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PART I INTRODUCTION

1. Pre-flight

I often wonder why I got involved in image-making in the first place, and have more or less decided that it was because I could never play football or baseball or hockey as a youth: I never had the physical co-ordination it required. I took one boxing lesson at the age of 11, and with the fifth punch thrown (all at me) I got a bloody nose. I took off my gloves, went home, and drew a lovely picture of a North American Bison. I took it to school the following day in an effort to recoup some of my losses.

I grew up in a tiny Northern Ontario town, somewhere between the watershed and the tree line. It was one of those foul-smelling, foul-languaged, one-company places whose sole reason for existence was the conversion of trees into paper. Everybody there either identified with the men cutting the trees or the trees which were being cut- the latter group being a distinct minority of which I was one.

Our school had a lot of dusty artificial Group of Seven prints hanging on the walls. The same two were in every room. A larger and even more odious one was a dominant feature of the staff room (I peeked). I suppose that the people responsible for bringing them into the building either got them for the right price or perhaps thought that we would identify with them. Not so.

I used to take the left-over oil colours from my mother's paint-by-number sets and shamble off into the woods to do some studies of trees. They more often than not ended up looking like Group of Seven trees. Invariably, I got the sensation that just being there was sufficient, and that there was not a man alive who could add meaning to the experience. Not even Robert Wood.

I always had a passion for photographs. I used to clip out pictures from the company magazine and assemble collages from which I made drawings. They gave satisfying results and I used to impress a lot of people with my skill...until they discovered that I had used photographs- at which time I had to explain that the hard part was assembling the individual pictures. Somehow, I could never quite recover lost ground through that strategy. Looking back, I now wish that I could have explained that I was striving for an objective view of society, and that the camera best resolved this problem through...

The truth of the matter is that my early efforts in making visual imagery were designed to entertain and place myself in the footlights every once in a while. That much in my life as an artist has not changed. (If others wish to build philosophical empires through their work, then that is their business. Just let me... entertain you. If you show me your work, I hope that I too shall be amused.) Twentieth-century art is a live-and-let-live proposition.

2. In Retrospect

I still wince at this thought, but have long since faced the grim reality: I am not an artist! I was probably never pre-disposed to be one, and certainly my efforts to role-play the part could not survive beyond art school, with all the protection and illusion it embraces. I do not paint enough; actually, I have not done any significant painting for almost two years. The paintings I have done hang on my walls, testifying to how emotionally attached I have become to them, and accusing me of a certain lack of professional objectivity. But they do represent time well spent and lessons well learned which I think is sufficient for now.

Perhaps the most potent lesson which emerged from my painting experience is this: those images which I find most enjoyable and worth the effort making, are incompatable with my temperament and way of working- an irresolvable dilemma. This showed itself while in the graduate programme, when I came to the realization that my paintings go through several stages of development, with a level of "completeness" at each step. The first line drawings are enchanting with their finely spun webs of graphite. The underpainting has an elusive quality in its abstractness. The third stage presents an illusionistic image which bears the mask of reality but also the handwriting of process. Quite often at this point, I would feel the urge to step back fifteen feet, squint hard, and consider the job done. That "song in my soul" would say

stop, but integrity forced me to discover new levels of finish. I had to go with integrity. As Eduoard Manet stated, "The realist does not say, 'Come see faultless work', but, 'Come see sincere work'".[1]

As the surface required more and more detail and polish, it necessitated moving closer and closer to the work to achieve the level of control demanded. When the working distance had shrunk to a mere eight inches, I knew I had discovered the world of the photo-realist at work. Those eight inches were confining to the point of suffocating: I knew that one could die in front of the canvas as easily as anywhere else. As a lifetime occupation, there could not possibly be enough recompense for living a life of such self-styled entrappment. I am left only with the knowledge that I can do it- I can make that kind of art which I hold in such high regard. Now that I know I can do it, there does not seem to be all that much left.

A professor of philosophy once suggested to me, "You will never know who you are until you have found meaningful employment." As a teacher of art, both qualified and practicing, I can lend my support to that statement. I am willing to admit that some of the pleasure I get from my occupation is attributable to sublimation: my students' well-crafted and inventive paintings would not have come into

[1] Linda Nochlin, Realism (Baltimore, 1971) p. 36

existence were it not for my instruction and guidance. But the involvement with people offers so much more challenge than does trying to improve upon a pure white, newly-stretched canvas. I have to admit that some of my students demonstrate more potential than I ever dared wish for at that age, and helping them develop their skills and realize their aspirations is a tremendous reward.

As a teacher, I am obliged to interpret and explain art as succinctly as my resources allow. The students want and expect this, and I strive to meet their expectations at a level which is within their grasp. This is a teacher's primary function and responsibility. However, as an image-maker, I do not believe my responsibilities went beyond the work- the degree to which I was satisfied with it, and to which others were amused by it. The amount of knowledge accumulated in the process was paramount- convincing others of the relevancy of my discoveries seemed trite at best, inconclusive at least.

Finally of course, the merits of one's artistic persuits will be judged by onlookers, irrespective of the artist's personal assessment of his success in the cause-and-effect process. Hopefully though, such assessments would stem solely from the 'work' and not from whatever 'patter' which follows. Within these pages, there is very little information which directly or indirectly adds to the contents of the paintings upon which it is supposed to be based. Each of the works

was designed to be complete within itself. However, as I have tried to do with my paintings, I shall try to make this product interesting to consume. This will be justification enough for its having been done.

3. Waterwings

When I first undertook studies at Concordia University ('Sir George' as it was known then), I was a full and active participant in the earnest but good-natured bantering which went on between the formalists and the abstract-expressionists. There was no other show in town. We were all trying out our new-found vocabularies; swimming in a vast pool of verbal and literal backwash originating from art journals and the volube professors under whom we studied. Of note, we learned that colour should squeek, red and green look real swell together, art is about art and that more is less. This last concept above all others, led me to reassess what I could or should be doing on this educational excursion. For it seemed almost axiomatic that as an artist's imagery became simplified in terms of the amount of data he inserted into his work, his verbal and literal arsenal became amplified; detached and removed from the actual business of making paintings. Making objects, rather than explicating them, was my main interest.

At the end of the first year, formal analysis and dissertations about the nature of Western Capitalism were becoming tedious and threadbare, and I found it increasingly difficult to build art activities around social comment,

spiritual insights, or the latest edition of Artforum. The "signs and codes of our times", which is what one instructor called them, had exhausted themselves of all meaning. As an alternative, I turned to the investigation of my own life experiences and environments for subject matter, a recourse which came naturally but with some difficulty.

I was not alone in my frustration. Cluny Maher, a classmate, was also interested in figurative art, and the two of us found mutual support in the face of an indifferent school community. He was interested in Andrew Wyeth and Tom Forrestal all the while he was dutifully making his hard-edge paintings. Unbeknownst, he was developing a technique for making graphite drawings from black-and-white photographs. I found them appealing, and taking up his initiative, I produced a few drawings of my own, although the subject matter reflected his concerns.

It was he who got me out on photographic field trips. For that purpose, I bought a used Minolta 35mm camera, which I still use. He owned a car; I did not. Consequently, where he went- I went. In the summer of 1972, we spent a lot of time poking through deserted railway stations, dilapidated barns and the rusting hulks of steam locomotives of St-Constant, Quebec. While doing so, I became empathetic to what he was doing but remained unsympathetic. His subject matter was too far removed from my own experiences to allow for the kind of concentrated image I sought.

