 'Self-Portrait.'

RP: Yeah. Because I thought of them as self-portraits. First of all, I was 'The Blind Man.' But then, if we want to add to the chain of coincidence, I developed another medical condition, which we can relate to the use of the urinal.

KC: And so, it was a self-portrait in all possible ways.

When you started the second series, the group titled *The Blind Man*, were you aware the Stieglitz photo had been published in that magazine, or did you find out as you were painting them?

RP: Well, I knew the story and everything, and I had appropriated that image 50 years ago, but I only did it once, I really hadn't touched the original *Fountain* since. When I realized the connection that it was, in fact, published in *The Blind Man* and that I had become 'The Blind Man' then it became a self-portrait and I became personally involved, you know. That's why they say 'Self-Portrait.'

I later had cataract surgery, and my vision is now pretty good. What happened before had affected my perception of depth. I had depth problems. I mean, for a long time, painting, I couldn't tell when the brush was gonna hit the canvas, which makes a big difference.

KC: So, when you were painting, you had to find a way to deal with those problems.

RP: Yeah.

KC: You have painted the 1964 *Fountain* many times. This might amuse you, but I wonder if there is any kind of memory your hand can draw upon?

RP: [Laughs] That's exactly—once I told my dealer Barbara that I had just finished a set of soups, and she said, "I would think by this time you could do them without looking at the canvas at all," because I've done so many. But it's not like that, it's not like I could just paint them with my eyes closed.

KC: You painted the *Fountain* for a client, it came back to you—it didn't go to the client—and it multiplied.

RP: I didn't really mind that the commission didn't work out. It's just that it triggered it off, and that started me on a trip. It took over, I mean, the *Fountains* took over, having nothing to do with the commission.

But I often work that way, I often fill my studio with stuff. I mean, look at all the *Bicycle Wheels* on the wall there. Why do I have seven *Bicycle Wheels*? I don't want seven *Bicycle Wheels*, I don't need seven. But I like them.

This seems to be how I work. I'll take a theme and then do almost invisible variations for no reason except because it amuses me. I like to make stuff.

KC: This is actually an extremely interesting aspect of your work, which people are not always aware of. I mean, that often you don't simply appropriate a work but introduce variations to it.

In the case of the 1917 *Fountain* that you've painted several times from the Stieglitz photo, you created variations from a reproduction of something that no longer exists, and, as you said, that very few people have seen.

RP: I'll tell you something interesting that you don't know about. See those paintings there, the *Bicycle Wheels*? The white paint is the last paint done, and it's applied three or four times. Which means that all the little white triangles between the spokes are painted. You know what I mean? It is not that I just paint it all white and then the *Bicycle Wheel* is imposed on top of it. The white comes last, actually.

KC: So you paint the negative, white space last. Is this also the case for the 1964 *Fountains*, the series that starts with the commissioned piece?

RP: Yeah, I've worked that way a long time. This is the case for all of the paintings.

In the first series the 1964 *Fountain* is painted on white; I then did the 'The Blind Man' series from the Stieglitz photo; and then I went back, once again, to the 1964 replica and did a new series: in this series the *Fountain* is painted on black. They graduate in size. It is just the same one getting bigger and bigger. You get it, don't you?

KC: These are not titled *The Blind Man* anymore.

RP: No. They are not *The Blind Man*. *The Blind Man* is only the original *Fountain*, right.

KC: And so, I guess you didn't feel they were self-portraits anymore.

RP: Well, they are not *The Blind Man*. And so, no, they are not self-portraits.

KC: At what point did you have cataract surgery?

RP: At what point did I have it? After these paintings. It was right around my birthday, in January. Right there, those are from 2016, and they're all since the surgery. Do you see the difference?

KC: Yes, but now that I think about it you really only saw the earlier *Fountains* yourself after regaining your eyesight.

RP: Yes, I remember Ian Berry asking me how it was going. You know, "How's the new work looking?" It was like, well, you're asking the wrong person.

KC: What did you think of them?

RP: It's ok. It's terrific. But it's rough, I knew they were rough. Oh, boy, yeah, these are really rough. [Laughs]

Recently at a party somebody came up to me and said, "Oh, I own one of your *Electric Chairs*, I just love my *Electric Chair*," and I'm thinking to myself, God, if you love my *Electric Chairs* wait until you see my urinals! I said to Barbara, "I made your life easier, all you have to do is sell a big variety of 40 urinals, good luck."

KC: And you are also doing *Bicycle Wheels* now. So you are doing a significant amount of work about Duchamp. It is like coming full circle, since you started out with Duchamp.

RP: Yeah, yeah. I like it. I like going back to the origins. And, Duchamp, I don't like a lot of Duchamp's work, but I loved the *Fountain* and the *Bicycle Wheel*, and the *Bottlerack*, the *Underwood*, *Air de Paris*, and the *Fresh Widow*. I love all those pieces, a lot.

KC: When did you first see Duchamp's work?

RP: I got turned onto Duchamp in the first place by the book that came out, the Grove Press book that came out in 1960, or around that time.

KC: You were living in LA when the Duchamp retrospective opened at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1963. You saw it, right?

RP: Oh, yeah. I have the announcement, and I copied it for the announcement of my first show at the Ferus Gallery in 1965.

KC: What do you remember from the Duchamp show?

RP: What I remember from the show is how beautiful it was. It was just incredibly gorgeous. And he was famous for not being interested in beauty. [Laughs]

KC: Well, this is what people were saying about him then.

RP: It was the party line. He has given up taste and all that sort of stuff. You remember the story of when he was interviewed at The Museum of Modern Art by Alfred Barr, and Barr said, "Mr. Duchamp, you have given up taste, how is it that your *Bicycle Wheel* is considered by some to be the most beautiful sculpture of the 20th century?" And Duchamp, "Well, nobody is perfect." [Laughs]

KC: When your first solo show opened two years later, in 1965, you exhibited several Duchamp appropriations.

It has been written that your appropriations were originally inspired by images reproduced in art magazines, and they were small because their dimensions were the same as the reproduction that had inspired them. Was your decision to work small also influenced by the *Boîte-en-valise*?

RP: No. But yes, but no. I grew up doing model trains. The trains in my studio are things that go back to my childhood, I have always been in teeny tiny land. I also have in my studio these Ferrari models, I like to collect them.

KC: So you have been thinking that way your whole life.

RP: I was asked the question about smallness. Every day you look in the newspaper, and you see a picture of Obama, and it's this tall. You don't for a second think Obama is that tall. In your mind's eye you see that he is a regular, full-sized person, he's not like a little, teeny thing.

I did a huge painting once, only because I was tired of being—everybody looked at my work and they were saying it was 'cute,' because it was little. Nobody was taking it seriously. And so I stretched the canvas six- by ten-foot square. In the end, I left it in the yard to rot. Waste of time.

Picasso is one of the few artists who can really work huge and really work teeny, equally well. It is very rare that people are able to cross scales, and I'm not. You could say that I work large, if you were to take all of these paintings together and say they are one big painting. But this is still making a lot of little paintings, you know, it is not working large. I don't have a big scale kind of brain.

KC: In your new works the size of the paintings varies quite a bit, but even the largest canvas is relatively small.

RP: Well, it's funny because when you look at them in the studio it looks like Warhol's studio, like it could be a bunch of silkscreens. Except you wouldn't have that many silkscreens of graduating size. That defeats the whole purpose of silkscreens.

KC: Right, the mechanical reproduction.

RP: Well, actually there is a group on the other wall where they are pretty much the same size.

KC: Did you look at multiple sources for all of these *Fountains*? And how did the size of the source images affect the size of the works?

RP: I don't know, I just did one and then did another one, did another one, and just, I don't know how it happened, the size variation happened because I had so many reproductions to work from. I have a lot of Duchamp books.

And sometimes, to get the scale change, I would photograph the photograph and then my wife would enlarge it with the computer, you know. But, for the most part, they're the size that I had found them in the books.

KC: Did you use the Stieglitz photo from one book for a painting and then switch to different books for other paintings?

RP: Yes, sometimes.

KC: Do the different sources also account for other variations between them, as well: I mean, for example, the variations in color and contrast.

RP: Yeah, I guess so, sure. Is it part of the trip? Yes. It's part of the trip. Years ago I was asked a question by some French guy. I had made two appropriations of a Lichtenstein painting: once I had done it in color and once I had done it in black and white. He wanted to know why one was in color and one in black and white. And the truth is that in those days paintings were frequently reproduced in black and white because it was expensive to print in color; they were not all done in color the way they are now. But I told him that when I did the color one I was happy and when I did the black and white one I was sad. [Laughs] You know. What am I supposed to say.

KC: Let's talk a little about the *Bicycle Wheels*. You have just done a new group of *Bicycle Wheels*. This is another recurring motif throughout the years, like the *Fountain*.

RP: Yeah, actually, I have painted many more *Bicycle Wheels* than I have *Fountains*.

KC: For your show in 1965 at the Ferus Gallery you made five appropriations of the actual readymade, and then you did one more in 2013 on the 100th anniversary of when Duchamp made his *Bicycle Wheel*.

RP: I made other sculptures of the *Bicycle Wheel* in between. Come here, and I'll show you something neat. There's a note in *The Green Box*, you know, Duchamp's *Green Box*, which is a collection of notes, and the note was obviously written to himself, but since it's published it's written to me, too, or to whoever else reads it. And the note says, "buy a pair of ice-tongs as a readymade." Here are the ones I got for myself, hanging on this wall above the train set.

KC: So, do you think—you did five *Bicycle Wheels* for the Ferus Gallery: do you think Duchamp ever came to know about them?

RP: I don't have any idea. I never thought about it before.

KC: In 1985 you made a painting titled *A Snow Shovel is Nice*, and you inscribed it with a quote about Duchamp: 'Marcel Duchamp is without question ...'

RP: ... 'my favourite artist.'

KC: 'My favourite artist. He made being an artist seem so easy. Just pick up anything—'

RP: Not 'pick up anything,' you are reading it from the book that misquoted my line. Take the 'up' off. It reads, 'Just pick something'. Pick and choose. 'Pick up' implies picking something up from the trash, and I meant 'pick and choose.'

KC: That is quite different.

RP: Yes. Pick something as in choose something is what I meant it to be.

KC: Here it is: 'Marcel Duchamp is without question my favourite artist. He made being an artist seem so easy. Just pick something, anything.'

RP: Yes, definitely. 'A snow shovel is nice.' And then the question is: A snow shovel is A) useful in the winter to clear a path to the car, B) helpful for removing snow from your porch, or C) nice.

KC: When you look at Duchamp's work today, does it still make you feel that way?

RP: Yeah, I guess so, yeah. Yeah. I think everything is art. I think my bikes are art. I think this bicycle is a masterpiece. It is. I customized it.

KC: And over here, is this a painting of you standing beside a bicycle?

RP: That's me, by my bicycle.

KC: '5,000 miles November 20, 2001.' Five thousand miles?

RP: We're at over 10,000 now.

KC: Is that a lifetime mileage? I didn't realize you were a cyclist.

RP: I haven't ridden for a year and a half now, or hardly. A little bit, but not much. But I used to do it.

KC: In 2013, just before starting this last trip with Duchamp's *Fountains*, you made a diptych in which you appropriated the *Fountain* next to Brancusi's *Newborn*. I think you said at one point that these were the two most important sculptures of the 20th century, is that true?

RP: Well, years ago I was in France, and at the Pompidou there was a show of 20th century sculpture. Side by side in the show were Brancusi and Duchamp: Brancusi's sculptures and Duchamp's readymades. There was no additional explanation, it was just that they were there. It was very interesting because everybody assumes that Brancusi is a great sculptor and Duchamp is the head guy, he's not a great sculptor. But actually, his sculptures looked pretty good, and Brancusi looked pretty smart: it was really a draw. I think they are the two—I don't think these two sculptures are—I wouldn't say that—but those two sculptors are both pretty significant.

