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Realism Redivivus And Universal

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If the moment when art became decisively “modern” occurred when Kandinsky, who “had known only realist art,” as he wrote, saw “The Haystack of Claude Monet...and didn’t recognize it,” finally concluding “objects were discredited as an essential element within the picture,”¹ then that moment has become passé. And, retrospectively, peculiarly misguided, however historically necessary it seems to have been at the time. For after a century of the objectless—“abstract”—art inaugurated and advocated by Kandinsky, it has become clear that without objects the picture is peculiarly empty. It lacks a certain essential existential meaning, for we exist in a world of objects; without them we wouldn’t exist. Some are more significant to us than others—some we relate to more regularly than others, some we ignore and some we celebrate—but without them we would be incompletely human. To deny or dispense with them as Kandinsky does, as though it were possible to make art without them, is to dehumanize art, to recall Ortega y Gasset’s view of what its “modernization” meant, and with that to deprive it of existential and human consequence. I am suggesting that objectless art—so-called pure art, an art only of “form and color,” as Braque said—has left us in a strange, barren place; all the more so as it has become aesthetically hypertrophied, not to say hyperbolically reified. Abstract art has made us more sensitive to “sensations”—the so-called color patches (*taches*) that supposedly made their first eye-catching appearance in Manet’s *Music in the Tuileries Garden* (1862)—but sensations are not “objective” enough to endure, let alone make an existential, humanizing difference.

That a new age of realist art has arrived is made abundantly clear by the wide-ranging exhibition of it curated by Casey Cleghorn, the daring young curator of the Paul Booth Gallery. If every exhibition is a critical argument, then Cleghorn brilliantly argues that there are two kinds of realism: the “hard” realism of observation, taking external reality as its subject matter, and the “soft” realism of introspection, taking internal reality as its subject matter. In other words, what Kandinsky separated as an art of “external necessity” and an art of “internal necessity,” declaring that the latter is more “purely artistic” and “spiritual” than the former, which is merely “objective” and “corporeal”—Kandinsky dismisses its “external, palatable beauty” as “distracting”—is a serious, destructive error. It misses the point that all art is inherently realistic or object-oriented: sometimes to

external objects or “hard truths” (objects experienced and represented as material facts) and sometimes to internal objects and “soft truths” (objects experienced and represented in the mind and in fantasy). Cleghorn’s exhibition (entitled “Fourth Wall”) reminds us that so-called descriptive realism, grounded in detached perception, and surrealism and magic realism, grounded in imaginative attachment, both address inescapable objects. The latter projectively identifies with them, often distorting them to make a psychodynamic point; the former perceptively identifies with them, usually to make a sociodynamic point. The two often overlap, and are in fact implicitly inseparable, for one always oscillates between projecting oneself into and separating oneself from objects. It is worth noting that Freud thought that even the most psychotically bizarre fantasy—the most surreally insane, magically absurd dream—is grounded in the experience of real objects. Object relational psychoanalysts remind us that the self is constituted by objects. That is, without our relationship to objects—our emotional as well as practical connection with them—we would not survive in the world, let alone exist. The same is true of art, which is an extension of our relationship with objects, for the emotional and social better or worse, like all relationships. However much color and form seem to exist for their own pure or “spiritual” sake in abstract art, their interplay—their aesthetic relationship—communicates the artist’s unconscious way of relating to the world of objects. One might say the aesthetic relations the abstract artist establishes among his forms and colors—implicating them in each other so that they seem inseparable, however distinctly different—symbolize the relational matrix in which he exists.

The hard realist works—works that picture external objects—in the exhibition are: Adam Miller’s *Bone Wars* (2015), David Molesky’s *Maiden* (2015), Ben Tolman’s *Canal* (2016), Mike Cockrill’s *Gossip Girls* (2010) and Richard Scott’s *Hearts of Men* (2016). The soft realist works—works that picture internal objects—in the exhibition are: Aaron Johnson’s *Walkin the Walk* (2016), Barnaby Whitfield’s *The Atheists* (2016), Chris Gullander’s *Stand Up* (2016), Ekaterina Panikanova’s *Exercisi Di Memoria* (2016), Levan Songulashvili’s *Idem et Idem 2* (2016), Lou Ros’s *The Bedroom* (2016), Mercedes Helnwein’s *Table* (2016), Odd Nerdrum’s *Dustlickers* (2005), Sophia Narrett’s *She Whispered And They Tried Things On* (2014) and Will Kurtz’s *Adam and Eve at Coney Island* (2016). Looking at the selection, it quickly becomes clear that none are unequivocally matter-of-fact realism or imaginative realism: the distinction between hard and soft realism is absolute in theory, rarely in practice. Matters of fact always inform imagination, and imagination always deals with facts—a dialectical point made clear by the dream, the work of art everyone creates.