By the end of that summer, as I had a lot of photographs built around the railroad theme, I began to put them to use, since after all, they were now documents of experience.

At this time I rediscovered a book I had bought almost two years earlier containing two reproductions of paintings by Alex Colville, "The Horse and the Train", and "Family and Rainstorm". Needless to say, the former embraces objects which I had observed that summer. I stared for hours at that little print, transfixed. I could see how everyday objects when placed together under unusual circumstances took on a power which individually eluded them. The implications derived from doing this sort of thing seemed endless as the unspecified secondary information went beyond mere horses and trains.

It is significant that during one of our last outings that summer, I was witness to one of the strangest events I have ever seen. While driving down a country road lined with Wyeth fields of grass and Colville railroad tracks, I glanced out the Volkswagen window and saw a frail, white-haired man sitting in a bus shelter, reading his newspaper. It might have passed me by were it not for the fact that the man was formally dressed in a stiff black suit, topped off with a bowler hat. Now when had I seen that before? Probably never, but the acute, suprised recognition factor was probably preconditioned by Colville's paintings, and those of René Magritte which were reproduced in a newly-released book by Ballentine.

I think this book is worth a mention, as it became my standard reference text for the following year; I could see once again how commonplace objects could be played off against each other with bewildering results. I was determined to find the key to Magritte's perception of the real world. So with equal portions of bravado and ignorance, I returned to the university with a new mission in art and all the footnotes I might require. I was convinced that art, as Colville stated, grew out of art. I remain convinced today.

A major stumbling block lay ahead of me. The university teaching staff had so purged itself of "narrative baggage", that there was nobody there who could or would show me how to go about rendering naturalistic images in paint. I had to develop these skills on my own, and in collaboration with Cluny Maher and Rudy Sparkuhl whom I was to meet later that year. Apart from the information and camaraderie we shared, being one of only three people in the university involved in realism had advantages, not the least of which was the attention it got us. In those days, being different meant being radical, a much-sought commodity, and that was a definate "plus" for us. Finding myself perversely acceptable, and in a small group which attracted attention, I fell into a trap of my own making. Feeling the need to justify what I was doing and enhance my own sense of self-importance, I busied myself with the psycho-analytical concerns of the surrealist school to which I had now attached myself. I studied Freud with all the

passion of a neophyte student of psychology.

In the third year of the undergraduate program, I bought a second, larger book on the work of Magritte, Jane Helen Dow's book on the art of Alex Colville, two books on dream analysis and interpretation, Cirlot's dictionary of symbols, Abram's encyclopaedia of themes and subjects in painting, and Carl Jung's "Man and his Symbols". While now possessing more documentation for the legitimacy of my activities, I also had plenty of ammunition for the verbal bantering game.

For the remainder of that year, I continued to busy myself with my Surrealistic concerns, and over the following summer, perhaps persuaded by a professor's honest passion for the medium, produced a painting in oils. This was a departure from the acrylics I had hitherto used exclusively. A book I had bought that summer, illustrating and interpreting the work of Salvador Dali contributed to the switch. Using a combination of Dali and Magritte imagery, I finally waded in over my head.

Using a black-and-white photograph of a 1950 Plymouth borrowed from an aquaintance, a picture of a White Egret in flight from a nature book, a statuesque female form from a Magritte painting, and assorted objects from indefinable sources, I assembled a landscape fraught with death imagery, which I did not completely understand, but enjoyed discussing anyway. That year, quite unsolicited, a student asked me, "Is your mother dead?" Her obvious concern, apparently drawn

from the content of the painting, shook me, and the absence of any worthwhile explanation for having made the picture left me unnerved and feeling exposed. It was at that moment I admitted my superficial excursion into Surrealism lacked integrity which precipitated another re-assessment of my objectives in art.

To digress a little, Cluny Maher and I once again took several field trips during the summer of 1973. The hunting grounds had not changed, nor had the predictability of the subject matter. But I had culled one photograph which was of particular interest to me, taken on a highway near Huntington, Quebec in a driveway beside a middle-aged, aluminum-sided, brick-veneered storey-and-a-half house. At the end of the driveway 'squeeked' a tiny weathered barn, in front of which was parked an immaculate two-toned 1953 Buick with an "A Vendre" sign tucked in the windshield. The car, the neatly trimmed hedge, clipped lawn and ashphalt driveway were all crassly out of place within the rustic rural setting. In a way, the scene presented a 'surreal' quality of its own. I took several shots of the Buick, in part because my father had owned one similar to it, and in part because I was infatuated with the sparkle of the car's surface.

For economic reasons, I was working with slide film, which necessitated the use of a hand-held viewer. Because the viewing of the exposures was so awkward, the slide got tucked away, almost forgotten for several weeks while I worked on the painting of the 1950 Plymouth.

The image of a 1950's model car was very fashionable at this time, as a nostalgic revival of that decade was in vogue. Rock and Roll music was once again getting airplay, "The Goon Show" had been ressurected as "Monty Python's Flying Circus", and the film, "American Graffiti" was in the can. But despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, I convinced myself that my personal interest in this image was strictly "pure", representative of what I now wanted to pursue in painting. The 1950's, I rationalized, were my formative years, the source of my current perceptions in life, and it only made sense to investigate those years through photography and painting. Thus emerging from my brief infatuation with surrealism, I turned to my childhood of the 1950's for subject matter, hoping that the special child-like way of seeing the world, would somehow be rekindled, with all its naive magic and mystery. This, I reasoned, would enable me to produce imagery with those same qualities which made the art of Colville and Magritte so potent.

Finding A Dead Cat

Kid with a stick- a natural thing
To smash the dusty roadside thatch
Exposing the grave of a grisly cat.

Dirty old boot-rag, gnarled and stiff
Smirking beneath uncounted rains
Glazed eyes glaring into noon-day heat
Grey tongue jutting in contempt of laws
Which rule the firmament.

Perversely alive, maggots crawling
Bugs that dig and lap and suck
Descending upon that juice of life
Within the parching, shrinking hide.

I wrote this poem, and several others in the Fall of 1973, just prior to beginning my first photo-realistic painting. It was representative of my efforts to isolate the more trenchant experiences I had as a child, in the hope of stumbling upon interesting subject matter which could be found intact twenty years later. As Colville stated, and Irving Layton later repeated, one's experiences as a child are more potent and poignant than those of later years, once we had learned to think of things in terms of function, rather than as things to be explored. In a way, this was the sort of thing I was attempting in my 'surreal' oil painting: the car depicted was almost identical to one I had been in when two years old. There had been a serious accident, fragmented images of which I can still remember. The new photograph of the Buick had direct links with my early years, with my excursion into the wasteland of metaphysics, my immediate environment, and a new mainstream which had emerged in the United States.

The November issue of Art In America had just been put on the stands, and for me, in terms of my needs, its arrival could not have been better timed. There, in exacting detail, were paintings of rusting Chevrolets, gleaming Volkswagens, pimple-scarred faces and take-out stands, all parading under the banner of "New Realism". The content of these paintings was of considerable importance, and I shall deal with that later, but of more immediate concern was the fact that realism

was now being called "new", and given top billing in a bonafide journal of art. I now felt free to proceed with the making of a painting derived scrupulously from a single photograph, knowing that a historical precedent had been set. The institutional approval, I felt, would be required of me by the university, which filed Realism under the heading of "Black Velvet".