KC: I read that when Stieglitz wrote about the photo he had taken, he wrote about how the *Fountain* looked like a Buddha, or a female form, something sensual. Maybe the *Fountain* and the *Newborn* complement each other in kind of a sensuous way.

RP: Yeah, they do, sure. And, you know, the Brancusi studio was at the Pompidou, in almost its original form, and I was allowed in there. I came around the corner, I looked down, and there was the *Newborn* on a little burlap cushion.

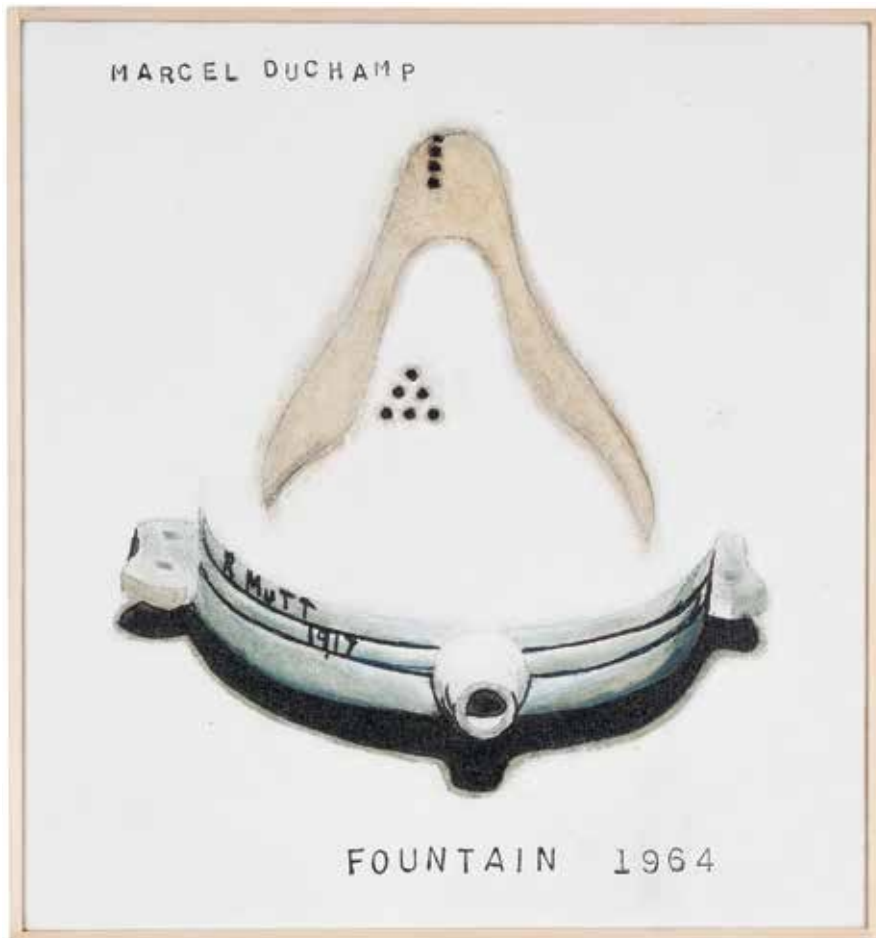
KC: That must have been a special way to see the work.

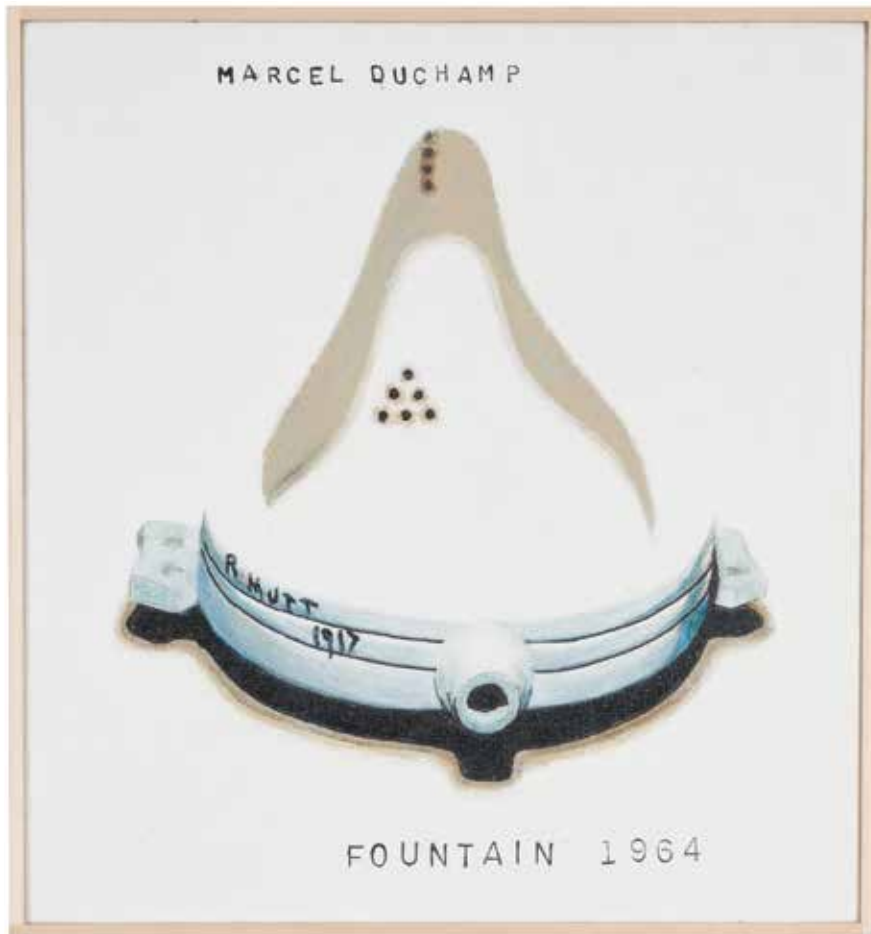
You have a nice easel here in your studio. I happened to be looking at it just now when you mentioned the presentation of *Newborn* on a cushion, and I'm reminded of an image I saw of a work you presented on an easel: it was an appropriation of Duchamp's *The Bride*.

RP: Yes, the easel was part of the artwork. Years ago I made a painting of *The Bride*. After I finished it I made a second one, using my previous painting as the source. This became *The Bride #2*. And then I copied the copy. And I copied the copy. And I kept copying the copy, until I put a urinal on it, and then I copied it.

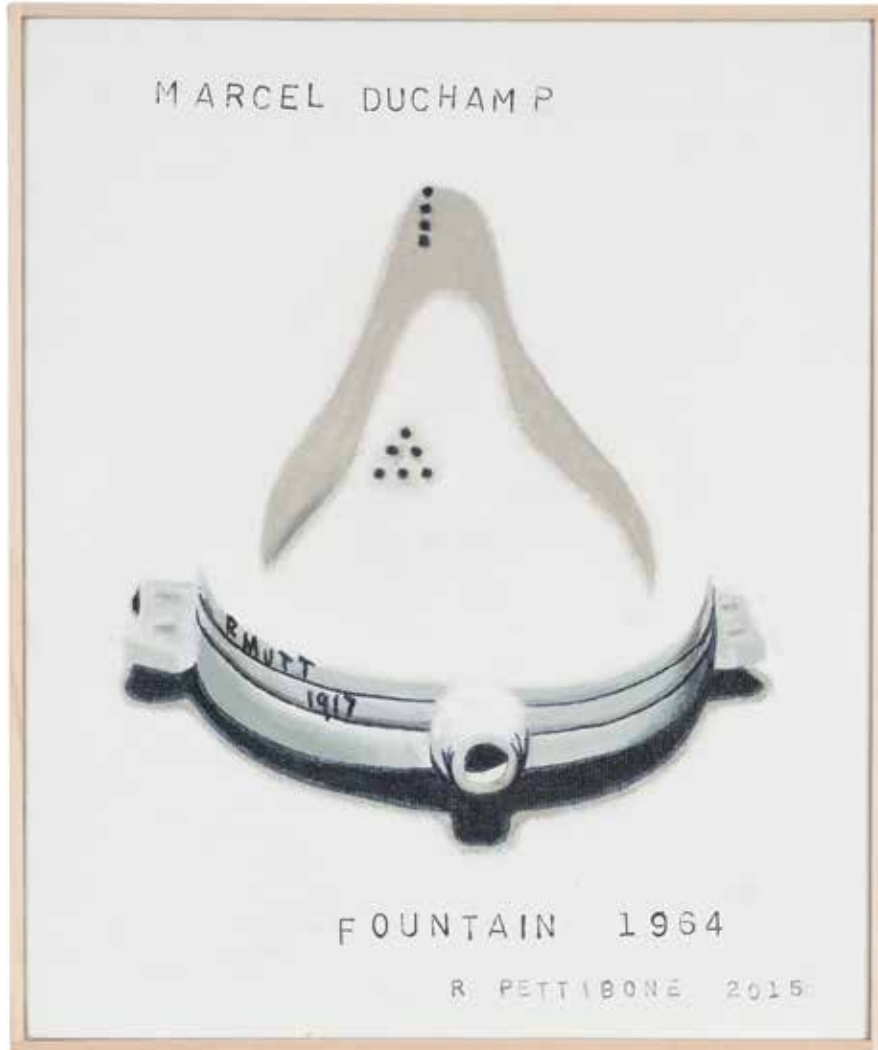
KC: What number are you up to?

RP: I think *The Bride #7*. I'm supposed to now copy it and replace it, but I might not. Because I don't have to. But I might. ●