Thus the imaginative transformation of history—while remaining true to the violent facts—into tragic myth by Miller, Molesky and Scott. Miller shrouds his combatants—archaeologists fighting over dinosaur bones—in luminous darkness, Molesky’s ukrainian rioters are in a kind of hell—thick smoke rises from numerous fires, and Scott’s ghostly

soldiers are in a lurid atmosphere. The archaeologists, rioters and soldiers are engaged in a fight to the death. Indeed, all three works show the Triumph of Death, ready to act with a stone and a pickax in Miller's picture, with rocks and Molotov cocktails in Molesky's picture, and with pistols and rifles in Scott's picture. All three works are moral allegories—object lessons in human folly, the Hobbesian war of all against all. They are meticulously executed in Old Master styles: a version of tenebrism in Miller, a version of proto-Renaissance style in Molesky, a version of romantic realism in Scott. The works are fraught with allusions to Old Masterpieces, suggesting they are New Masterpieces. Miller, Molesky and Scott are what I have called New Old Masters; that is, they use Old Master styles to mediate modern reality and to give emotional and cognitive depth to events that the mass media would treat superficially (one more momentarily hot news story, here today, gone tomorrow). They are narrative painters, and, like Old Master narrative painters, they force us to take seriously the scene they depict, not only because of the deliberateness and care with which they render it—no quickie slick photograph or newsreel excerpt from a TV broadcast—but because they make it clear, as the Old Masters do with the scenes they represent, that it is a particular example of a universal story. To immortalize a scene or an individual, as Old Master art has been said to do, so that it seems to be fully “realized,” and with that to exist in what has been called “the eternal present” of art, is to bring out its universal significance.

Mike Cockrill also deals with tragic violence, but in a more sardonic way. In *Gossip Girls*, the teenage girl with a Lugar is a coldblooded killer, in effect a Nazi, as the German pistol she carries makes clear. The teenage girls in her gang are also coldblooded, and very trendy: one records the murder of two terrified adult clowns on her camera—a real life and movie event converging, fact being fictionalized as it happens, fiction treated as entertaining matter of fact. At first glance, the work looks like an illustration lifted from a slick magazine. But the slickness disappears in nuance, evident in the subtle and exquisite rendering of detail, the use of shadow, the intensity of the colors—many primaries—and the careful placing of the figures, each with a different face. We see the moviemaker from the back, adjusting her hair like a Venus in front of a mirror, an ingenious allusion to a classic iconography. Cockrill's painting speaks the unconscious feminist truth—men are clowns, and women want to kill them—in an amusing way worthy of Brueghel. It is a dark scene with bright colors, making its tragic import all the more startling.

Tolman's *Canal* is a grim sociopolitical allegory of urban life, as its over-all grayness and ramshackle structures, their doors and windows blackened, suggest. The “canal” is in effect the fence that diagonally cuts through the scene, suggesting that the work pictures a world divided—two cities or societies side by side yet disconnected and different. The upper one is rich and “higher,” as its higher and larger buildings suggest; the lower one is poor and down-trodden—oppressed—as its low-lying, smaller buildings imply. There are few people on the streets in the upper city, while many people crowd the streets in the

lower city. The two sides are at odds—at war, if fitfully. As with the other hard realists, Tolman registers the irreconcilability of human groups. And, like them, his handling is exquisitely precise and exacting, his details having a certain autonomy even as they form part of a whole. He also seems to be commenting ironically on modernity, for his scene is a geometrical construction—an abstract grid skewed and absorbed into a realistic scene.