The painting of the Buick, which I later titled, "Little Bride Bleu", was done by projecting the slide directly onto a three-by-four canvas, a procedure I had read about in the article (I do not think that it would have occured to me otherwise). I then took the slide to a photography studio and had an enlargement made from which I worked during the painting process. I grinned to myself, in the knowledge that my own art concerns had led me away from the mainstream of current art activity at the university, and had coincidentally landed me in another vogue. But I was involved in the radically different, all-new Photo-Realism, secure in the thought that there would be few students at the university who would endeavour to swamp me in this new painting game.

The endearing difference between this movement and all other ongoing "isms" was the refreshing lack of vaulting intellectualization within the new realist camp. Literary pieces which purportedly dealt with the artists' works were more concerned with describing subject matter and processes than attempting to analyze and explain why they were being done.

The superstructure of art critics and intellectuals had not yet made the transition from the conceptual to the concrete, resulting in a literal and verbal void across the entire range of new art. Feeling the need to divest myself of the role of soothsayer and magician, I welcomed this change gratuitously. I could now concentrate on improving my technique while producing what I thought would probably be my first meaningful image. In keeping with the new part I had to play, my responses to students' inquiries became clipped and without superfluous information:

"Why are you painting this car?"

"Because it was there."

"I like your colours."

"Thank Liquitex and Kodak."

"Why did you leave a white border around the painting?"

"Because the photograph has a white border."

"How do you find the patience to work like that?"

"How do you not find the patience?"

This last response must be attributed to Rudy Sparkuhl, whom I overheard muttering it during a similar interrogation.

Then in an "Existential Moment" of enlightenment and perhaps a little guilt, I remember thinking, "THE RULES HAVE CHANGED, BUT IT'S THE SAME OLD GAME". There were many more issues I was trying to resolve, but given the new task at hand, it just did not seem appropriate to discuss them. I simply wanted to paint.

After having become exposed to that issue of Art In America, my first instinct was to run around the city of Montreal and take as many Canadian equivalents to these American pictures as I could find. But the length of time it took to complete one painting left me reassured that this could wait until the snow melted (you do not put snow in a piece of Photo-Realism). The scope of possibilities seemed endless as later publications were to confirm. I had not yet figured out how I was going to retain images of my past on the photographic negative, but I was sure that somewhere in the City of Montreal and the outlying areas, that subject matter existed. It was simply a matter of going out and finding it.

However, my preoccupation with the past was about to crumble. In the Spring of 1974, I went on a student field trip to New York City, which involved an overnight bus ride. Throughout the night I considered all the notions I had about the city and the art treasures stored there. This meeting with New York would be my first encounter with the real world of Big Art. By the time we arrived the next morning, we were more drunk with anticipation and speculation, than we were with the apple cider which was circulating on the bus.

All around us were the glorious evidences of the decadent American materialistic society about which we had heard so much. Massive expanses of glass and brass plated the stores which proudly displayed their wares- replete with gentlemanly uniformed doormen. Avenue of the Americas stocked rows of

office towers like lines of oversized dominoes while Broadway presented itself in something less than travel poster form.

The monuments to Frank Lloyd Wright, Marcel Breuer and Philip Johnson contained what we had come to see: the history of Western art- in twelve hours. We started at the Metropolitan Museum, spending several hours looking at Rembrandts, Bochs and Bruegels until our eyes watered. After a while we became immune to them, through over-exposure and perhaps a little shell-shock. We proceeded to the Guggenheim, Whitney, and some small "independants", and finally to the Museum of Modern Art.

It was here that I was to make my first meaningful discovery. The paintings of Mondrian were quite messy. "Why", I mused, "did he not bother to use masking tape? The edges would have been so much cleaner." One of the immortals had become possessed of mortality, and I realized just how deceptive art book reproductions could be. I saw my first genuine Magritte painting. It was as perfect as I had hoped; I reached out and touched the sacred vessel. To this day I can still feel that moment of anticipation and contact.

There were other pleasant suprises. Monet's "Waterlilies" with its grandiose scale and broad sweep of the brushwork held my attention as well as any other work I had seen. So too, Picasso's "Guernica" was a focal point while a large Jackson Pollack canvas took me by suprise: I actually liked it. This discovery led me to the conclusion that the literature

which purportedly "explains" an artist's work is of value only if the reader is interested. The painting gained its strength from the fact that it was interesting to look at, in spite of whatever may have been written or said about it.

I took several photographs during that one day in New York when I felt inclined, but they were largely of the souvenir variety. However, there were times when interesting subject matter presented itself but was left unrecorded. While walking down a street with Rudy Sparkuhl, I came across a derelict who was standing on his head in a small alcove in the side of a massive brick wall. His pants were split open at the crotch, displaying his genitals to an amused public. Taking a picture did not seem appropriate. A fat, acne-ravaged young woman sat for her portrait under the soothing hand of a pastel artist. I did not take a picture. Another young woman, with all the icy beauty of an Athenian godess, sat in flowing robes, playing her cello to the streaming passersby. I did not take a picture but now wish I had.

I did take a picture of a hot dog vendor and so did Rudy Sparkuhl. Rudy made a painting while I did not. I took a picture of Times Square at night and he quickly followed. He made a painting while I did not. I took a picture of an old discarded stove out in an alley. I have not yet made a painting but might do so in the future. My preferences in terms of subject matter were becoming clearer. On the whole, these

objects and situations were too far removed from my own experience to hold my interest for the length of time required to paint them. Painting them simply because I had been there was not enough. New York was fine for Richard Estes, but I left with mixed emotions: enthralled with the Mecca of Western art, but clear in my own mind where I had to look for meaningful subject matter. At midnight, we boarded the bus for home.

PART II ' HISTORICIZED ANECDOTES

The information I have related thus far, brings me to the point where I must deal with Photo-Realism and some of the perceptions of the activity I have absorbed since working in it. Some of the importance I affix to the meticulous recording of the environment stems from its being a time-honoured tradition, with implications which go beyond mere process and product. Its place in history, the reasons for its emergence at this time and place, its relationship to other contemporary art forms and its self-avowed intentions all pose problems which I shall endeavour to relate through my own perceptions. This section edits the information I have gathered and the conclusions I have drawn.

4. Reality and Realism

The nature of reality is of course, related to the general direction of this paper, although such a discourse is outside the limits of intent. I have vague memories of

participating in such discussions in the past and of having become frustrated and bored rather quickly. One such exchange revolved around the social perception of reality, or more accurately, the modifications that one's social conditions makes to that perception. My tormentor took the position that an Eskimo would become totally disoriented in our modern world of right angles and accelerated speed (I have since learned that this proposition is without foundation because the opposite has been proven true). My position was that while an Eskimo might have experienced something akin to a religious experience while doing 120 m.p.h. in a streamlined sportscar (a concession on my part), he most certainly would have been able to find the door and climb out of the car.

The implications are clear. For despite individual and cultural differences in the way that modern Western man perceives his environment, and the way the hypothetical Eskimo perceives that same environment, both function with relative co-ordination and safety. We, and the Eskimo, know that if we put our hands in open flame, we will burn our fingers, we all shield our eyes from wind and glaring sun, and we all ultimately try to avoid death. Physical phenomena are consistent enough to permit and warrant scientific investigation and mensuration; surely our experiences of these phenomena are the "stuff" of reality.

