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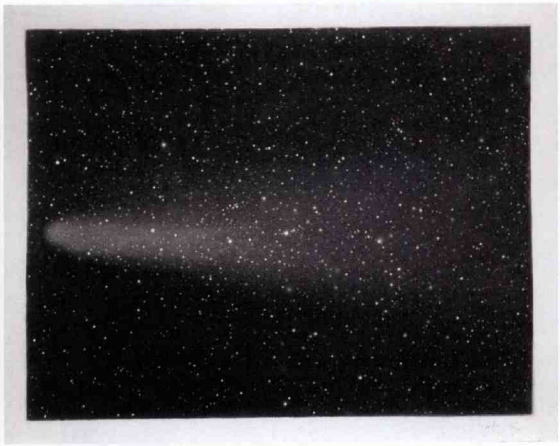
DEPICTION AND THE PICTURE:

A Dialogue on Contemporary Representational Art

by Lawrence Gipe and John Seed



About a year ago, art ltd. editor George Melrod asked me if I'd be interested in writing an essay about representational painting. I responded with an enthusiastic "yes!"–which I gradually started to regret. Although I teach as well as paint, I'm used to writing short reviews about specific exhibitions, and the wide-ranging field of image painting overwhelmed me. Around the same time, Huffington Post blogger John Seed posted an interview about my work, and I began to follow his column. He impressed me as a kindred spirit and an articulate spokesperson; but, when the devil got to the details, our taste in painting was wildly different–even oppositional.

As a scholar and journalist (and featured speaker at the upcoming TRAC2014 Representational Art Conference, in Ventura, CA, this March), I knew that John was deeply involved in the issues I was grappling with. So I proposed doing a dialogue with John on the broad topic of representational painting. Engaging a contrary voice helped the topic sort itself out; the process was fast and furious and ended up being more of a dust-up than I anticipated! Despite our disagreements, the issues involved are rich ones. Hopefully, the ensuing dialogue, however subjective, can shed some light on them by coming at them from such different angles.

–LAWRENCE GIPE

"Untitled #10," 1994-1995, **Vija Celmins**
Charcoal on paper, 17" x 22" Photo: courtesy McKee Gallery, New York

JOHN SEED: Larry, I have been looking over some of the work you will be including in the exhibition "Deep, Dark, Truthful Mirror," the upcoming show you're curating at the Hespe Gallery in San Francisco. I know that you are very interested in the way that Realism began to work against Romanticism in the mid-19th century, and I also know that you are not a fan of the "stylistic flourishes" of Romanticism or of its embrace of fantasy. Let's talk about all of this: I come from a very different place and am much more susceptible to painting's warm fuzzy side.

My deep affection for representational art goes back 35 years to my undergraduate studies in painting with Nathan Oliveira. The way that I value representational art—and the way that I process it—has everything to do with my respect for Nathan. Although he is often classified as being part of the "Bay Area Figurative Style," which was a late modernist movement, he was in fact an eclectic artist who made it clear that he did not consider himself of any avant-garde. He defined his practice this way: "I'm part of the garde that comes afterwards, assimilates, consolidates, refines."

Painting is a very, very old tradition, and the painting that interests me now attempts to consolidate and refine venerable traditions, just as Nathan did. I have a good friend these days who is a biologist, and talking with him about DNA has made me look at painting in a kind of quasi-scientific fashion: when I first see a new artist's work I ask myself, "What are the genetic (art historical) strands that this work is woven from?" At the moment, I am seeing exciting work that taps into Old Master and academic art, Expressionism and Bay Area Figuration. Of course there are many other sources being accessed, as well.

LAWRENCE GIPE: First of all, it's great to be organizing an exhibition of representational art in the Bay Area. I think painters and other artists here nod respectfully to the past while they look forward. And, the Bay Area scene doesn't appear to be as *suspicious* of art that involves technical skill—which can be a relief.

Thirty years ago, I went as a painting undergrad to Virginia Commonwealth University and the first book I remember buying from the bookstore was a catalogue of Diebenkorn drawings and paintings on paper. Paintings on cigar box lids. The "assimilation" you conjure was embodied by Diebenkorn—he yanked Matisse into the late-20th century and made some of the juiciest paintings ever. His work was about light, sensation, surface drama—the recent show of his Berkeley paintings at the de Young (now up at Palm Springs Art Museum) is a treat.

It must have been a thrill to have Oliveira as an instructor. I've always enjoyed his works, especially when you catch one in person. They are

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compelling. The only thing, for me, is that his style was imitated a lot (often badly). In the end, it points to an aspect of representational painting I find hard to relate to.

Recently, a grad student I teach at U of Arizona wanted to know what I thought of the "style" of her painting. I said, "Well, frankly it looks like so-and-so meets so-and-so..." and she asked— kind of frustrated—"How do you develop a 'style' that's original?" I could only answer for myself: for me, "style" was a process of elimination and, over the years the visual goal in my work became to reference the photographic source as closely as possible— thereby *avoiding the issue of style altogether.* Turn it around, for instance, and consider Gerhard Richter, who avoids the issue of style completely by employing an army of them, so that no style can claim him and vice-versa (more about him later)!

