MODES OF PERCEPTION IN NEW REALIST ART

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(Oil on Canvas)
Defining one's own work is difficult because it is only after being able to detach one's self from the reasons for creating and therefore the reactions to those reasons that it is possible to settle back and inquire, "Why?"

Personal difficulty is paralleled by that same struggle art historians have shared in documenting art's past.

P.G. Collingwood, in his book, Speculum Mentis or The Map of Knowledge, writes of this difficulty:

To the historian accustomed to studying the growth of scientific or philosophical knowledge, the history of art presents a painful and disquieting spectacle, for it seems normally to proceed not forwards but backwards. In science and philosophy successive workers in the same field produce, if they work ordinarily well, and advance; and a retrograde movement always implies some breach of continuity. But in art, a School once established normally deteriorates as it goes on. It achieves perfection in its kind with a startling burst of energy, a gesture too quick for the historian's eye to follow. He can never explain such a movement or tell us exactly how it happened. But once it is achieved, the melancholy certainty of decline ensues. The grasped perfection does not educate and purify the taste of posterity; it debauches it. . . . So far as there is an observable law in collective art history it is, like the law of the individual artist's life, the law not of progress but of reaction. Whether in large or little, the equilibrium of the aesthetic life is permanently unstable.¹

With this insight into the difficulty of defining something so transitory, so changeable, one must somehow deduce the essential, digest the mass and come upon some type of conclu-

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Herbert Read, in trying to aid this discovery maintains that modern art can only be given coherence by a philosophy of art that defines art in a very positive and decisive manner. This philosophy defines art as a means of conceiving the world visually.

He notes that there are other ways of conceiving the world: by measuring, it and recording the measurements in a system of signs (numerals or letters); by making statements about the world based on experiment; or even by constructing systems that explain the world imaginatively (as in myths). "But art is not to be confused with any of these activities; it is an 'ever-living question, asked of the visible world by a visual sense,' and the artist is simply the man who has the ability and the desire to transform his visual perception into material form. The first part of this action is perceptive, the second is expressive, but it is not possible in practice to separate these two processes; the artist expresses what he perceives; he perceives what he expresses." ²

It is evident that the whole history of art is a history of modes of visual perception, of the various ways in which man has seen the world. One constructs reality from this individualized perception. "The naive person might object that there is only one way of seeing the world--the way it is presented to his own immediate vision. But this is not true--we see what we learn to see, and vision becomes a habit, a convention, a partial selection of all there is to see, and a distorted summary of the rest. We see what we want to see, and what we want to see is
determined not by the inevitable laws of optics, or even (as in the case of wild animals) by an instinct for survival, but by the desire to discover or construct a credible world. What we see must be made real. Art in that way becomes a construction of reality."

In order to clearly define this body of work it is necessary to understand the elements expressed here, to examine the forms of perception which have continually influenced individuals of the past decade and to determine how that influence has affected this artist.

The point of this paper is to examine the art form which has strongly emerged during the past decade and from it make certain deductions about three particular artists' work as a personal perception, and therefore to discover a meaning from these influences compatible with this artist's work.

In order to present this New Realist movement, it is necessary to understand its origins:

The immediate ancestry of today's conceptual, realist, and process art lies in Abstract Expressionism, wherein serious efforts were made to achieve the improbable and ultimately unattainable goal of subordinating social and iconographic content to the visualization of purely aesthetic functions.

The artistic process became the subject matter in order to promote aesthetic speculation. This subject matter, which centered upon the process of art, became their "realism." Emphasis upon contemplating the aesthetic value took precedence over the
familiar, everyday objects and themes.

Abstract Expressionism served as the next generation's protestations—a debauchery of sorts, as the contemporary realists saw their work in terms of the finished product. They did not emphasize the process of creating the work, nor any type of emotional, social or personal involvement in the creation of the work. They disposed of any intellectual implications by concentrating upon the sheer physical "presence" of the object depicted in paint.

For their subject matter these artists chose images which were familiar, everyday aspects of modern society. They appeared to emphasize the ordinary and mundane as well as the presence of the object. As this group emerged it contained a wide variety of so-called realist painters with varied intentions. In order to understand these various goals Hilton Kramer, a New York Times critic, formulated three categories for all contemporary realist painters. Academic or neo-traditional painters fell in the first category, which he termed as reactionary painters; Photographic or New Realists into the second, or Radical, category; and all other realists such as Philip Pearlstein and Alex Katz made up the third category known as the Mainstream group.

The reactionary painters of the first group remained true to the traditional painting style. Their manner of painting still-lifes, landscapes and social scenes was a record in paint similar to a historian's record in print.