The view that the nature of existence should be investigated through science was one which had major philosophical impact

in 19th-century Europe. William James, the formulator and chief spokesman of Pragmatism suggested that ideas have value only after they have been publicly tested and proven true, a direct reaction to the 'useless' metaphysical philosophical approaches thriving at the time (how many fairies can dance on the head of a pin?), and consistent with the emergence of science as the dominant shaper of the modern world. This repudiation of the magical and mystical, and subsequent acceptance of Pragmatism by the art community, was one of the prime motivators behind art's shift away from the various idealized romantic forms which functioned within pre-scientific concepts of reality.

The concerns of 19th-century realists were many and varied, not the least of which was the search for a contemporary, instantaneous image to represent their epoch. Lofty intellectual generalizations were scorned in favour of the factual recording of particular, comparatively mundane events which represented bourgeois life at the time. Art was stripped of rhetorical, supernatural content, and eventually completely transformed. When Courbet was asked for his opinion of Manet's Christ and Angel figures, he said simply, that he could formulate no opinion because he had never seen an angel. Historicized anecdotes executed in the grand manner now gave way to the humble and the commonplace rendered in monumental scale. Thus it became the role of the artist, somewhat like an empirical scientist, to be a recorder of events, without emotional

or intellectual prejudice; a gatherer of information about the microcosmic and macrocosmic, with equal fidelity and objectivity. Zola wrote in praise of Monet, "He knows neither how to sing nor how to philosophize. He knows how to paint, that is all."[2]

The photograph played a major role in the shift from Romanticism to Realism, just as it helped determine the shape which its products took. Delaroche remarked upon seeing his first daguerrotype in 1839, "From today, painting is dead!"[3] His comment was a little overly-exuberant and certainly premature as was witnessed by the realists' embrace of the photograph as an indispensable tool of their craft: Degas, Manet, Daumier and countless others through Turner and Picasso used it as an instrument of information gathering. Even though the photograph was berated by the established art critics, as being the essence of visual vulgarity, the very idea of using a technological device- the product of applied science, certainly would have appealed to the 19th-century realist. It offered a quick, dispassionate translation of visual reality, which they so eagerly sought and often slavishly copied. Shades of Photo-Realism!

[2] Brian Coe, The Birth of Photography (New York, 1976), p. 17

[3] Mario Amaya, Pop As Art (London, 1965), p. 22.

Ironically, the search for meaning in objects and situations, led to the 19th-century realists' discovery that in truth, they were trying to deceive the viewer into thinking that a two-dimensional surface was three-dimensional space. Thus, the orientation of art became less concerned with ~~the investi~~gation of one's environment as it was with the exploration of the nature of paint on canvas. Says Nochlin, "Ever since Maurice Denis proclaimed in 1890 that a painting was essentially a flat surface covered with colours, assembled in a certain order, before it was a battlehorse, a nude woman, or an anecdote, realism has fought a losing battle for inclusion within the ranks of avant-garde art."[4] It would appear that Realism fathered Impressionism, which in turn started the chain of events which almost a century later, found realism in the forefront of the avant-garde.

5. Hierarchy of Subject Matter

From as far back as history has surveyed, artists have sought to more fully understand the world by recording it as accurately as possible. While political and social conditions brought 19th-century Realism into notoriety, illusionism in its many forms has been traced back into antiquity. At a stage in their development, both ancient Egypt and Greece embraced

[4] Linda Nochlin, "Realism Now," Super Realism, ed. Gregory Battock (New York, 1975), p. 113.

illusionism. From Greece comes Pliny's anecdote of Zeuxis, who is said to have painted grapes so convincingly, that birds tried to peck at them. Whether or not this tale is true is open to speculation, but it has held as a symbol of the intentions and aspirations of illusionistic painters ever since.

Even in Greece though, the classification of illusionism into megalography, with its grand depictions of figures and architectural structures, and rhyparography, with its flower pieces and obstensibly minor themes, predicated the 19th and 20th-century dilemma as to what constitutes a "worthy" art image. While both types of work enjoyed financial success, "the practitioners of grand manner painting looked down upon the others with condescension."[5] Whether or not the importance of the subject matter should have a bearing in assessing the value of a work of art, remains to this day, a philosophical problem.

More interesting perhaps than the devices employed by tromp-l'oeil artists to deceive the eye and beguile the mind was the subject matter they chose to depict, giving the viewers of later epochs the opportunity to better understand the milieux of bygone eras, through the objects they produced. Of note is the 18th and 19th-century phenomenon of "papyromania", referring to the proliferation of varying scraps of paper, letters, tickets, books, train schedules and pamphlets as subject

[5] M. L. d'Otrange Mastai, Illusion in Art (New York, 1975), p. 37.

matter in trompe-l'oeil works. Art historian d'Otrange Mastai suggests that the visual arts were using the printed media as symbols of mass communication, which saw the printed page become available to a broad social base. A common link emerges here between these artists, and the 'new-realist' Pop artists of the 1960's, who used the images of commercially printed material for that same purpose, thereby bridging the hierarchial gap which traditionally existed between subject matter which was considered too "tivial", and that which was accepted as socially significant.

6. Realism as Reaction

The New Realism of our age is by no means an isolated accident, nor is its emergence unlike that of the realism in the past century. The shift from Impressionism to Conceptualism featured, above all else, a move away from scientific thought in art, towards the ethereal intellectual generalizations so inherent in 19th-century Neo-Baroque Romanticism. New Realism has reacted to this shift by dealing with the concrete truisms of the material world; a complete 'about-face' reminiscent of their 19th-century forebearers. When Roy Lichtenstein was asked, "Are you anti- experimental?", he responded like a true realist: "I think so, and anti-contemplative, anti-nuance, anti-getting-away-from-the-tyrrany-of-the-rectangle, anti-movement-and-light, anti-mystery, anti-paint-quality, anti-Zen, and anti all those brilliant ideas of preceding movements which

everybody understands so thoroughly."

Perhaps one single piece of writing which might be representative of the sort of thing to which Lichtenstein was objecting, is "Art as Art Dogma, Part 5"; symbolic of non-visual art content:

> ...Simplicity in art is not simplicity
> Less in art is not less
> More in art is not more
> Too little in art is not too little
> Too large in art is too large
> Too much in art is too much
> Chance in art is not chance
> Accident in art is not accident
> Spontaneity in art is not spontaneity
> Pushing in art is pushing
> Pulling in art is pulling
> Heroism in art is not heroism
> Hankering in art is hankering
> Hungering in art is hungering... [7]

Evident in this piece of writing is the formalists' standard of taste and almost single-dimensional way of dealing with the painted image, a standard which they freely apply to all art. The orientation (or perhaps "system" is a better word) is <u>almost</u> singular in that quite apart from their self-proclaimed subscription to objective detachment, there runs through the system a common assumption: that the viewer is aware of the psychological and metaphysical references necessary to understand what is seen. Art Critic, Meyer

[6] John Russell and Suzi Gablik, <u>Pop Art Re-Defined</u> (London, 1969), p. 92.

[7] Ad Reinhardt, "Writings," <u>The New Art</u>, ed. Gregory Battock (Toronto, 1966). p. 175-176.