Anyway, when organizing "Deep, Dark, Truthful Mirror," I wasn't that attracted to work formed by gestural, "expressionistic" marks. Am I just a hopeless cold fish, John?

JS: Larry, you seem like too nice a guy to be called a "cold fish," but it may be fair to call me a "warm puppy." In my view, Warhol was a villain who used photography to simultaneously kill painting and give style a harsh beating: then came the Pictures Generation—who were his minions—to apply a few more kicks to painting's battered body in the alley. Richter certainly learned from Warhol as well, but he is a much more complex character.

For me, it's not painting if I can't feel the electricity that travels directly from the brain through the arm to charge the brush and leave its tracks: its "petit sensations à la Cezanne." Regarding style, I don't care much for joiners and acolytes, but I do have a lot of respect for individualists who forge strong personal styles.

That said, I promise to be civil: tell me about some of these artists you like that have been so careful to skirt the edges of style.

LG: Well, what does the warm puppy think of Vija Celmins? Because in realist painting, she's one of my reference points. First off, I love the stillness and obsessiveness in her work—it calms me down immediately, maybe because the content is so non-hierarchical. Her scenes of waves are like tantric compositions—the star fields are timeless, and yet they address the issue of time more richly than Thomas Ruff's photos of the same material. Seen in person, they make me consider photography and painting at the same time, and their different goals and uses (conversely, as reproduced photographically in books and magazines, they lose an ironic charge).

In Celmins' work, the epic battle between photography and painting is on; it emphasizes the very nature of photography as a technology of immediacy and "reality" by taking weeks and weeks to realize an image that took a fraction of a second to record. In the end, it's a perverse and beautiful conceptual exercise. In fact, I find her drawings and prints equally revelatory. Sometimes in the prints, she aligns a few images up against each other—a diving plane, a star field with a comet— images about how photography captures speed. Celmins lovingly simulates every distortion manifested by the grain of the photo. There's very little "hand" in the execution of her work. But it's more than simply replication of a photo—there's a texture, a sensation of touch. They are poems about movement and time.

"TABLE 58," 2013, **F. Scott Hess**
OIL ON PANEL, 43¾" x 61¼"
PHOTO: COURTESY OF KOPLIN DEL RIO, CULVER CITY AND THE ARTIST

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"Portrait (Red Robe)," 2008-2012, **Anne Harris**
Oil on linen, 52" x 33"
Photo: courtesy Alexandre Gallery

JS: In choosing Vija Celmins you have set the bar high: she is a master. I don't know how she manages to both reference photography and transcend it, but she does. However, before I award you victory in the first round of this dialogue, let me introduce you to a Chicago-based representational artist: Anne Harris.

Anne is tough to categorize, but when I asked her where she fits in she called herself a "romantic expressionist representational figurative" artist who is involved in conversations with both traditional and contemporary painting. Everything Anne does begins with the idea of a self-portrait, but she does it in a way that transcends narcissism and moves towards universal themes.

As I mentioned before, I am very interested in the long lineage of painting, and Anne is the same way: she feels strongly that "painting is painting." She has looked hard at an almost endless number of artists—de Kooning, Rembrandt and Courbet are a few—and interestingly, she also mentions Vija Celmins as one of her influences. On just a few occasions Anne has used photos as references, but life, memory and her own past works are her main visual starting points. Anne is eclectic and I find her work energizing and full of painterly oxygen. She definitely has a tendency to move towards phantasmagoria, so I am betting that her work may have a tinge of Romanticism that you won't care for.

"It's not necessary for a realist artist to tell too much. It's better to let the viewer be a little disoriented, and the text can exist outside..."

LG: Harris is clearly a technically gifted artist—I especially enjoyed seeing her drawings. For my tastes, some of the portrait work is melodramatic, although there's no denying the impact you feel seeing them. As always, I wish that experience could be a live one. Most of what a painting *is*—its retinal excitement, its surface—gets lost in reproduction.

Even the strictest photorealist is best up close and personal. For instance, someone like Robert Longo gets short shrift when seen on the Internet. I've always been a Longo fan—I think the recent drawings are amazing on many different levels. When you encounter one, at an art fair or gallery, they are persuasively colossal. And, the content is usually up my conceptual alley—he grabs a hold of big themes and doesn't let go.

I guess you could argue that he eschews intimacy and expressiveness for this sense of grandeur, but I don't mind watching an artist overreach in this direction. There's a breadth to the work, too: some of the images seem so ubiquitous and obvious (like atom bombs exploding) that you say: "Wait, no one covered this territory before?" Other themes are more esoteric—like the series of gigantic Freud drawings—and I'm more fascinated by them. The cycle is based on photos of Freud's home and offices taken by Edmund Engelman in June 1938, just a few weeks before Freud and his family would flee Vienna in the aftermath of the Nazi Anschluss. I think Longo wants to address all the potential layers of this poignant moment. He doesn't want you to think of "Longo." So he uses a style that's neutral—free of expressive signifiers like drips and distortions.