The mainstream group, including artists Philip Pearlstein, Alex Katz and Jack Beal, chose the human figure as their subject
and reduced it to a mere object among objects. These artists painted in an extremely cold, calculating manner. Pearlstein was concerned with the "perfection of nothingness." In other words, it did not matter that the images he was painting were human, because his first and foremost concern was how "things move across the surface." Subject matter was secondary to painterly concerns, and emotional sterility was the result.

The Photo-Realists, part of the second category of the "radical" realists, shared this view, emphasizing the object and seeking to paint it to perfection. They even employed the use of certain machines to aid this goal. The opaque projector and the air-brush became fundamental tools for realists like Richard Estes and Ralph Goings, who wished to erase any presence of the artist so as not to diminish the intended effect, the sheer presence of the object.

These objects were reflections of modern society at its most urbane--Este's was primarily concerned with reproducing storefronts and city streets, the crisp, sharp, cutting reflections of modern man, whereas Goings depicted all or parts of shining, glowing automobiles. A statement by Alain-Pobbe Grillet, New Wave filmmaker, sums up this type of representation and appears to explain the recurring idea of "presence" of the art object:

Let it be first of all by their presence that objects and gestures establish themselves, and let this presence continue to prevail over whatever explanatory theory may try to enclose them in a system of references . . . Gestures and objects will be there before being something; and they will still be there afterwards,
hard, unalterable, eternally present, mocking their own meaning.\textsuperscript{5}

This declaration with total emphasis on an existential presence is shared among the mainstream and Photo-Realist categories. Although the Photo-Realists attempt to divorce themselves from meaning and are similar to the mainstream artists, a strong difference emerges. Artists in the mainstream category were not concerned with the subject matter; they were concerned with the problems of using the paint as paint. Pearlstein's concern with "how things moved across the surface" is an example of this. His nude figures were just a means to this end. The Photo-Realists, despite using the camera and airbrush as means to imply their neutrality toward the objects, stressed the images they painted. Their painterly concerns were secondary to the primary goal of introducing the bland cityscapes or ordinary supermarket displays. Despite their efforts to deny any meaning, a clarification emerges. There is an "atmosphere" present in Estes' sharp reflections of the cityscapes, even if it is one of plasticity and superficiality, as well as a similar statement of banality of the times which effuses from Goings' polished cars.

All the shiny and absurd images of the contemporary American way of life leaves the viewer considering his present state of existence among this superficiality.

This reaction to the state of the times is re-emphasized by H.D. Raymond in "Beyond Freedom, Dignity and Pidicule." "Only matter is represented and only surface matter. The spirit or force

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that has occupied painters of the great tradition and given their works its energy has been scrupulously excluded. . . They are cool and their methodologies leave little room for the invasion of passion. No current flows through their depicted objects. 6

However, there is a group of painters who prefer to remain dedicated to certain emotional beliefs and values. These painters fall into the second part of the "Radical Realist" category, making up the emphasis of this paper and being addressed as New Realists from here on.

The work of these artists continues to search for new ways of communicating what they see, and it is appropriate to "call it realism if it catches the immediacy of the visual experience and gives one a strong feeling that the particular visual experience one is presented with could not have existed but for the artist's deeply felt need to find an analogue in paint for a fact about the physical world." 7

It is this deeply felt need, or the emotional reaction to the subject matter, which is to be stressed here in relation to these four shared characteristics:

1.--The subject matter chosen tends to be on the "neutral" side, uninteresting in its own right, simple, right-at-hand, everyday;

2.--Things are either placed in a symmetrical, frontal way or the objects are scattered evenly across the surface to form an all-over decorative pattern;

3.--The artist tends to paint series, exploring a set of possibilities using the same or similar subjects.
4.--The colors and the values of the tones are very clearly articulated, often in a rather narrow range, so as to allow for a maximum of coloristic and tonal control.

With these characteristics in mind, the next portion of this paper will examine three women artists who share these and other viewpoints which are pertinent to this paper. These women are Georgia O'Keefe, Sylvia Mangold and Yvonne Jacquette.

Besides exhibiting the above characteristics, these women seem to share a feeling for their natural world and impart a unique point of view to the observer by painting the images at a very close range, largely from a frontal vantage point. Cropping, magnification and frontality are methods shared by each artist. These artists are concerned once again with the commonplace and the ordinary, yet they also manage to impart a certain sensitivity to their subjects.

Georgia O'Keefe became well-known and respected as an artist in the 1920's; however, her views and manner of working remain relevant to this time period as well as to this painter's work.

Although O'Keefe painted a series of New York City buildings, the majority of her best work has been her large-scale, frontal paintings from nature: flowers, skulls, shells, mesas. She painted from life and often magnified the details of the objects until they lost recognizability. Harry Abrams in American Art emphasizes her characteristic combination of formal power and romantic mystery. The romanticism stemmed from the fact that O'Keefe knew her objects well. She found and kept them in her possession, examining them with an exact eye, yet with a reverence for the meaning and
essence of the object. The landscapes she painted with this same fondness were areas that she eventually lived upon. These subjects, while mere images, were cherished parts of her life which she interpreted with her own personal, unique vision.