Schapiro quotes Whitman, stating that, "Whitman's description of God as a square depends upon his intense vision of it as a live form:

> Chanting the square deific, out of the one advancing,
> Out of the old and the new- out of the square entirely divine;
> Solid, four-sided (all the sides needed)...from this side Jehovah am I. 8

He continues by extracting a segment from Tolstoy's Diary of a Madman:

"Something was tearing my soul asunder but could not do so... Always the same terror was there- red, white, square. Something is being torn, but will not tear."[9]

Finally in one sweeping gesture which puts the onus on the reader-viewer to sort out the various implications, Schapiro concludes by saying, "I shall not conclude that the circle or square on the canvas is, in some hidden sense, a religious symbol, but rather: the capacity of these shapes to serve as metaphors of the divine arises from their living, often momentous, qualities for the sensitive eye."[10]

Perhaps these cross-references made themselves most conspicuous in the person of Jackson Pollack. His subscription to alchemical and metaphysical properties of colour and paint

8 Meyer Schapiro, "On the Humanity of Abstract Painting," Modern Art (New York, 1978) p. 230.

9 Ibid

10 Ibid

and belief in the notion that art should be an unconscious act controlled by nebulous forces, did a great deal to expand the supernatural in art. The New Realists did not disclaim the truth or sincerity of such beliefs, but said that without proof, such tenets were without value. If such ideas had no proof, and thus no value, there was no place for them in painting. They returned to known entities (new cars are shiny), and social truisms (some tourists carry cameras) for subject matter.

However, while the New Realists were solidifying their imagery and objectives, the 'Modernist March' continued. Quite apart from their belief in the spirituality of colour (according to Montreal painter, Molinari), later modernists continued the drive towards increased abstraction until the 'ridding' of the object became a goal; art was becoming a cerebral game, and a great deal of the sport of it depended upon the viewer's understanding the myriad of theories upon which the pieces were founded. Clement Greenberg wrote, "I repeat that art does not offer theoretical demonstrations. It could be said, however, that it converts all theoretical possibilities into empirical ones, and in doing so, tests inadvertently, all the theories about art for their relevance to the actual practice and experiencing of art."[11] The distinction, like that of Schapiro's is a mute one indeed.

[11] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," ed. Gregory Battock, The New Art (New York, 1973), p. 76.

Undoubtedly, the ultimate paring of aesthetics with an intensification of metaphysical rhetoric came with art povera. With a belief that "true artists help the world by revealing mystical truths"[12], and a determination to completely erase aesthetics from art, in order to destroy the art "establishment", the conceptualists had taken modernism as far as it could go. However, Rosenberg points out the fatal flaw:

> The uncollectable art object serves as an advertisement for the showman artist, whose processes are indeed more interesting than his products, and who markets a signature appended to commonplace relics. To be truly destructive of the aesthetic, art povera would have to forsake art action for political action. As art, its products bear the burden of being seen by non-believers who must be persuaded to respond to them. But to make a fetish potent outside the cult is precisely the role of the aesthetic. 13

With Clyford Still's black painting hanging on a black wall in New York's Museum of Modern Art, Malevitch's canvas, "White on White" stripping art content in "The Art of The Real", and the conceptualist's drive to rid art of all objects through the use of video and earthmoving machinery, the art world was ready for the volte-face in direction which the New Realism offered.

But the new wave was not gratuitously accepted in an art industry banking on modernism, because to a large extent, New Realism laid bare the modernist myth that art, like man himself, was on an evolutionary course, with the various "isms"

12 Harold Rosenberg, "De-Aestheticization," Gregory Battock, ed., The New Art (New York, 1973), p. 186.

13 Ibid., p. 187.

of the 20th century leading inexorably towards some ideal, pure form of art, free of all incumberances of process and product. With this simple gesture, the New Realists affirmed that new directions in Modern art have usually been a response of dissatisfaction with the art which preceded it. The rallying cry of the 19th-century realist was once again making itself heard: "Il faut être de son temps!" (Nochlin)

Twentieth century realism has been with us all along, but apart from briefly surfacing under the guise of Pop, which eventually evolved into Photo-Realism, has remained beneath the worthy consideration of mainstream priests and profits. Undoubtedly, Pop's acceptance as a serious contender in the art arena rested in its apparent adherence to the modernist credo that the retention of the flat surface was an artist's uppermost problem. In his essay, The Painted Word, Tom Wolfe suggests that Pop artists were realists "in drag"; while professing a concern for flatness, this thin veneer masked their cheating hearts longing for realism. This hypothesis is partly born out when looking at their work and the critical reviews of their contemporaries. Amaya writes that Rosenquist's main virtue lay in, "his virtuoso handling of two-dimensional illusion and his brilliant ability to compose with structural conviction."[14]

The flat appearance of Pop is not suprising, since the subject matter was primarily the two-dimensional printed

[14] Mario Amaya, Pop As Art (London, 1965), p. 96.

surfaces spewed forth by the commercial image-makers. Typically, Lichtenstein attached himself to the comic book aesthetic, using it to depict his subject matter- often the comic itself, in that flat and shallow manner. Perhaps he reached his zenith in his work, "Little Big Painting", a tongue-in-cheek look at Abstract Expressionism. Peter Blake in his "Got A Girl", takes a similar good-natured gibe at Kenneth Nolan's chevrons, while collaging above the larger sections of paint, actual commercial reproductions from "girlie" magazines. Indiana and Brecht are noted for their painting of signs with absurd messages, and it has been said of Warhol that rather than painting soup cans, he was actually painting the labels of those cans. Even when dealing with Warhol's multiples, there is a certain amount of flatness, but without a doubt, the Pop-Art-Award-For-The-Flatest-Surface would have to be given to Alex Hay for his painting, "Graph Paper", an 87" x 68" image of yellow-green paper ruled into blue-green squares of line. One might ask whether the modernist aesthetic had influenced his concern for flatness and grid structure, whether it had influenced his choice of subject matter, or whether Hay was in fact taking a "nudge-nudge, wink-wink, know-what-I-mean, know-what-I-mean?" (Monty Python's Flying Circus), over-the-shoulder look at formalist concerns. Whichever is the case, or whether or not all these apply, the painting demands more than a "palm-reading" of spatial development and flatness.

Incorporating preceding artforms in a taunting but

humourous "campy" sort of way has been the sport of realists in the past. DaVinci's "Mona Lisa", which has evolved into a symbol of art has been defaced by numerous artists in the past, including Saskia de Boer, Warhol, Duchamp and the self-styled realist Leger, who in 1930, included a photographic miniature of the "Mona Lisa" in a still life setting, stating that it was an object like all the others.

But as was the case with those "knock-knock" jokes of the period, Pop Art humour wore thin, mainly because its choice of subject matter was too confined. With too narrow a message (who's there?) their range of images was destined to become wearisome and overstated. Perhaps they incorrectly assumed that the media was some monstrous single entity, conspiring to numb and manipulate the collective 'Mass Mind', and that the public was a knot of furry rodents dashing to blissful self-destruction. Such cynicism would prove to be myopic. In fact, the art public's embrace of Pop showed their willingness to share in these social concerns; once this following had demonstrated their acceptance and approval of the Pop message, the movement per se had nowhere left to go. (The practitioners of Pop should have known that realists do not get involved in such things!)