On the soft realist side, Johnson's expressionist realism and Gullander's surrealism have something in common: they both make a mockery of human beings. Gullander's figures, on stage and in the audience, are grotesque, misshapen monsters; and Johnson's stagey, barefooted figures, with their distorted faces, have an affinity with those in Ensor's *The Entry of Christ into Brussels* (1888). Odd Nerdrum's *Dustlickers* are less physically absurd, but they are engaged in a rather absurd act. The saltlick has run dry; there is only the dust of death to lick. The landscape is barren—not a sign of green growth anywhere—and empty, apart from the two figures. Nerdrum's figures are not physically (outwardly) grotesque as Johnson's and Gullander's are, but they are emotionally (inwardly) grotesque. They are driven by "internal necessity" to do what they do, whatever the "external necessity" of the bleak landscape. For all the apparent self-possession and defiant aplomb—evident in their hard stare at us—of Whitefield's young atheists, they seem to be inwardly empty, as their pale faces suggest. Their eyebrows seem to be plucked, their pink lips pursed, their face streaked with rouge, their hair combed in what seems like Caesarian style, but it all seems to be a mask or pose, conveying not so much disbelief in God but narcissistic self-belief, giving them an air of pseudo-confidence. Atheists or not, Whitefield has deftly represented an insane internal self, isolated and unrealistic because it denies the existence of objects beyond and outside itself, the objective world symbolized by God, the ultimate object, who created it.

The works by Helnwein, Narrett, Ros and Songulashvil, however different in appearance and in the method of their making—Helnman's is oil on pastel, for example, and Narrett's is a masterpiece of embroidery—are all group scenes. In Songulashvil's work, the group huddles in darkness. In Helnwein's work, the group sits around an absurdly floating table. Are we witnessing a séance? The women in Ros's work are blurred into painterly oblivion, undermining their intimacy, and the tiny figures in Narrett's work seem to be in a Garden of Eden doubling as a funeral parlor. All huddle together for a warmth that doesn't exist: internal reality has a decidedly morbid cast in all four works. External reality is violent in the works of the hard realists, which no doubt lends it excitement; but there is libidinous excitement in the handling and colors, suggesting that their works are inwardly alive. As Panikanova's *Exercisi Di Memoriam* makes clear, the works of the introspective realists tilt decisively toward melancholy, the ugly grotesque being a defensive form of its emotional ugliness. Panikanova's work, with its doubled child on a rocking horse standing out of the blackness, is a tour de force of melancholy, one might say—all the more so because of its

ingenious use of old books, shrouded in black cloth, forming an over-all grid. Conceptual in principle, it is devastatingly realistic emotionally.

In a more colorful vein, yet equally dark emotionally, Kurtz's *Adam and Eve at Coney Island*—the one sculpture in the exhibition—also deals, if less directly and more ironically, with a young boy's memory of what psychoanalysts call the exciting, tantalizing, seductive mother; for mother Eve, with a snake around her neck, has given her little boy Adam a jelly apple, making him an Oedipal winner. The lurid colors, painterly dramatic, coating both figures—dark blue predominates in mother Eve, light blue in boy Adam—intimately connect them, conveying the intensity of their relationship and inseparability. It seems that, for Kurtz, God has made Eve before he made Adam. As with the other soft realists, we are dealing with inner life at its most emotionally dramatic. Perhaps they should be called psychological realists, and the hard realists should be called social realists. However much their figures also have an inner life, it's certainly less conspicuous than with the figures in the psychologically realistic works.

The exhibition "Fourth Wall," curated by gallery director Casey Gleghorn, was on view at the Booth Gallery at 325 W. 38th St. (Store #1) New York, NY 10018 from August 13 through September 10, 2016. paulboothgallery.com.

—Donald Kuspit

Notes

1. Wassily Kandinsky, "Reminiscences/Three Pictures," *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, eds. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 363.
2. Ibid, 242. Kandinsky facilely asserts that "the spirit...can find no new nourishment...in the content of accustomed beauty." It gives "accustomed pleasure to the indolent corporeal eye....Hence this kind of beauty often constitutes a force that leads not toward the spirit but away from it," as though corporeal beauty—the beauty of physical objects—were spiritless.