In a catalogue for O'Keefe's 1970 exhibition, Lloyd Goodrich wrote, "The flower became a world in itself, a microcosm. Magnification was another type of abstraction, of separation of the object from ordinary reality and endowing it with a life of its own." 9

Linda Nochlin in "Some Women Realists" emphasizes this same spiritual idea: "It was O'Keefe who first severed the minutely depicted object . . . from its moorings in a justifying space and setting, and freed it to exist, vastly magnified, as a surface manifestation of something other (and somehow deeper, both literally and figuratively) than its physical reality on canvas." 10

Often critics wanted to assume that the forms and dark voids of O'Keefe's flower paintings (such as the Black Iris, 1927) suggested parts of the female genitalia or some similar type of sexual overtone. O'Keefe rejected these interpretations emphatically. She painted the flower image big, she has written, so that people would be surprised into taking time to look at it and would then perhaps see it as she did in all its miraculous shape, color and texture.

In O'Keefe's work, nature is not so much analyzed as meditated upon, the result being an abstraction that does not look abstract while it invites the viewer into a personal contemplation (as O'Keefe put it) of the wideness and oneness of the world.
Sylvia Mangold shares similar characteristics in her work by dealing with intimate speculations of her own world and transferring them onto canvas as magnified portions of a larger whole. She employs the frontal view and cropping as an aid to her goal.

Mangold has chosen as her subject matter various views of an object as common as the floor beneath her feet. Linda Nochlin in "Some Women Realists" terms it as an exhaustive probing and states that "no photograph would care so much, could be as ostentatiously lavish in its documentation as this dedicated artist." Again her subject is derived from an admittedly mundane and ordinary, yet necessary, part of her personal life. Out of this most neglected, unthought-about aspect of experience, Mangold transforms the floor onto canvas in an overwhelming, meticulous manner, magnified for our most intimate speculation.

Her mode of approach is "part, by part, methodical, a little at a time, like cleaning a floor, very carefully." The viewer realizes the extent of the floor is only partially captured on the canvas. Mangold has chosen those limits and has invited the viewer to share that moment of contemplation.

Bareness and space, seemingly unimportant, become an essential, meaningful part of her world. James Agee in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men writes, "Bareness and space (and spacing) are so difficult and seem to me of such greatness that I shall not even try to write seriously or fully of them." Mangold takes this bareness and space with this reverence in mind and transforms it into the essential, meaningful, relevant part of her world on can-
vas, applying boundless sensitivity to subjects as seemingly mundane as the floor beneath our feet.

Yvonne Jaquette also takes her subjects as portions of a larger whole, and she, too, emphasizes space.

Her paintings are also personal views of her own environment. For Jaquette, "Space is a function of glimpses -- up, out, down, around, of clouds through windows, of light fixtures on ceilings." 14

She paints things that are part of her own environment, things that she knows well such as views from a plane window or a glimpse upward toward telephone wires and street lights. In doing so she combines intimacy and distance, experience and memory. Jaquette is as concerned about perceiving things as she is with simply seeing them. From her perceptions she gives the observer a first-hand personal glimpse of the commonplace, made interesting by the angle (as in looking straight up) and the organization of the parts of the objects which creep in from the sides of the composition to compose the whole effect.

These women have culled from the larger environment a portion of our intimate contemplation and in doing so have revealed the uniqueness of all things, ordinary and extraordinary. Cindy Nemser in "The Close-Up Vision" sums up the goal of these artists: "Drawing on the boundaries of our leisured, affluent society, they invite us, through contemplation, to experience the oneness of all things and to understand that our material possessions are as essential a part of ourselves as is nature and our fellow man." 15
These artists share many of the characteristics found in the work of this painter. Rather than compare qualities with each artist individually, generalizations can be drawn from all of them due to the similarities of intentions.

These artists extract their subjects from intimate contemplation of their own world, generally from a frontal viewpoint or a slight angle. Commonplace scenes are most often neglected in our day-to-day existence simply because they are so common, yet so necessary a part of our environment. The manner of magnification and the frontal view aid the viewer in realizing the necessity and importance of the often overlooked aspects of the natural or domestic environment.

Like O'Keefe, it seems preferable to meditate upon nature rather than to paint in an exact, analytical manner, to note the beauty and form, texture and shape. Again, magnifying can aid the viewer's observation of the meticulous detail. Like Manvold, this painter prefers to paint meticulous detail, almost to the point of overemphasis, in order to do justice to the complexities that exist in so small a segment of the world. In doing this, one must embark on an "exhaustive probing" and through the detail invite the viewer to share in the process so that he can realize the interdependence of all things, natural and spiritual. It is hoped this effort to produce inspirational contemplation will carry over into the viewer's intimate speculation of himself and his own world.