This re-emergence of realism, albeit through the back door, was however, significant. The modernist umbilical cord, if not severed, had at least been clamped. In an age where man defines himself by what he does, his society was now

being assessed by these artists, through the products it produced and the environments it created. The realist's aspiration of better understanding his surroundings through objective observation, was infinitely more attuned to this new perception of society than that of the old avant-garde, whose formal 'behold-the-belly-botton' exercises had increasingly lost touch with the legitimate concerns of the public. The New Realists had turned over the modernist mirror, and exhibited instead of that self-reflected image of art, the "Made in U. S. A." label.

Part III PHOTO-REALISM REVEALED

7. Photo-Realism and the Snap-shot Aesthetic

The love-hate relationship between the artist and the photographer has prevailed since the two learned to co-exist in the late 1800s. The 19th-century realists, while exploiting the photographic image, forced photographers to reassess their objectives and expand the photographic aesthetic. This change of direction was prompted equally by the marketing of inexpensive portable cameras and film in 1900. The 'Great Unwashed' had at its disposal the Kodak "Brownie" camera, accepting it as much the standard fare of tourism as a change of underwear. The Kodak "snapshot" (a word coined in 1860 by Sir John Herschel), with its sharp clear image, was now being produced by the tens of thousands, furthering the frantic search by professionals for alternatives to what at

that point was the cheapest and most successful photographic process.

Today, the term "snapshot" refers to that very kind of image, found stuffing family albums, valued only by the owners and participants in the 'gang-over-for-a-party' or 'here-we-are-in-Kapuskasing' themes. The term "photograph", while all-encompassing, is also used exclusively to identify the work of photographers with nobler aspirations, seeking more control and scope in their conception, production and presentation.

I bring this matter up because I had to come to terms with it in the course of making photo-realistic paintings. While I was presenting four completed canvases at a Concordia seminar, one of my instructors asked, "Why do two of them look like snapshots, while the other two look like...paintings?" The question caught me off guard because it was a concern which I had hoped was not quite so self-evident. I explained though, that the two paintings which resembled snapshots did so because the photographs from which they were produced were exposed under full and direct sunlight, with the resultant bleached highlights and blackened shadows. Until the adjustable camera was put into widepread use, this was the typical image the family camera was producing. The other two source photographs lacked that kind of harsh lighting and cast shadowing; the softness of the images was reminiscent of the paintings of Alex Colville.

Reinforcing this split were two separate and distinct types of subject matter. The first two dealt with domestic themes, loaded with nostalgic family references, while the others contained less emotive imagery: a telephone lineman at work, and an abandoned slum dwelling. The first two related to snapshot albums; the latter took their cue from 19th-century realism.

Because of this perceptual duality, I concluded that in spite of what certain photo-realists had claimed, both form and content play vital roles in the genre. Photo-Realism generally embraces the snapshot aesthetic in terms of form, with the hard lighting, radical cropping, infinite depth-of-field (in the case of landscapes) and loosely-structured compositions. The subject matter though, is equally defiant of this aesthetic with its impersonal, fragmented and detached imagery, showing a photographer's awareness of considerations beyond the self-centred, through the secondary information conveyed. The identifiable snapshot and photographic aesthetics co-exist more effectively in paint than they do on film.

Upon examination of a noted piece of photo-realistic painting, one finds control which goes beyond that usually associated with snapshots. For example, Robert Bechtle's "1971 Buick" has the automobile sloping down about 10 degrees from a horizontal position, from right to left. The amount of car cropped from the left side of the painting is close to the amount of house cropped from the right side of the painting.

This awkward but deliberate symmetry does not subdue the snapshot aesthetic, but the supposedly casual, unstudied, paramount "objectivity" of realism has obviously been subjected to formal considerations.

8. The Photograph as Subject Matter

The photograph serves one or two functions to the photo-realist: it is used as subject matter, and/or it is used as a record of subject matter. The distinction is subtle and largely psychological on the part of the artist. But the two attitudes do exist. Chuck Close maintains that his interests lay solely in the kinds of perceptual systems inherent in the photographic image, as light passes through lenses and apera-tures. He exploits camera viewpoint, single-source lighting, shallow depth-of-field, and the indiscriminate documentation of textures across the human face, rendering them in what he calls, "art marks". He claims to reject humanist concerns in his monumentally-scaled faces and states, "that doesn't mean ultimately, that there aren't other levels of content. It's just that I can't afford to think about it."[15] One is forced to speculate why Close chooses the full-face pose, with his subjects looking down at the camera, and hence the viewer, with the camera's focal point drilling into the subject's eyes. It

[15] William Dykes, "The Photo As Subject," Super Realism, ed. Gregory Battock (New York, 1975), p. 152.

is pretty difficult to look at the image of a human face, nine feet in height, staring down at you, and read the things solely in terms of photo-systems and art markings.

Malcolm Morley was working in photo-realism in his Pop days, coming to the ranks through Minimalism. His postcard subject matter in his painterly works, were of the Pop genre, allowing him to profess detachment through his use of twice-removed commercial prints of ocean liners. His basically modernist view of art has taken his work through a number of stages, to the point where he has developed a style dubbed, "Post-Style Illusionism" by Kim Levine. The curious name fits the game.

Levine relates a bizarre tale of Morley's childhood in London during World War II; an event which may have influenced Morley's subject matter. Morley had built a model wooden model battleship and placed it on his bedroom window sill. That same night, a German air raid destroyed both the model and his home. Levine writes, "He never built another wooden ship, and he says the blocked memory surfaced only recently under analysis."[16] This story certainly suggests a preference for subject matter, over and above the postcard format. If Morley is more concerned with formalism than subject matter, one would have to wonder why he allows this aesthetic to be dictated by the 'Anonymous Entity'.

Morley and Close both work with grids to enlarge their

16 Kim Levine, "Malcolm Morley: Post-Style Illusionism," Super Realism, Gregory Battock, ed. (New York, 1975), p. 176.

images (modernist grid and flatness?) and both concern themselves with leaving the handwriting of the process, which is central to the information they wish to convey. However, in both cases, it is difficult to avoid narrative implications, suggesting that what the artists think they are doing, and what they are in fact accomplishing, are two different things. The statement by Marandel that, "today's painters have changed. They cannot discover reality any longer. Their subjects are photographs, illusions or as with Estes, reflections",[17] is as devoid of real content as he would hold Photo-Realism to be.

9. The Photograph as a Record of Subject Matter.

The camera is not objective, nor are photographs. They simply do not perform in ways which can be described as being anything other than photographic. It is the consistency of the process which is its greatest attribute. People are seldom objective, but neither can they ever be as consistent as the tools they employ. Numbers alone bear out these facts. A tripod-mounted camera will take an infinite number of identical pictures of the same scene, if left untampered. But give cameras to ten different people, and ask them each to take a picture of the same view, and you will surely end up with ten different photos, each representing the personal preferences of the photographer. Being close to the subject matter

[17] J. Patrice Marandel, "The Deductive Image," New Realism Gregory Battock, ed. (New York, 1975) p. 48.

has a different impact than does being further back, tightly-composed pictures have a different feel from loosely-composed ones, and depth-of-field, focus, exposure, frontality etc. all carry with them different meanings. Those photo-realists who take their own photographs make any number of these choices each time the shutter is released, and the reasons must be, at least partially subjective. While the photograph can never be a purely objective account of a single facet of reality, it can, within its own limitations, be of great assistance to the artist who would have to go to incredible lengths to get similar, but not identical results.