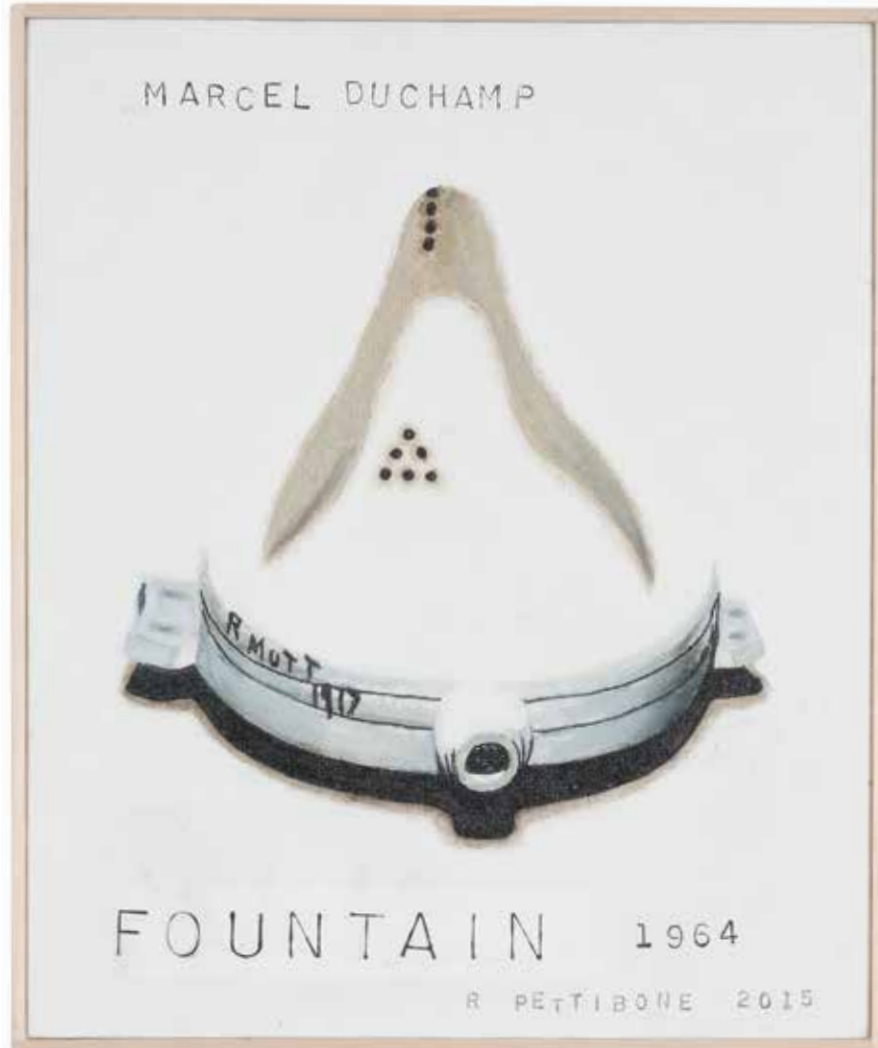


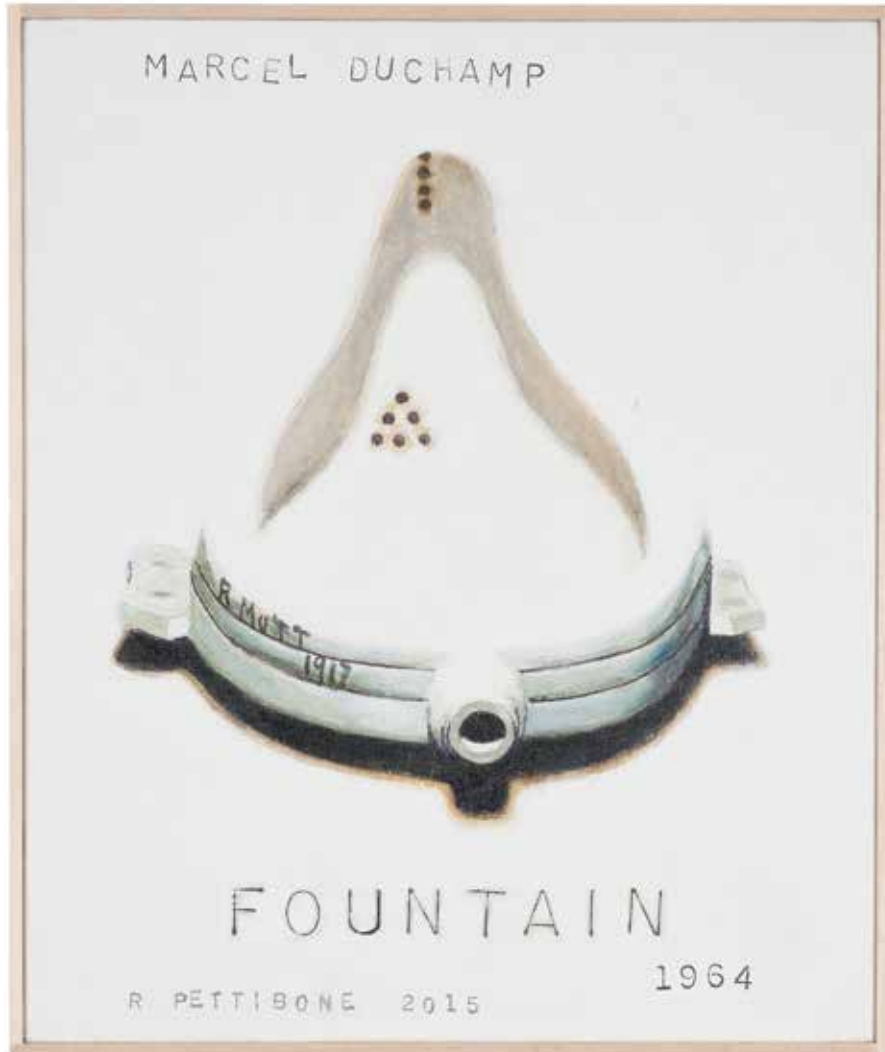


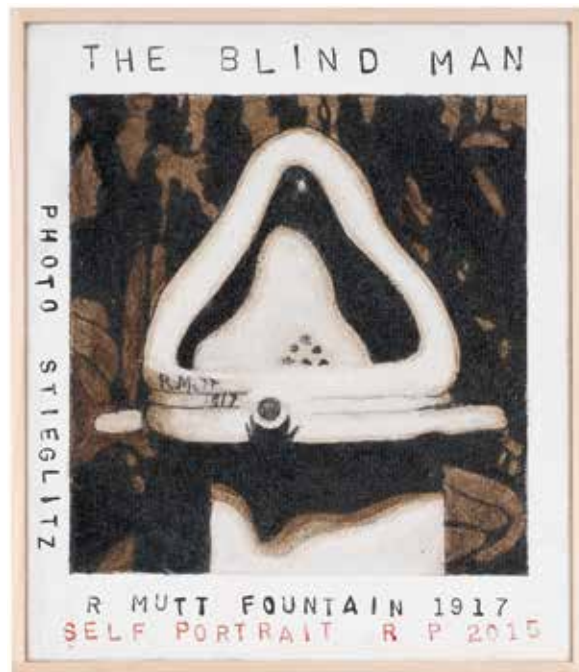


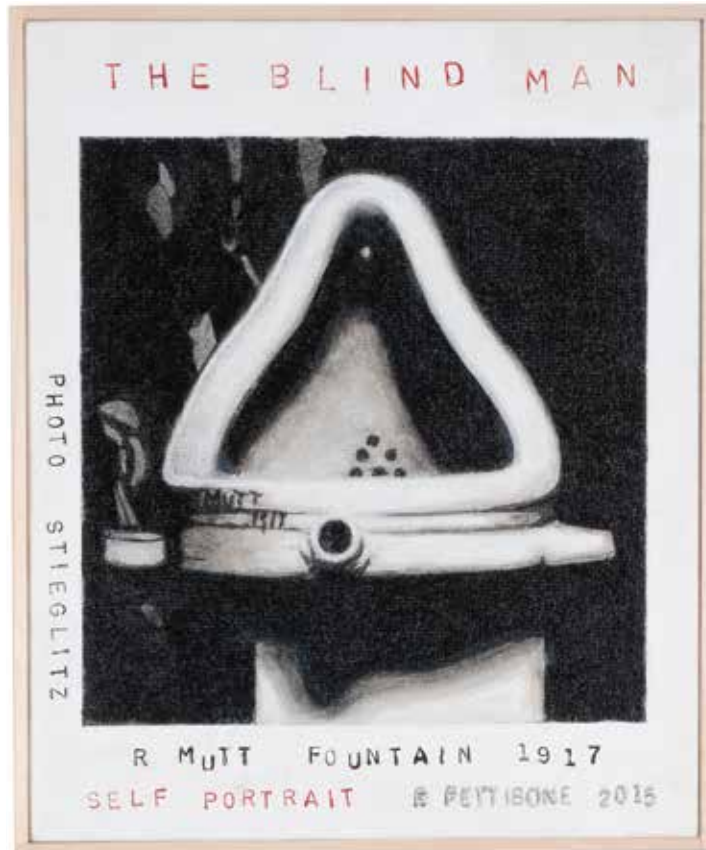


20 Marcel Duchamp, 'Fountain', 1964, 2014, Oil on canvas, 9¼ x 7¾ inches









THE BLIND MAN



PHOTO
STIEGLITZ

R MUTT FOUNTAIN 1917

SELF PORTRAIT R MUTT 2015

THE BLIND MAN

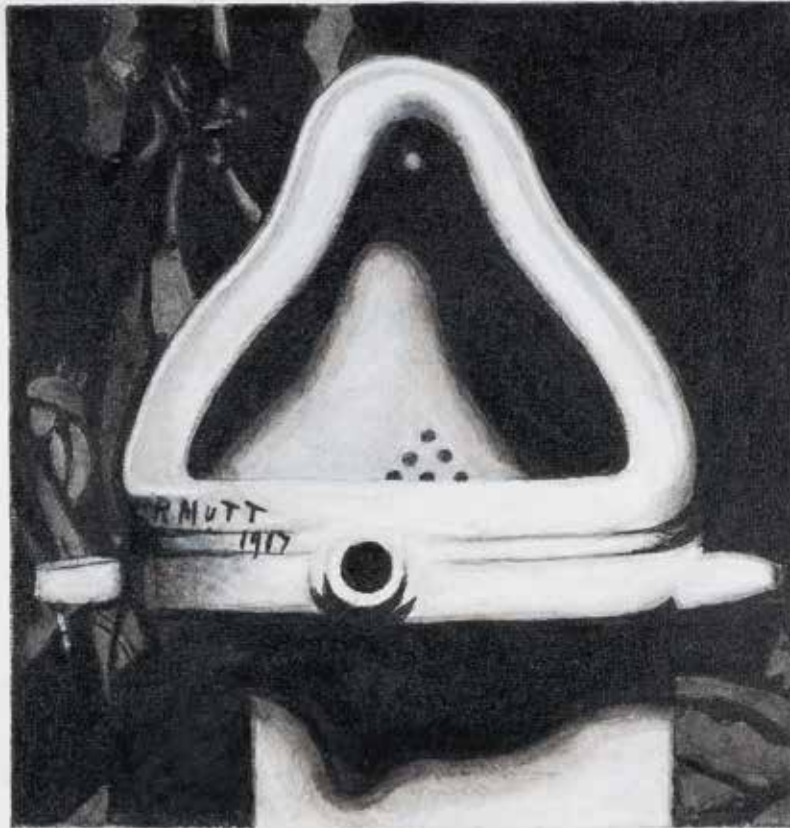


PHOTO STIEGLITZ

R MUTT FOUNTAIN 1917

SELF PORTRAIT R PEFFIBONE 2015

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R MUTT FOUNTAIN 1917

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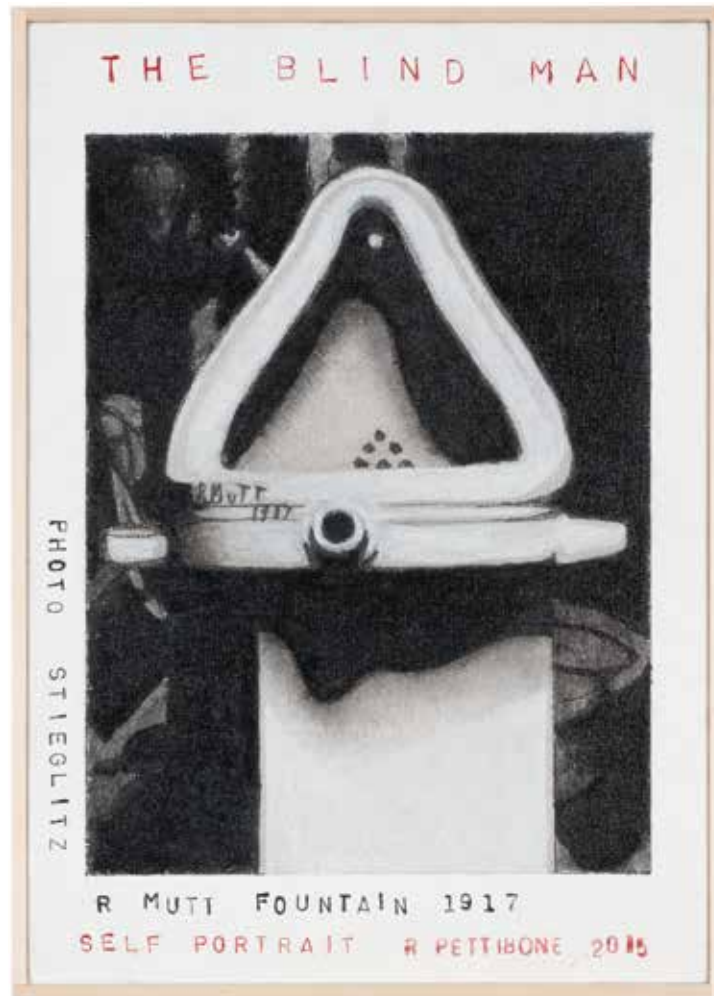