The story behind a painting or drawing doesn't have to be manifested in the image itself. I sometimes tell the story of when I visited Gerhard Richter's "October 18, 1977" exhibition, which first was exhibited at the old Portikus in Frankfurt. I spun through the show at first, thinking it was classic Richter, a variety of abstract and figurative work. Then, on the way out, I asked what the date meant and was referred to a short essay. It described the work as based on newspaper images concerning the Baader-Meinhof Group; I turned around and I re-viewed the show with completely different expectations. Even "abstract" work turned into blurred funeral scenes and figures hanging in cells. So, it's not necessary for a realist artist to tell too much. It's better to let the viewer be a little disoriented, and the text can exist outside...

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Another incredible draughtsman, though on a much more intimate scale, is Patrick Lee at Western Projects. I'm curious what you'd have to say about him.

JS: Larry, you lost me at Robert Longo. To my mind he is a guy who over-relies on photos and projectors—who is clever about choosing and juxtaposing his images, but who lacks heart. His recent works seem to be working very hard to be self-consciously chilly, which in turn gives his work politically acceptable "Conceptual" credentials. What you find persuasively colossal I tend to dismiss as overblown.

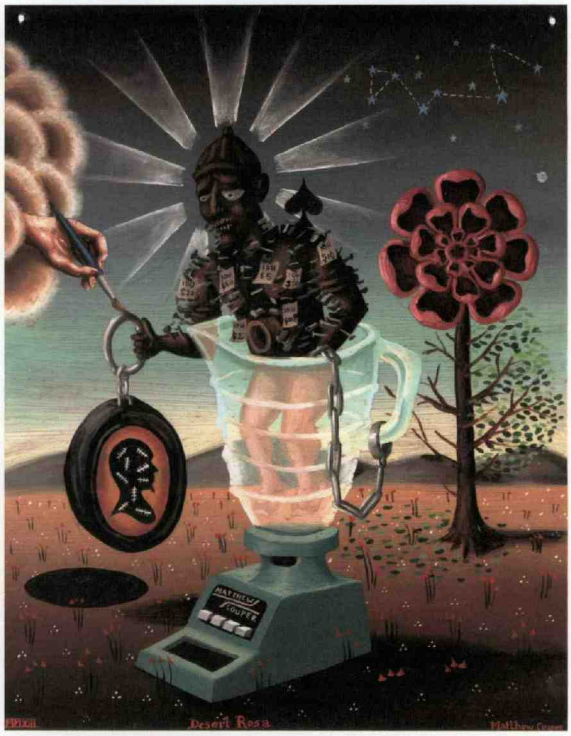
It doesn't surprise me that you like Richter, who I also like, but just a bit. I see him as a minor figure whose career has been swept up in the tsunami of the art market. You certainly have a right to like works that have an outside text, but I like to see narrative deeply embedded in the work. That can be disorienting in a good way too.

I like Patrick Lee much better. And, like Celmins, he has real technical gifts. I do find his tough-guy subject matter a bit affected though: I wonder if he isn't too concerned about what the *Juxtapoz* crowd thinks of his work. Sentimentality seems to be a real taboo right now in many circles and I wonder what would happen if Lee injected his work with a dose of sweetness: the presence of Jungian opposites in works of art can be so vitalizing.

I think F. Scott Hess is one of the best representational artists at work today. His recent oil on canvas *Table 58* shows that he continues to be a great social observer and also that he has a sense of humor. The image is based on an iPhone photo, and I think it is very funny the way that Scott has used the distortion that came from sweeping the phone across the crowd to create motion and suggest that whoever was taking the photo had enjoyed at least a glass of wine, or two. Scott has technique to burn, and he also knows how to tell a story in an engaging way.

My counter to Robert Longo would have to be Matthew Couper. His works are very modest: he often paints on tin in the style of 17th- and 18th-century devotional paintings. Couper sees himself as a kind of anonymous tradesman whose art makes no statement about his ego. He uses a borrowed and earnest set of traditions to ask spiritual and moral questions. I recently curated a show of Matthew's work at Riverside Community College and the exhibition interspersed Couper's collection of antique religious paintings with his own works. Will it surprise you if I say that I think Couper is actually a bit like Diebenkorn? He is also an assimilator and he is very overt about that. He has found some rich and evocative source material and made it his own.

LG: Well, I think Couper is to Diebenkorn like, I don't know, like a fish is to a bicycle! But I better not provoke another round. In the end, we both overlap a great deal. I do think that having the meaning of the picture be outside of the "tableau" itself is a template for an engaged relationship to the world—there's always more than meets the eye in any given image, always layers and layers of back story. While I enjoy abstract painting, it seems conceptually mined-out, a bit exhausted. That's why I gravitate towards representational work—as do you John—even though our opinions conflict. To me, depiction provides the widest platform for artistic expression; it potentially connects with all layers of political, formal and visual issues.



"Desert Rosa," 2013, **Matthew Couper**
Oil on metal, 14" x 11"

"Betty," 1988, **Gerhard Richter**
Oil on canvas, 40¼" x 28½"
On view in "Postwar German Art in the Collection"
June 29, 2013 – January 26, 2014
Photo: courtesy Saint Louis Art Museum