10. The Photograph as an Aid

The photograph as a source of information is the one element which binds photo-realists together, and they share an awareness of the assistance it lends in the art process. Audrey Flack described her reasons for the use of the "photo" as follows:

> It is a drawing aid. It offers me more time, and a new kind of relaxed time in which I can study the picture.
>
> It does not twitch, become irritated, laugh or move as human subjects do. I can quietly study it to further the study of reality.
>
> It freezes space, colour, light and light sources- I can concentrate on the colour changes, tonality, light striking objects and space, without being interrupted by the actual changes which are taking place in the ever moving world. The photograph lets me study what is taking place at a given moment, period or hour- more intensely and for a longer period of time than I can in the actual world of reality.
>
> It makes inaccessible objects available for me to paint.

It allows me to particularize. I can zoom in and study detail and surface textures.

It creates an illusion of space, through the juxtaposition of form.

It creates a world of shadows. Shadows create form and they play a role in time and space. 18

There is no doubt as to the photograph's potential as an aid to the artist who has to transcribe three-dimensional reality onto a two-dimensional surface. The photograph does it instantaneously and with great fidelity, not knowing preferences, prejudices or ignorance as it makes its totally indiscriminate recordings. I can recall working on the shiny fender of a policeman's motorcycle, in a painting which had a cast shadow running right through the centre. The reflections in the paint, and that cast shadow posed no end of work and frustration, but at least they remained constant week after week.

The photograph allows an infinite amount of time to be spent, not only on the whole image depicted, but also on the individual parts which may need more attention than others. Visual records now can be made through the photograph, stored and retrieved at a later date. The portability of photographs means that subjects can be found almost everywhere and transported to a comfortable and efficient working space.

I took several pictures of a road grader ploughing snow which I later used in a painting. From the dozen or so

18 Udo Kulterman, New Realism (Greenwich, 1972) p.19.

exposures I took, I selected the one which best conveyed those aspects of the machine and its function that I felt were central to the image. In that one, the machine was coming towards me while I chose a low viewpoint for a little added drama. To make this image convincing, through my perception of the situation, only a photograph could convey the appropriate data. As a record of the event, it froze everything, including the tractor, the tumbling snow, the pedestrians, passing cars, and the moment. That moment when the shutter is released is an anxious one.

Speaking of anxious moments: I made a pencil drawing of a group of motorcycle club members (The Vagabonds), leaning up against their machines, while glaring at me through their chromed sunglasses. Upon explaining my activities, they did not seem to mind a ten-second intrusion, but I do not know how much more they would have tolerated. In this case, the camera provided a convenient screen behind which I could hide. The picture would not have been made otherwise.

Despite countless attempts, I have yet to see a snapshot which looks stilled, regardless of the freezing of time. This active appearance in the stillness of the snapshot is what lends a unique quality to the photo-realistic painting: they are active and vibrant, like a glimpse caught through a taxi window, or a disjointed segment from a motion picture. Photo-realistic paintings are a paradoxical amalgam of frozen time and snapshot light: perhaps they are more transitory than temporary.

Kodacolour is wonderful. It is all 'tarted' up and improves upon natural colour. Faces look healthier, and shiny plastic purple coats look like precious gems. It is a 'natural' for our artificially coloured urban environments. Somehow, it simply is not as effective with old wood and moss-covered stone. For those concerned with desert themes, the yellowish cast of Kodachrome is ideal. For the surf and snow crowd, I recommend Ectachrome with its mellow blues. For pastoral themes with fresh green grass, Agfacolour has got to be your choice- it is definately partial to greens. But never use filters with your camera if you intend to make photo-realistic paintings: that's not being objective. Telephoto lenses are OK though.

Photographs do not translate a sense of space very effectively: they only have overlapping shapes and minimal forms. I have heard that certain primitive tribes in South America do not know how to 'read' a photograph, but I would have to see that for myself. Having grown up in a culture which accepts the photographic image as the last word in realism, such a situation is difficult to comprehend.

Because of the flatness of the photographic image, these more or less flat shapes have to be translated into form and space through the painting process, in order to make the painting look "more real" than its photographic source. While certain misguided critics look at the flatness of the photograph and conclude that the entire movement must have grown as an offshoot of Minimalism, there is no

doubt that this aesthetic and the very impudence of its stylish early practitioners must have helped make photo-realism a little more palatable to the art moguls.

11. Personal Processes

1. I do not like the idea of being tied down to one type of subject matter or one way of recording it. I have on occasion, used black-and-white film in order to allow me the flexibility of inventing colours. Such is the case, particularly when dealing with subjects which are worn or muted, such as the old caboose I have just completed. In this case, the colour would simply get in the way. When dealing with a subject I intend to paint on a large surface, I turn to slide film, so that I can preview the image in a scale which will approximate the size of the finished piece, rather than struggling with the usual 5" x 8" print. I could not imagine making two, never mind two dozen pictures of the same subject matter, although I hear a side order of Zen does help.

2. When transcribing the image, I am not particularly fussy about the way I do it. I have used a modified grid system because the situation called for it. When projecting, I used to use slide film, and later have a print made, from which I would work exclusively during the hand-crafting process. But I later discovered that the photographic negative projects almost as well. When this is done, the process is so abstract that tracing around the value areas is to say the least, challenging.

When projecting the negative, I always keep a print of the image handy, in order to keep my progress in touch with the subject matter.

3. Up until now I have used acrylics, starting my painting in the largest, darkest areas so that I will have a value reference for the rest of the piece. I try to intensify colour and exaggerate form, by increasing colour saturation and by using several different kinds of colour contrast. This procedure gives a greater sense of illusionistic space, and makes objects generally more interesting to look at. Pure white is never used except when depicting direct light, such as is found in chrome sparkles. I normally work from dark to light, completing shapes in paint-by-number fashion. Usually, one object or part of an object is completed before moving on to another. In this way, I get the sensation of masterminding a miniature world within the canvas borders. When large areas have subtle shifts, I may develop several adjacent areas together, regardless of the subject matter. I try to put a little blue and/or brown in every colour, in order to help unify the surface.

4. I dislike the colour green and avoid using it whenever possible. I wish someone would invent a pure green.

5. Photo-Realism, despite its often grandiose scale, is a cost-efficient pastime; at least as I approach it. A tall glass of water, a couple of paper towels, good quality sable

rounds and bristle flats, a dozen colours, a plexiglass palette, an easel, chair, and a newly-primed, fresh white canvas will get you started. I own my own camera but borrow the slide projector. Everything is kept neat and clean, in keeping with the urban subject matter being depicted; that too is reality! No, the photo-realism process does not represent an anal fixation, as one Expressionist friend of mine suggested. An orderly way of working is simply necessary: order and a great deal of time are both requisites.

12. The Meaning of Photo-Realism

Linda Chase states that, "there is a frightening madness and fascination in painting colour layer upon layer...In spite of the artist's (Close) intent to paint without message, the task itself becomes a message."[19] She is absolutely right in one respect: the business is mad, but for some enjoyable. But beyond the exhaustive commitment required of its practitioners, there are other messages inherent in photo-realism, focused around the notion that photo-realism is a positive art form: it believes in things rather than disbelieves; it trusts in things rather than doubts; it reveals but does not preach, informing without being dogmatic; it gives without bullying for a viewer-response, and all through its subject matter.