Jacquette's series of personal glimpses is the way man most often views the world, yet he rarely takes the time to fix
a contemplative eye on this existence. By rendering her "personal glimpses" on canvas, she calls to the viewer to take notice of the ever-so-ordinary aspects of our environment. That, too, is the goal of this painter.

The brick painting submitted as part of this project strives to achieve all of these elements as a result of my personal glimpses upon a small area of sidewalk. The leaves serve to break up the pattern of the bricks, and both leaves and bricks are painted with an overemphasis on detail to call the viewer's attention to the beauty of this otherwise neglected aspect of our environment. The bareness of the bricks called for even closer examination and a noting of each multi-colored particle comprising the whole. This serious, intimate contemplation reasserts the idea of one small part making up a larger whole, further emphasizing the spiritual oneness of all things. Cindy Nemser in "The Close-Up Vision" sums up this feeling well: "These minutely observed objects, despite their exaggerated size and close-up placement, do not threaten or overwhelm us. Rather they give us succor, for they reveal that beneath the artificial, the commercial, the despoiled, there is still the organic, the essential, the eternal." 16

Nothing in this painting is fabricated. This painter makes the effort to extend imagination in paint to construct the reality that is visually perceived, yet at the same time to emphasize the spirituality or essence of the subject. This over-emphasis of detail is a natural outgrowth of the painter's vision.

Preferred colors are all primary earth colors, as in the
work of O'Keefe, and all colors on the painting are achieved by using a limited palate of six colors.

Using the medium of paint to provide the viewer with a scene from one's own point of view and to present that scene as an intimate part of nature in an effort to balance the complexities of the mind with the simplicity and straightforwardness of what exists in nature seems a worthy goal.

In a rather dramatic, yet appropriate, statement Linda Nochlin sums up the consideration of the environment by the three women artists discussed in this paper.

Once again, one is tempted to view these diffident cut off views as synecdoches for a larger whole: women may be stuck with glimpses for their visual nourishment, yet the pictorial tensions generated by the interplay between space and things that interrupt its freedom are, after all, what makes art interesting or what makes art art; and this is the case whether the space in question is the living room floor and the interruption the children's toys, or the space is the Sistine Ceiling and the interruption the hand of God.17

In this paper the statement posed by Herbert Read in the opening has been repeatedly examined: "Art is an ever-living question, asked of the visible world by the visual sense." In asking this question through his own personal glimpses, man strives to construct his own conception of reality in order to establish its and his credibility in this world. There are still those who question the reality painted by the New Realists. According to H.D. Raymond, "... these paintings can be read as a celebration of the minutiae in loving detail or as a la-
ment for lost wholeness, or as an ironic putdown in savage detail, or as a rich amalgam of all these and other meanings. The elusiveness of meaning could be what they are about.18

Some of the questions about the elusiveness of reality have been addressed in this paper. Because of this elusiveness it must be remembered that the paintings produced are only a version of self-constructed reality, that we are viewing individual, subjective points of view and that the painting or photograph is only one response to a complex and multi-faceted object.

It is here again that the act of perception should be examined, as well as the influences on that perception:

The act of perception is itself total, conditioned both in its mode and in its content by time, place and concrete situation. While it may be willfully objective—and realists have traditionally tried to divest themselves of personal and cultural impediments—it cannot occur in a vacuum. It is this that makes the New Realists so new and completely of our time.19

In other words, the reality being painted now can only be understood within the personal and cultural implications of the artist. Answering the question "What is reality?" or inquiring into its meaning in painting and in this painter's work has been made clearer by the inquiries in this paper. However, it will all be reflected upon again in years to come by those whose perceptions will be guided, molded and influenced by the cultural, historical, and personal implications of their times, and then perhaps meanings for that generation may be quite different from 15.
their own vantage point. At that time undoubtedly a newer form of realism will emerge as a reaction to the New Realists.

Perhaps O'Keefe's response when asked about any theories she might offer about her work emphasizes the personal perception stressed in this paper. Years ago she said that she had no theories to offer. Her painting, she said, was "like a thread that runs through all the reasons for all the other things that make one's life."20

Because of that thread of meaning which helps in constituting reality, a personal search will continue and while accepting the irony that the search is just beginning with each new insight, the hope is that the pushing it presents will provide an aid in further development for this artist.

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REFERENCES

2. Ibid., p. 12.
3. Ibid., p. 13.
11. Ibid., p. 74.
12. Ibid., p. 78.
13. Ibid., p. 76.
16. Ibid., p. 63.
17. Nochlin, op. cit., p. 78.
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