

REPORT FROM VENTURA

Representational art on track at TRAC 2012

TRAC2012, The Representational Art Conference, attracted more than 150 artists, academics and art students to Ventura's Crowne Plaza Hotel in October for a four day program of panels, presentations and demonstrations. The conference, which was sponsored by California Lutheran University, was a first time event. Its primary focus, as expressed on the conference website, was to address a perceived injustice: "There has been a neglect of critical appreciation of representational art well out of proportion to its quality and significance; it is that neglect that this conference seeks to address."

At a Sunday evening dinner prior to the conference's official opening, Michael Pearce, the Chair of the Cal Lutheran Art Department, and also the event's primary organizer, raised his glass and proposed a toast to "the Old Masters, for being the foundation on which we stand." By doing so, Pearce set the tone for the conference that would follow: it would celebrate the revival of a kind of thinking about art and beauty that had existed before the conceptual denigrations of Duchamp and the ironic formulations of Postmodernism.

Critic Jed Perl, who opened the conference on Monday morning as keynote speaker, began his talk by describing the atmosphere he had encountered as an art student at Columbia in 1971. He recalled that "there were strong currents fueled by indifference and hostility to the past." Perl then told the audience that he advocated cyclical thinking about art which would allow a return to "older modes and manners." The challenge faced by artists, in Perl's view, is that they are living in a "time when authenticity is embattled." He went on to recommend that artists re-connect with "serious traditions" including those that "engage reality." The level of an artist's engagement with those elements, Perl argued, can serve as a critical benchmark that can identify art's "charlatans." Along with showing examples of artists whose work he admires—Balthus and Louisa Matthiasdottir among them—Perl was also clear about his dislikes. He characterized representational painters Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin as the "darlings of the current art world," and dismissed their work as "abhorrent shit." Perl's willingness to skewer big reputations brought an admiring gasp from the crowd.

Next up was USC Professor Ruth Weisberg, who presented her views on "The Possibilities of Post-Postmodernism." Weisberg, whose tone was gently optimistic, stressed the need for artists to attain a sensual engagement with the real world, and to

master their craft. Like Perl, Weisberg feels that the development of art occurs in cycles, and she urged the artists present to both acknowledge the artistic traditions and lineages that have preceded them while also searching deeply to identify their own genuine feelings and beliefs.

On Monday afternoon demonstrations of marble carving by sculptor Béla Bácsi, figure drawing by Alexey Steele and a live portrait painting session featuring Tony Pro drew admiring onlookers. Two busloads of art enthusiasts then headed to Oxnard's Carnegie Museum for a viewing of Michael's Pearce's allegorical "Emblemata" series, and those who still had some energy left after their return ascended to the top floor of the Crowne Plaza for a live portrait drawing demonstration by David Kassan.

Tuesday brought a full day of demonstrations, discussions and papers. In a pointed, wide-ranging and eccentric presentation, artist Graydon Parrish kept the crowd wide-eyed by asking original and daunting questions. For example, he projected a Cindy Sherman photograph of vomit and asked us to compare Sherman's work and aesthetic to that of the Dutch Baroque still life artist Jan Van Huysum. Parrish made it clear that he finds the highly refined loveliness and sensuous color of Van Huysum more relevant and inviting than anything Postmodernism has to offer.

On Tuesday afternoon a cadre of over-stimulated artists and academics took 30 minute ride to the campus of Cal Lutheran University to hear a talk by Alexey Steele. Steele, a Russian-born artist who was trained by his social realist father Leonid, stood in front of his series of heroic drawings of winged male and female figures hung in CLU's Kwan Fong Gallery and cut loose. Emphatic and voluble, Steele told the gallery goers that classic representational art is on the verge of a major comeback: "The train has left the station" he stated, with evangelical fervor.

Over breakfast the next morning a panel discussed "The Future for Representational Art." Vern Swanson, the director of the Springville Museum of Art in Utah, commented on the rapid growth of ateliers dedicated to the teaching of classical representation. The panel's moderator, Sadie J. Valeri, runs a highly regarded atelier in San Francisco, and Michael Pearce, another panelist, has introduced an atelier system at Cal Lutheran that has instructors and students painting side by side. "I have very little interest in engaging post-modernity as the enemy," Michael Pearce explained to me later, after the conference: "*We are* post-modern!"

The culmination—and possibly the high point of the conference—came in the closing address by painter John Nava. Taking a very long view, he reminded the crowd that “painting is an ancient practice.” Nava praised painting’s ability to “extend the hand” and “touch the world.” As he narrated the story of his personal artistic development, Nava commented that in choosing to become a representational artist he had been aware that his decision was to be regarded as “eccentric” and not “mainstream.” Near the end of his talk Nava offered his opinion that art history had been following the model of the industrial revolution, favoring innovation over all else. That model, in Nava’s view has been deflected by the internet, which is challenging traditional models of criticism and dissolving the tendency of art movements to congeal into “isms.”

For many, the TRAC2012 conference had stirred up a kind of political fervor. It felt, in some ways, like a 149-year-later “Salon Des Refusés” with Postmodernism cast in the role of the entrenched academy. Although some of the dialogue had been polarizing in its energy, Nava’s talk left everyone in the crowd with something to agree on. “Beauty is nourishing,” Nava reminded the group in his conclusion, “and the experience of beauty makes us less bitter.” It was a heartfelt statement, which provided just the right note to bring the conference to an end.

—JOHN SEED

The Representational Art Conference—TRAC2012—ran from Oct 14-17, 2012 at Ventura, CA.