I read an article about the work of Ken Danby some

[19] Linda Chase, Hyperrealism (New York, 1973). p. 13.

years ago in Time magazine, in which the author concluded that it was time to investigate the psychological implications of Magic Realism, a term he applied to Danby, Colville and Wyeth with equal abandon. The picture used in the article was a small black-and-white "mugshot" of a Danby painting, depicting a crude rowboat of some kind on the bank of a mirror-flat body of water. If the author wanted to go about unravelling the psychological implications of this image, I wondered where he would start. Perhaps he could start with the water as being symbolic of "the river of life", and the boat meaning, "we are all in this boat together". Or perhaps he sees the image as being more existential, implying that we are alone in this universe after all. I doubt that such an intellectual process would do anything constructive for the reader, never mind the viewer, and would demand something of the painting and the artist, which could not, or should not be revealed.

Henry Gerrit wrote, "Surely we have all seen snapshots of ourselves, and others, taken by amateur shutterbugs. Some of them flatter unjustly; some of them unjustly reveal; but some of them, the choicest and necessarily the rarest of all, flatter by revealing."[20] I suspect that flattery is an unintentional by-product of photo-realism. Danby was flattering

20 Henry Gerrit, "The Real Thing," Super Realism, Gregory Battock, ed. (New York, 1975) p.13.

that boat when he lifted it out of its usual bucolic setting and placed it on a gallery wall. I wonder if there would have been any psychological implications in the boat's presence had the writer stumbled upon it in the woods himself. In such a situation, I doubt whether the craft would have been seen in any terms other than function.

Subject matter has to be chosen with great care. The device of taking some innocuous object and blowing it up to some ridiculous scale is a gimmick whose novelty quickly wears thin. Rudy Sparkuhl once said, "Everything is a symbol." I do not entirely agree, but at the same time would have to say that some symbols are much stronger than others. It is no coincidence that the automobile figures largely in photo-realist subject matter, not only because it is found everywhere in the usual urban hunting grounds, but also because it is such a potent symbol at all levels of society. In the 1950's it resembled an escape machine, styled to suggest some sort of inter-stellar craft. In the 1960's when dimestore psychology permeated our psyche, it became an extention of the Ego on one hand, and an urban polluter and congestant on the other. In the 1970's, the car was seen as a rampant waster of fossil fuels; a device that was placing in jeopardy, the very foundations upon which our society is built. Such implicit information, whether or not the viewer subscribes to it, and quite apart from his private responses, surely

represents some of the content in the automobile as subject matter in an art image.

I read with some amusement, Salvador Dali's analysis of one of Richard Estes' phone booth paintings:

> Amid the innumerable chaotic reflections of the city, phone booths are parallelepipeds whose four exterior strictly transparent rectangles are living mirrors of an ultra-local universe, enclosed within them, a living informative biology. In a universe or virtual images, each phone booth seems a parallelepipedal halograph of our visible reality, an existential mesazoa. Each phone booth is like the perpignan railway station, it is legi intimus, it is the fatherland. 21

This sounds like Dali describing Dali, or how I imagine the writer from Time would have Danby's watercraft disseminated as a vessel waiting to be occupied.

Realism (and probably any art form), when it is well done, is a bit of a tease, because it has the capacity to involve the viewer directly with the imagery, without formulating specific questions or offering specific solutions to those problems posed by the secondary information. I suspect that in most cases, the viewer's own experiences, perceptions and insights are tapped because the artist has gone through that very process beforehand.

The photo-realist takes meaning to and from his environment, observing himself observing his surroundings, while selecting those objects which carry significant meaning for him. Such is the nature of a symbol. He watches and records, photographs and plans, and sets out to build himself

21 Linda Chase, Hyperrealism (New York, 1975), p. 5.

a meticulously-crafted model of one segment of his reality. Astutely observed and carefully rendered, this painted image becomes more potent than reality itself, when recognized as such by the viewer. However, only after the viewer has come to this realization, does the art process begin, for art concerns itself with communication, necessitating senders and receivers.

True, there is joy in observation alone: dust, rust, litter and glitter all have characteristics which pose challenges, both through the observational and operational phases of realism. But personally speaking, the greatest satisfaction is gained through trying to find the links between rust, and dust, and the nature of human existence: not by trying to solve the riddle, but by attempting to define it. As such, the true reward in Photo-Realism comes not by observing accurately, but, as Manet stated, through seeing clearly.

13. Most of The Rest

Just as I have stated that Realists have at times indulged in the sporting passtime of lampooning preceding art movements and chuckling into their shirtsleeves, so too, I think most artists like to have a run at defining the activity to which they assign themselves. I think the first question I was asked at 'Sir George' was, "What is art?", to which I glibly replied, "Why beauty, of course!" Yet in the

intervening time, I have not really discovered a more satisfactory answer.

I thought at one time I had the whole thing worked out, thanks to the writings of the English educational philosopher, R. S. Peters. He suggested that education was a process, rather than something to be defined in terms of aims or objectives. He listed three criteria which he thought must be met if an activity was to be considered educational: the learning activity itself had to worthwhile, it had to encompass a broad cognitive perspective, and the person involved had to come to care for what he was doing.

Transposed into the art arena, these criteria seem to be prerequisite to art activities. No educated person, according to Peters' requirements, would question (I hope) that art is a worthy pastime, that is, the activities it involves and the sorts of things to which it aspires, are worth the time and effort. The questions arise though: who is going to judge the validity of the activity, and who is going to annoint the judges? There must surely be some common consensus and criteria that will indicate that yes indeed, this guy is saying something interesting and revealing!

As far as Photo-Realism is concerned, the second criterion is the catcher, for just when the club members thought they had stumbled upon a modus operandi which defied the wide cognitive perspective, the intelligensia pulled a coup and deftly started bestowing it with all kinds of laurels: 'Palman Qui Meruit Ferat. The stuff's not all that indigestible. It's

existential! Their lack of message is the message! Ladies and gentlemen, if I may have your attention in the centre ring...'

The process of Photo-Realism seems to validate the third criterion, for how could anybody be crazy enough to get involved with technique, at a time when such self-indulgence was rated right down there with clipping your nose hairs. They would have to be pretty serious about what they were doing to risk the wrath of those who believed that art, like the world, should be FLAT.

So far, Photo-Realism seems to have cleared all the weigh-scales, but for me, there is still one problem. I have just returned from an amazing one-man show. There, in appropriate scale, were rendered gleaming 1950's cars: Chev's, DeSoto's - the whole works - in front of and inside of appropriate storefronts and garages. The things were done in stitchery! She had stitched in the glints and the gleams, stitched in the bumpers and the bricks, stitched in the doorhandles: she had stitched in her name!

All the dormant forces of modernist avant-gardism must be asking, "Is nothing sacred?" For it has been the avant-garde's single-minded worship of What Is New, which has played Grand Marshall to the whole noisy, dizzying parade of high-wire stylists, carney-barker theorists and post facto sweepers. When the mug dippers, and the jug joggers, and the eggshell painters caught up, they knew it was time to strike up the band.

Once avant-gardism has rallied its forces, as I suspect it eventually will do, Realism in all its forms, including stitchery, will be banished from the carnival grounds. I am still waiting to see who will be next to climb the ladder, for that one-shot chance to perform on the highwire, while the band plays that grand old march of the 19th-century realists, "Il Faut Être de Son Temps."

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