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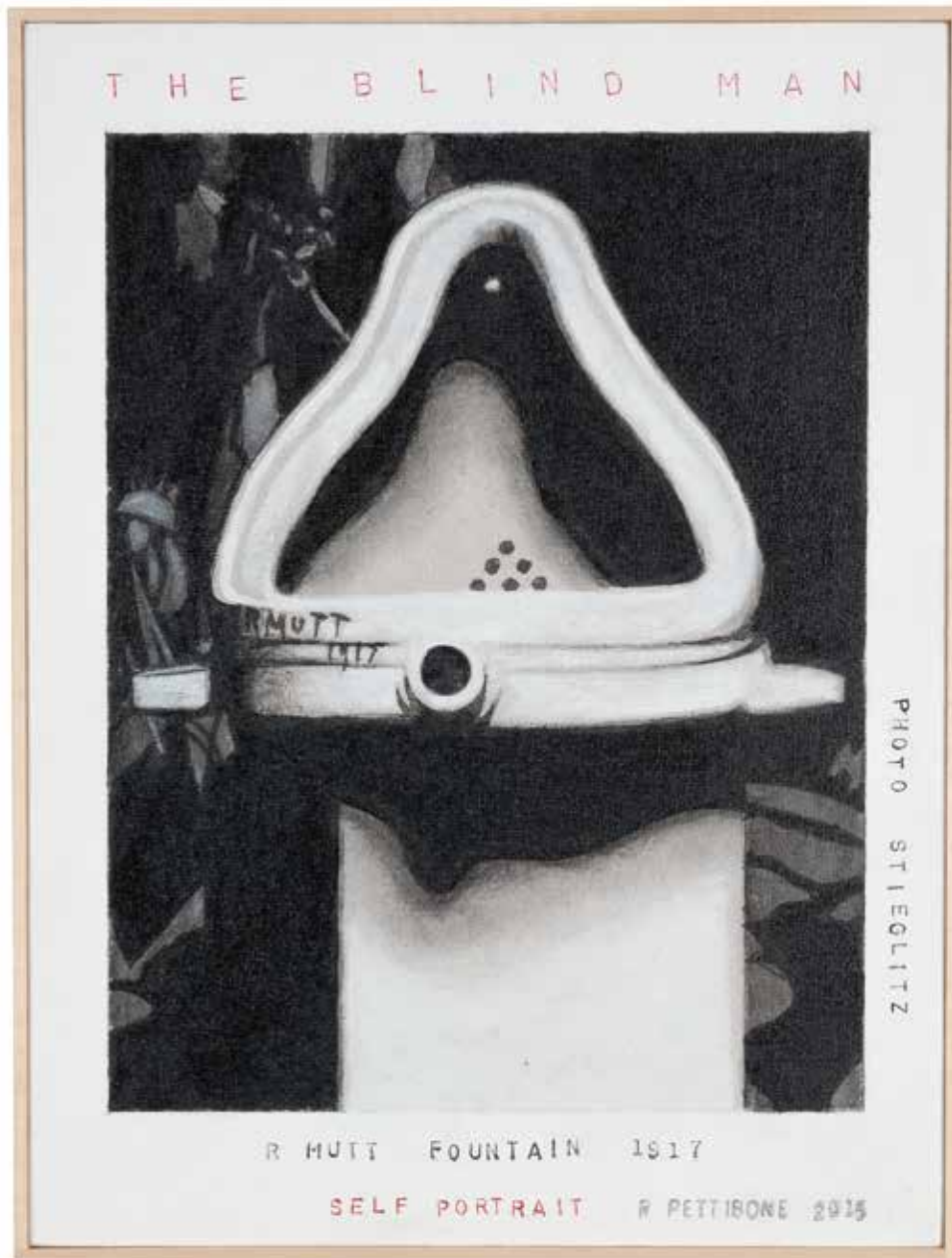
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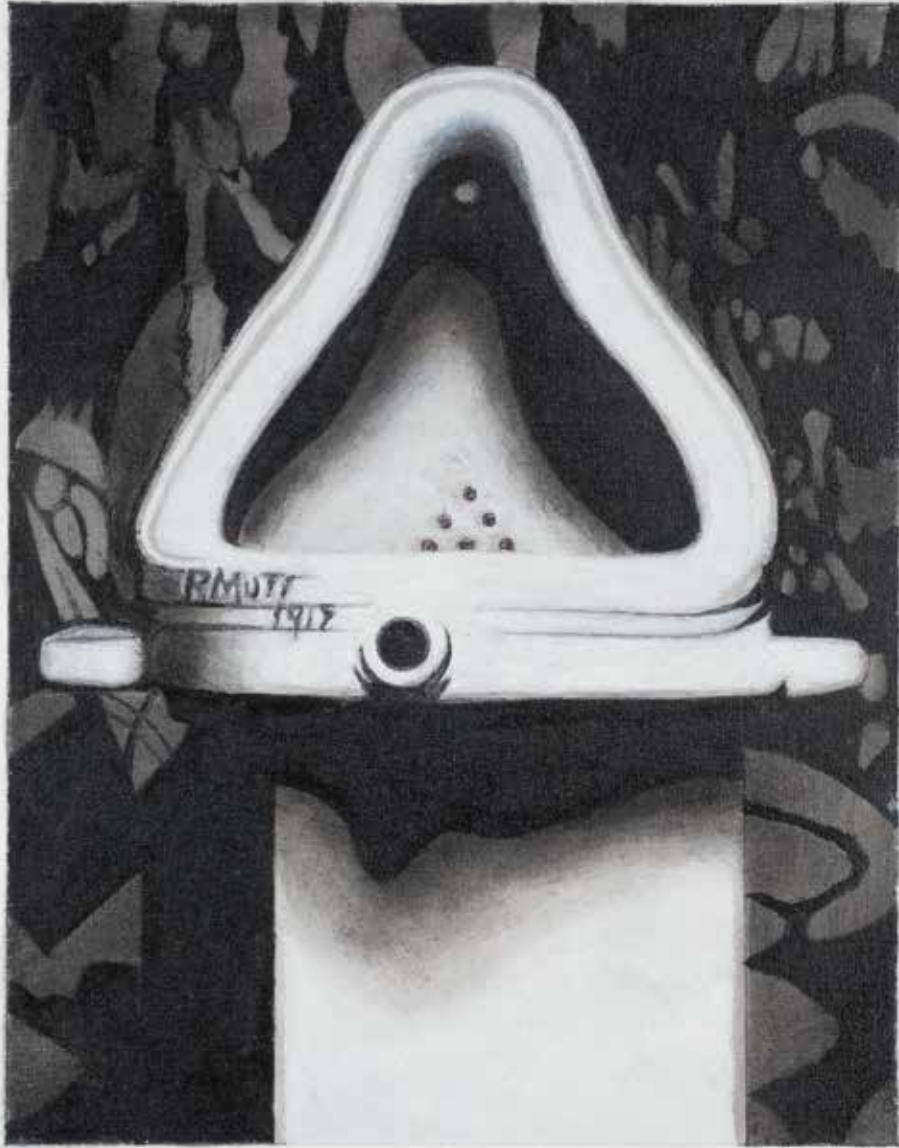
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R MUTT FOUNTAIN 1917

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THE BLIND MAN



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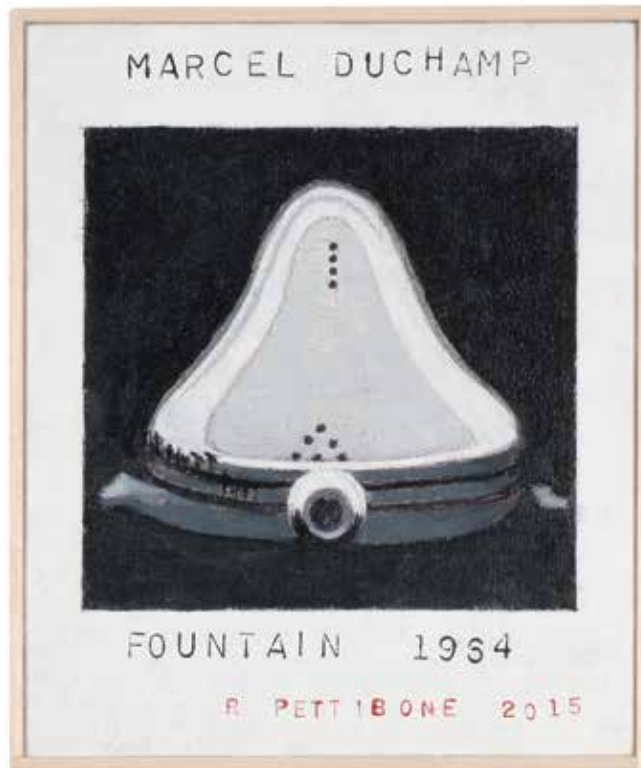
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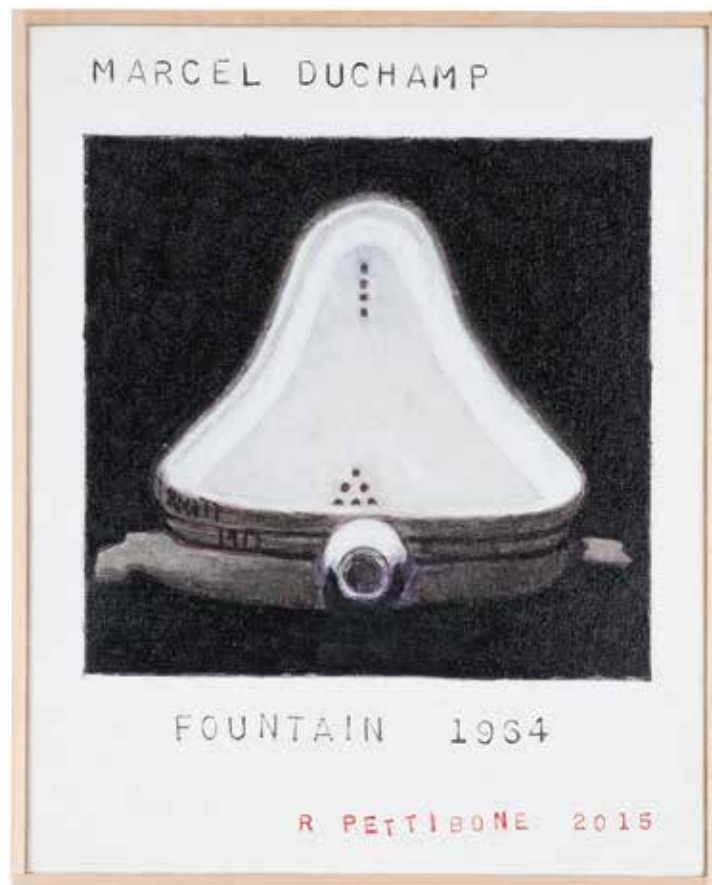


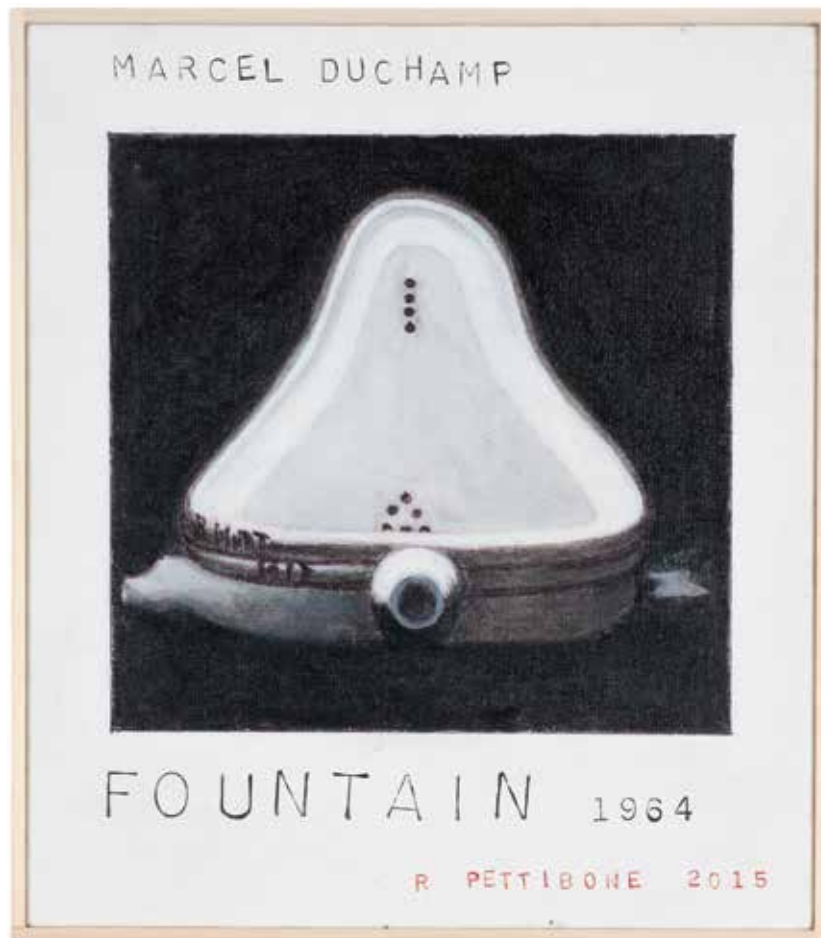
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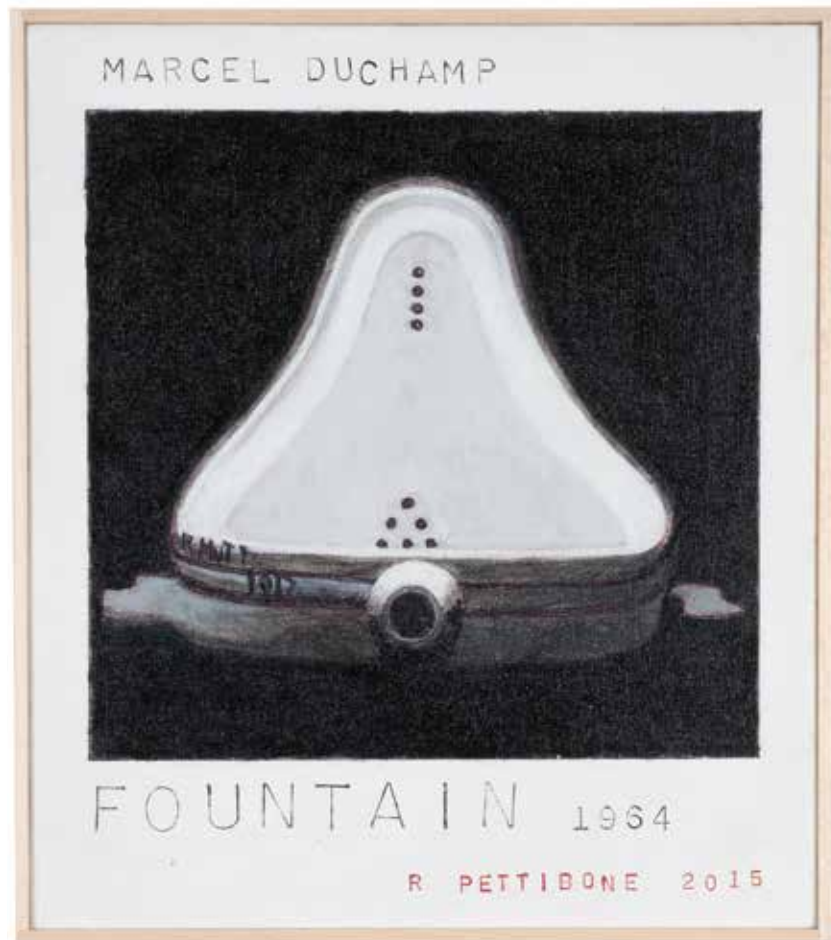
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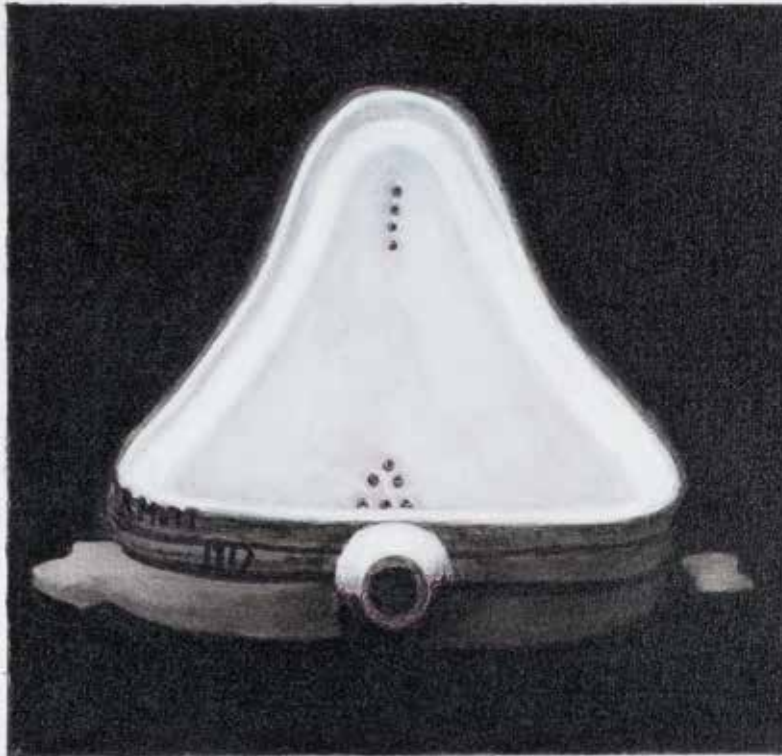
MARCEL DUCHAMP



FOUNTAIN 1964

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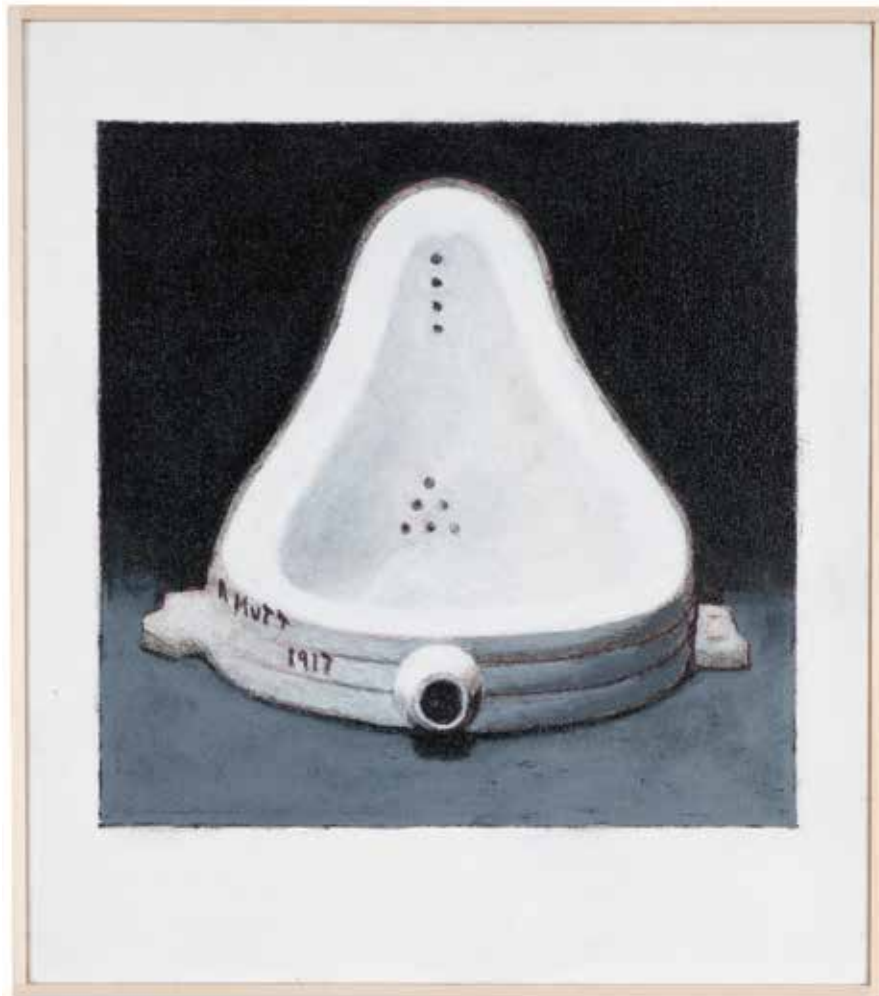
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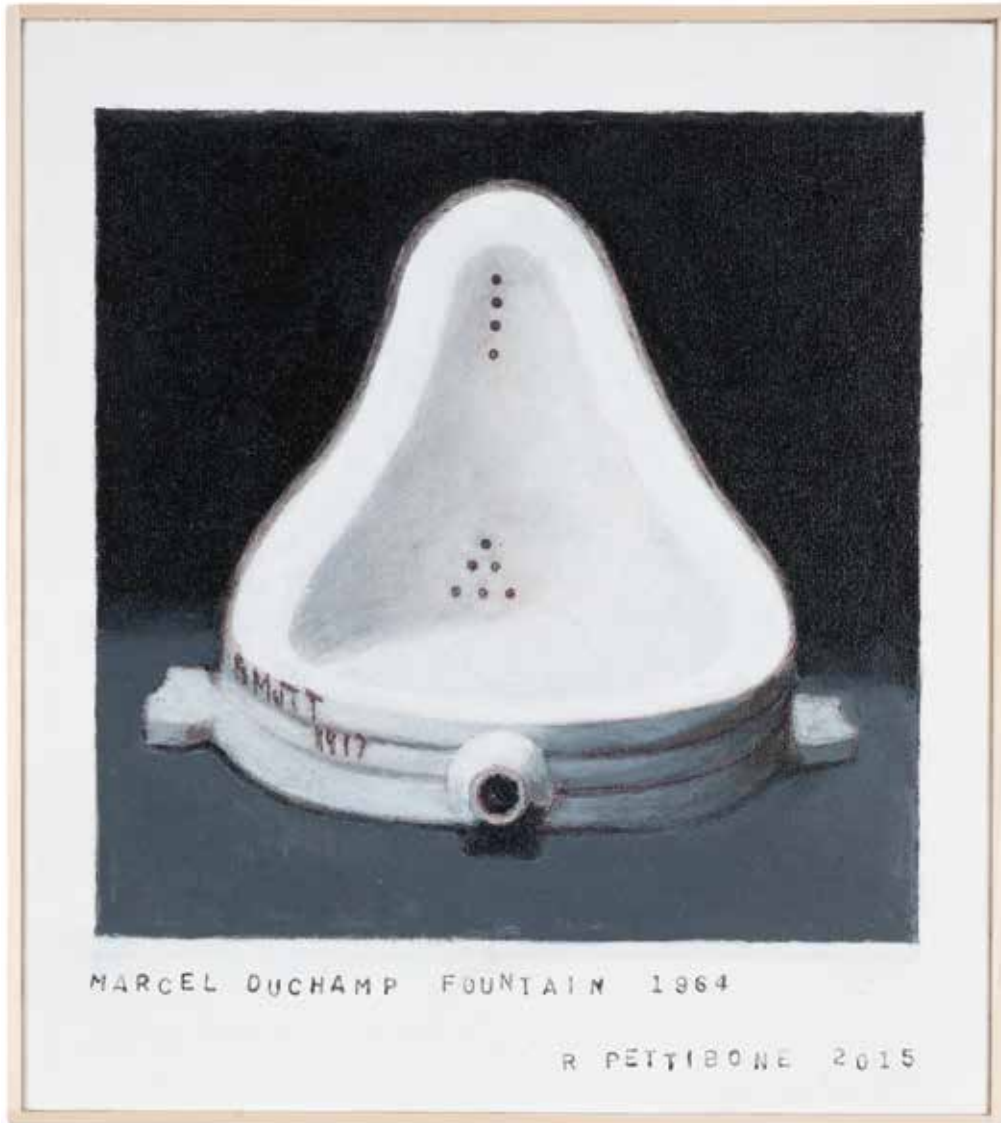


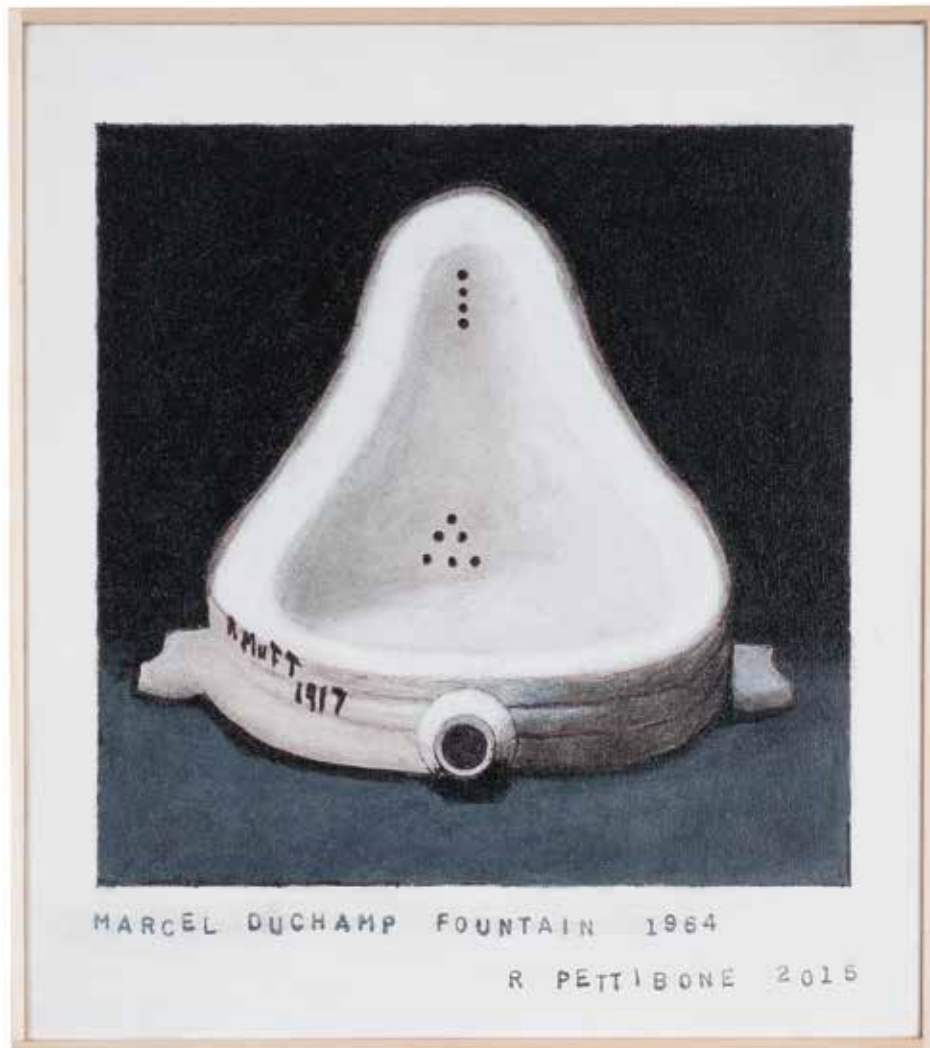
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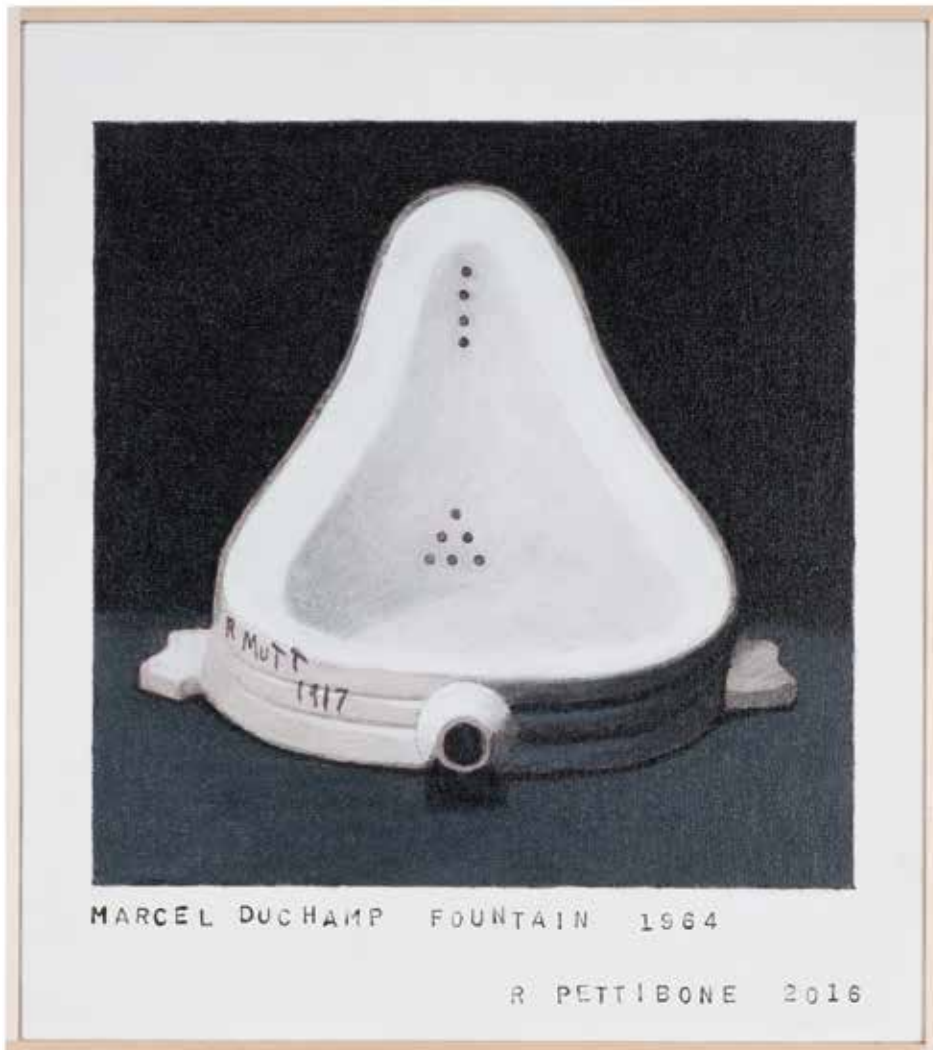


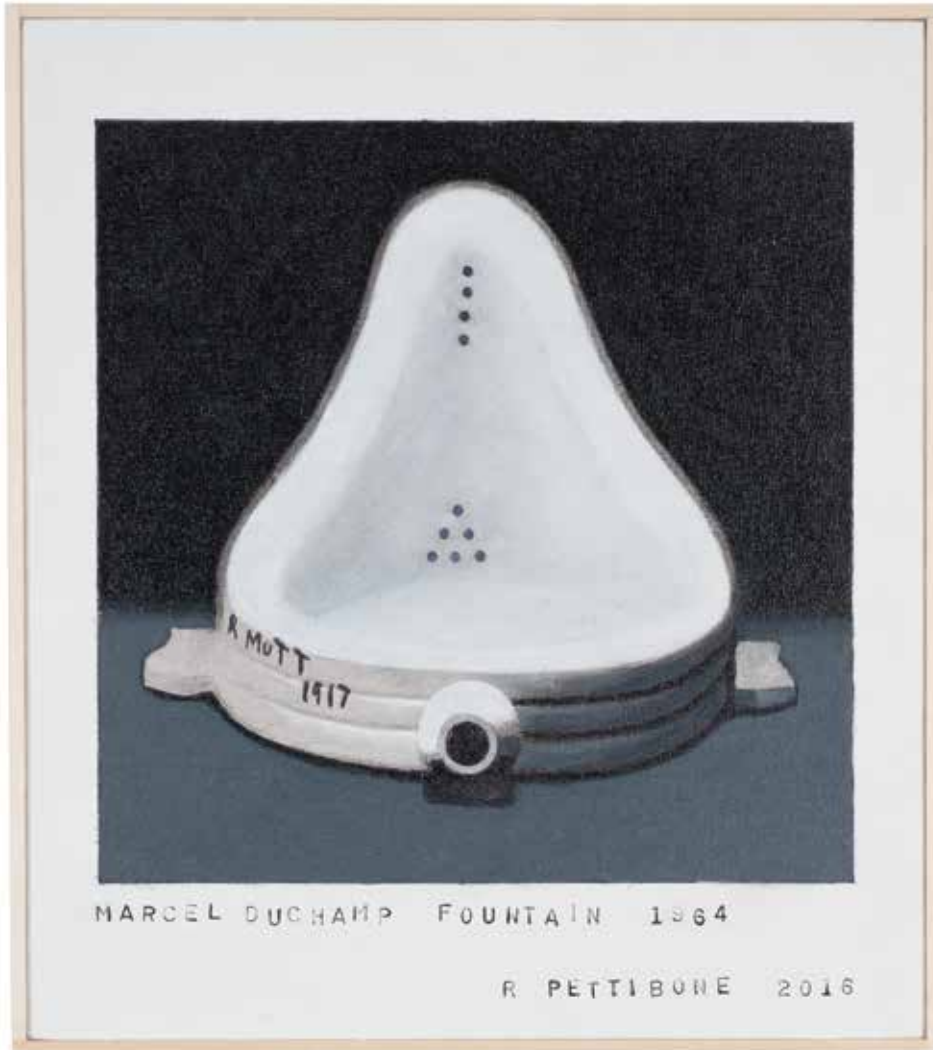


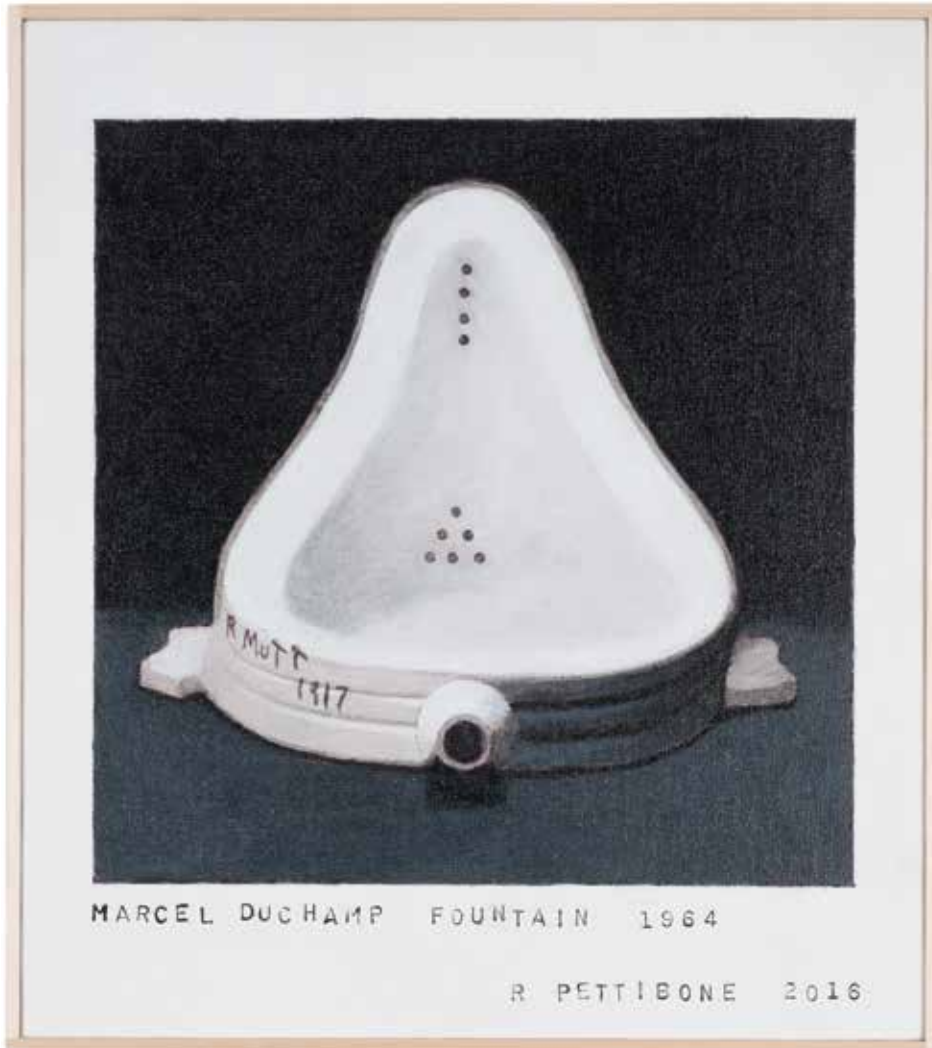


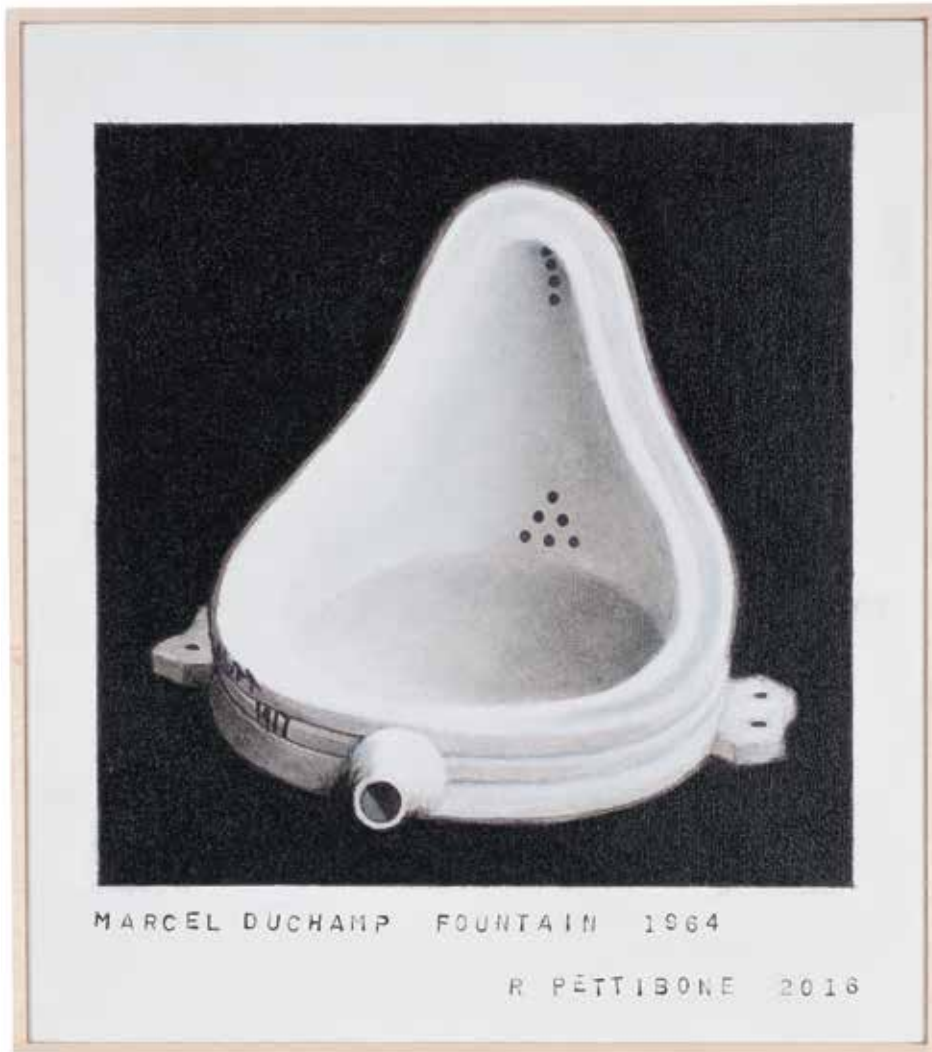
MARCEL DUCHAMP FOUNTAIN 1964

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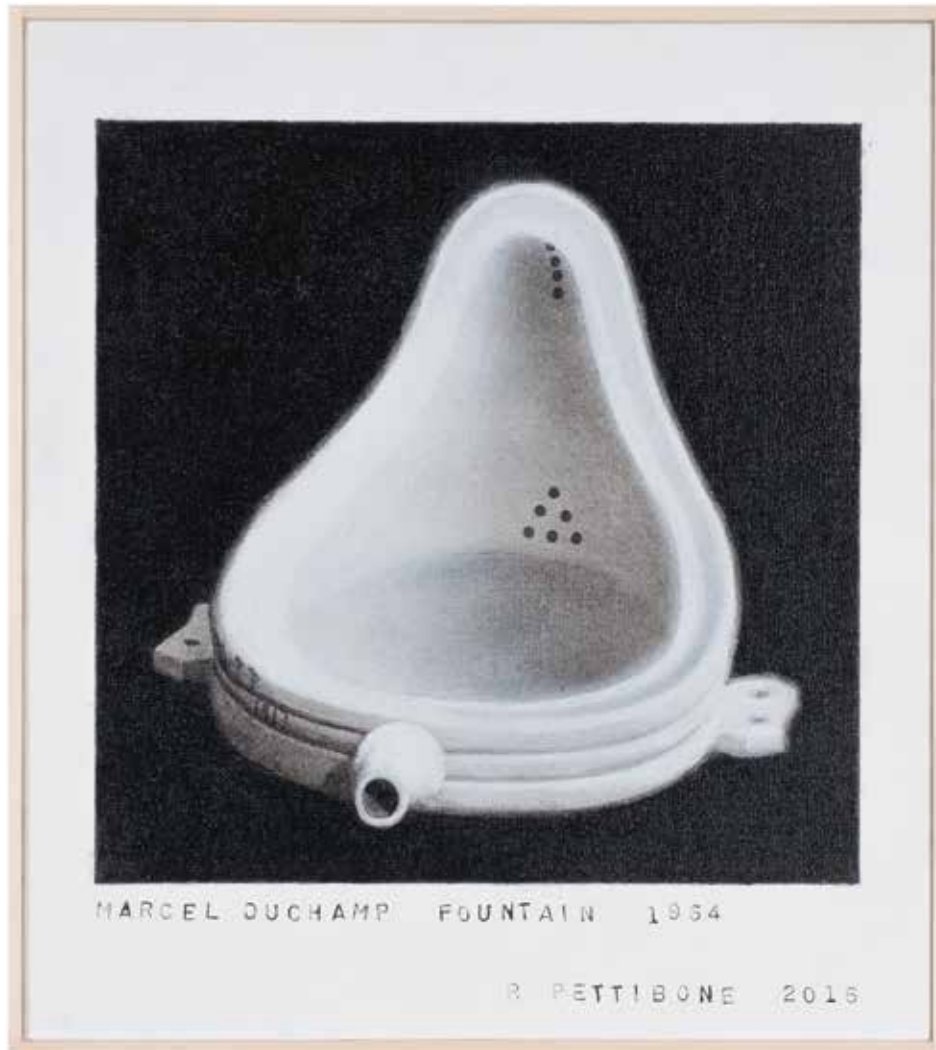


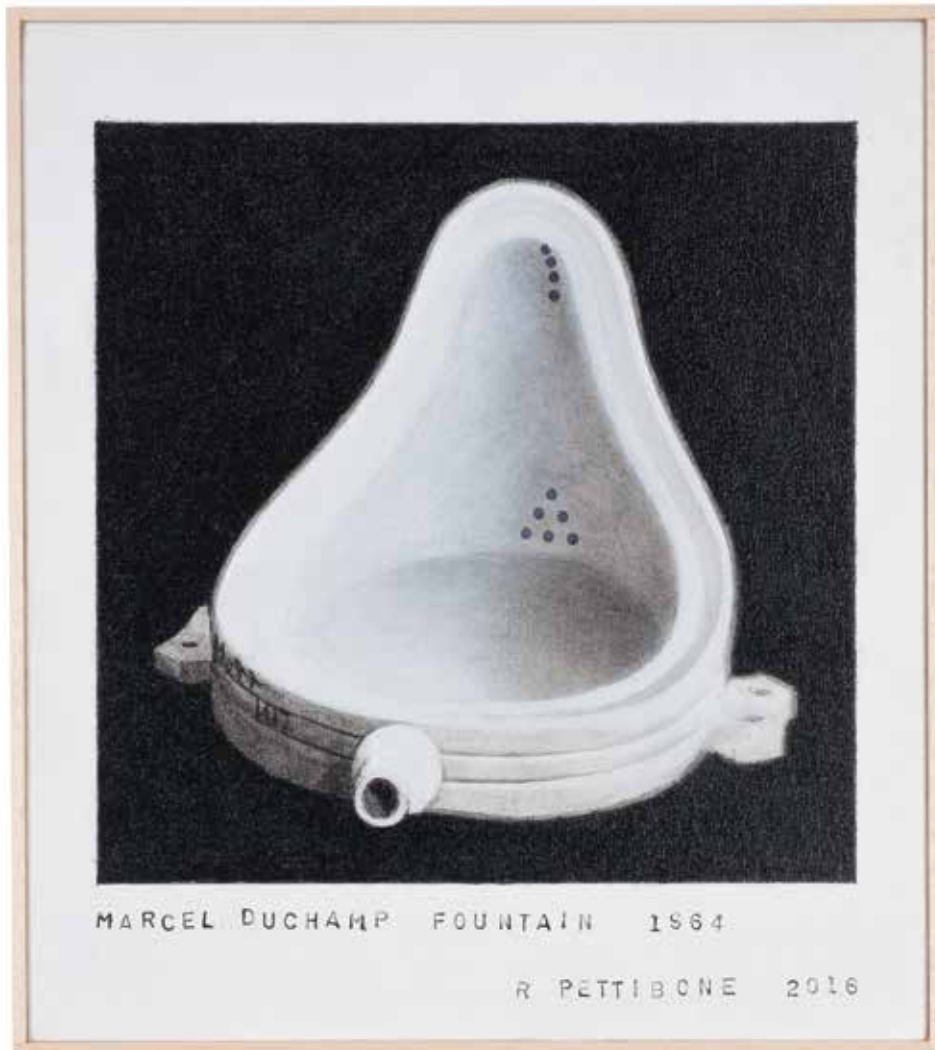


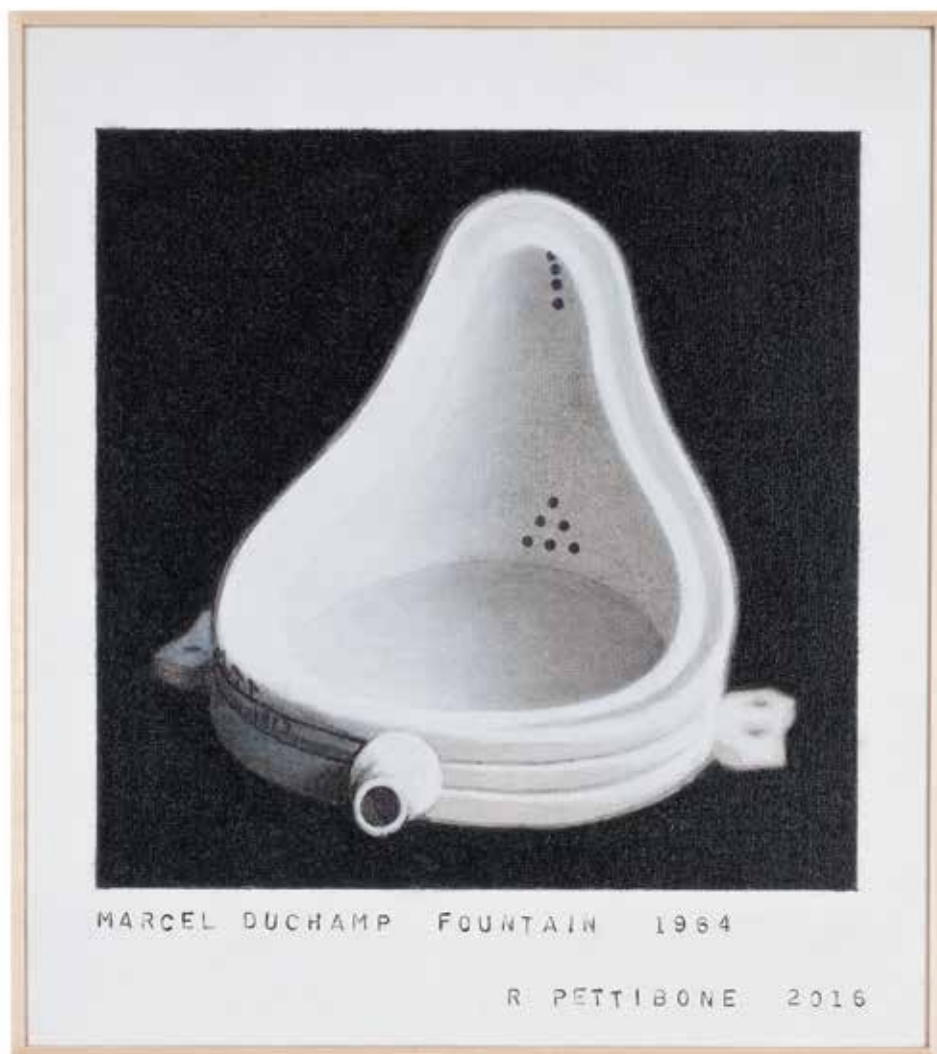


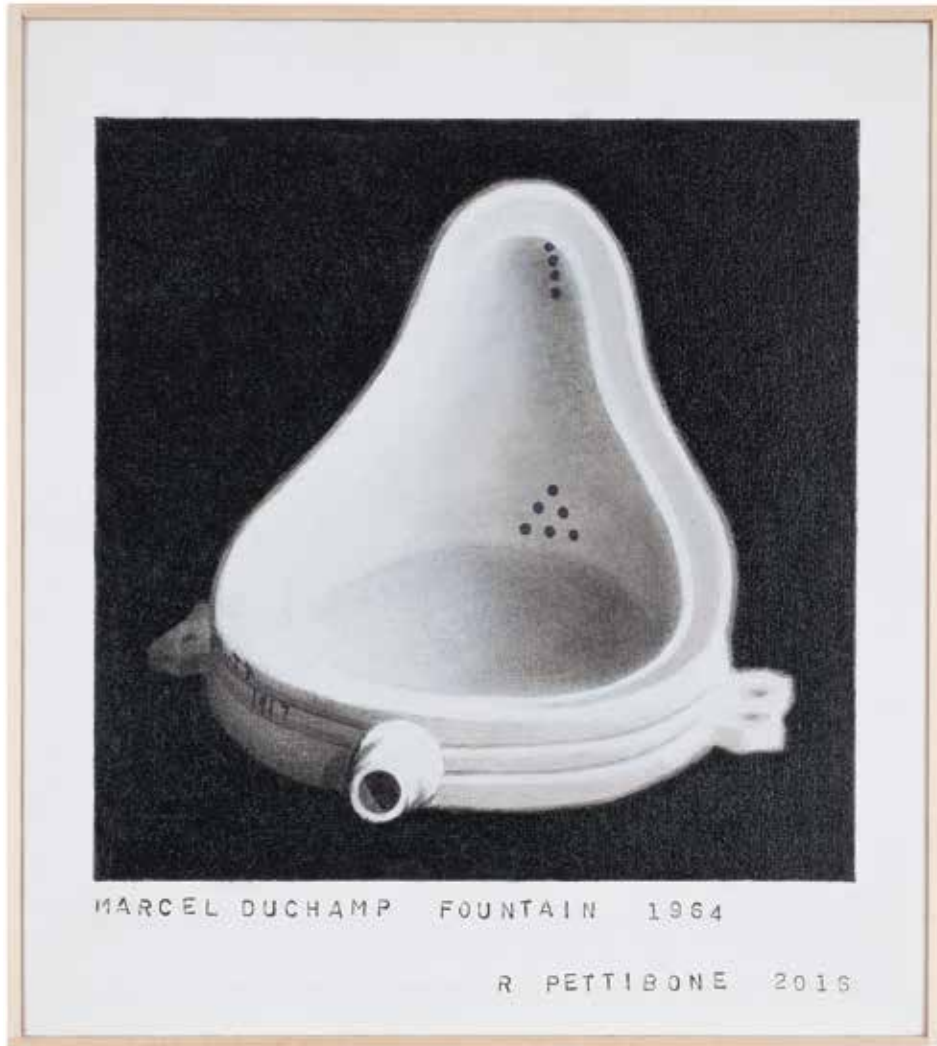
MARCEL DUCHAMP FOUNTAIN 1964

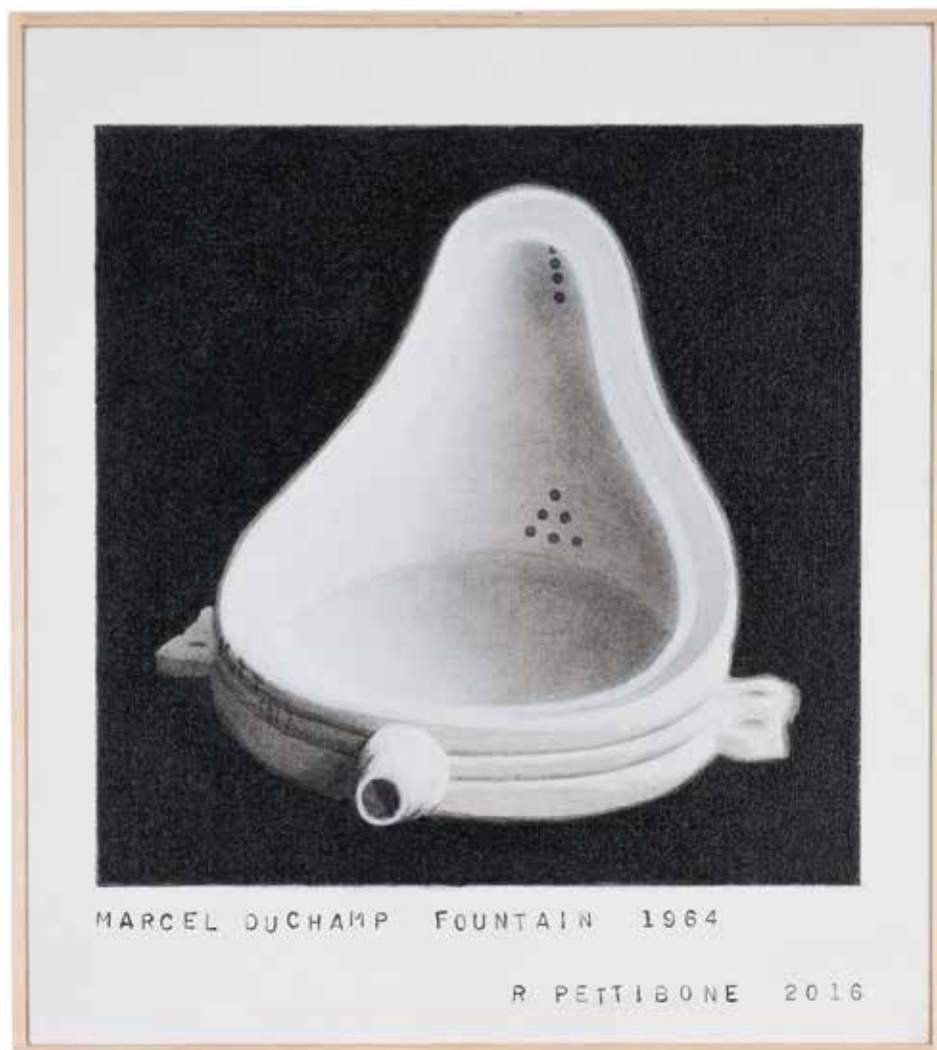
R. PETTIBONE 2016

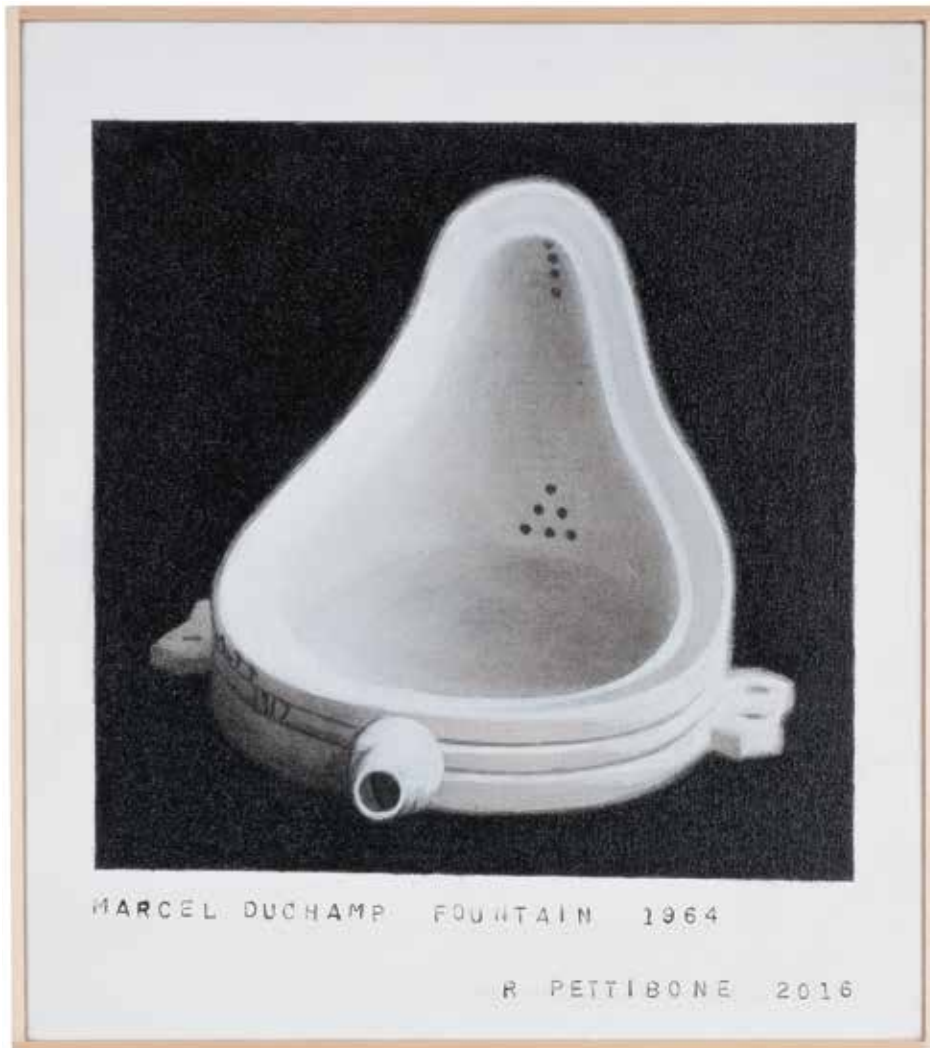












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