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Art

By Hilton Kramer

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“REALISM, Delacroix observed in 1860, “is the great resource of the innovators at those periods when the schools are becoming languid and turning to mannerism; through it they awaken once more the blasé taste of the public, while the schools turn in the circle of the same conventions.” Bernard Shaw, though speaking of the theater rather than of painting, affirmed the same principle several decades later. “When art becomes effete,” he wrote, “it is realism that comes to the rescue.”

Nowadays we are no longer as certain as Shaw was that these rescue missions are an unmixed blessing. Too much that is vital in the arts has too often and too lightly been condemned as “effete.” Too much that is meretricious has too regularly offered itself as a sign of restored vigor. What seemed to Delacroix, with good reason, a “great resource of the innovators”—he was, after all, thinking of Courbet and the Flemish masters—has too frequently in our own day turned out to be the great fraud of the Philistines and the sentimentalists.

And yet, it is increasingly apparent that the skepticism —not to say contempt—which has greeted sonic recent ventures in realist painting is not a very reliable guide to what is actually going on. Like it or not, a realist revival of some sort is upon us. A great many painters, including some of the youngest (though the movement is by no means confined to the young), are simply no longer interested in the various modernist options, which they tend to regard as exhausted or a racket or both. They are seeking instead to re-establish the basis of painting in life-drawing, portraiture, landscape and traditional still life—in all the old methods and subjects and procedures which the modernists have repudiated.

Exactly how far this recoil from the modernist position can go may be seen in the current exhibition at the Pratt Manhattan Center, 46 Park Avenue at 37th Street, where three young painters Jillian Denby, Stephen Lorber and Martha Mayer Erlebacher —are showing work of considerable interest. (The fourth artist in the exhibition, a sculptor, seems to me of no interest whatever. The problems of realist sculpture, it may be worth noting, seem very much greater than those of realist painting, no doubt because the esthetic illusionism that realism trades in has become so much more difficult to bring off in an object occupying “real” space.)

The most terrifying talent in the Pratt show is Mrs. Erlebacher's. Her meticulous graphite drawings (mostly portrait studies) are masterpieces in the manner of the great Northern Renaissance draftsmen. Breathtaking in their technical skill, they are certain

to become favorites with collectors of work of this sort. The artist's paintings, however, are something else—a no less dazzling recapitulation of late Pre-Raphaelite kitsch. Here are “Venus” and “Apollo” in all their egg-tempera glory, technically flawless yet quite dead, a chilling reminder that technique divorced from true imagination—imagination in touch with life—can become a kind of morbid romance in itself. There is, to be sure, something memorable in this figure of Apollo, with its porcelain-like torso and its carefully delineated genitalia of pure marzipan, but the work assuredly has nothing to do with living art.

Miss Denby's pictures, though they too traffic occasionally in mythological allusions, are more persuasively located in the quotidian world. Her “Seated Hermes” is very much a flesh and blood model in the studio. Her beautiful “Dream of Rome,” with its montage-like composition of studio nudes filtered through a screen of memory and association, evokes a fantasy rooted in something real. Her methods are more painterly, her vision more earthly, her technical powers (which never falter) more answerable to the springs of sonic recognizable emotion. She may yearn for some mythic ideal, but she never fails, when painting the figure, to remind us that she is in her studio painting what she sees. And some of her smaller, non figure painting, particularly the little landscape called “The Dairy at Yaddo” and the still life of “Mushrooms,” are very affecting in their modesty and precision.

Mr. Lorher is the true classicist of this trio. His still life paintings, though a little cold, a little too carefully conceived as studio problems, a little too arbitrary in the tasks they set for themselves, are nonetheless realized with a flawless perfection. He allows himself nothing in the way of modern shortcuts to observation or expression. Color, for example, is never allowed to become an interest in itself; it is strictly—that is, tonally —conceived as a coefficient of the object. We are back in the world of light and shadow and solid objects, back in a world of solemn obligation to the data of observation, without recourse to subjective alternatives or ironic substitutes. It is a little dry and puritanical, but it has the strength of an absolute conviction.

But the realist revival we are now witnessing is by no means confined to this “conservative” resurgence. Much of it—indeed, most of it—is very alert to the modernist scenario, very canny, in fact, in divining ways to steal the modernist fire for its own purposes. It aims to “swing” at the same time that it restores, or at least reconstitutes, some of the strategies of traditional realism. It seeks not to repudiate but to domesticate the modernist imperative. It seeks, in other words, a middle course between apostasy and abject surrender.

Such, I take it, is the impulse to be found in the paintings of Janet Fish, who is currently showing a group of amazing still life paintings at the Kornblee Gallery, 58 East 79th Street. These are all oversized depictions of objects you can acquire at the grocery or the liquor store—jars of honey or jelly, bottles of soda or vodka or gin, a few lemons still in their plastic wrapper. The scale is heroic, the objects commonplace; the strategy, clearly, is to make a good deal of this inherent contradiction.

And a good deal, pictorially speaking, Miss Fish does make of it. I would guess that she has learned something from the work of Alex Katz. But whereas Mr. Katz confines himself to opaque surfaces, Miss Fish is in love with transparencies, with the kind of solid objects that consist of little or nothing but light, and she has a marvelous gift for rendering them with a cool but painterly precision. Hers indeed an impressive talent.

And then, inevitably, there is the lunatic fringe, struggling to revive the moribund pop movement, a realism that prides itself on its mindlessness, on its ability to approximate the impersonal mechanism of the machine. In the Chuck Close show, now at the Eykert Gallery, 24 East 81st Street, there are two very large pictures, each 100 inches in height, each a hand painted rendering in color of a photographic portrait realized as closely as possible along the lines of a four color separation prepared for letterpress printing. No doubt there is a sociological point to be found in this desire of a painter to aspire to the methods of a machine but the esthetic interest of the procedure is nil. Needless to say, the "portraits" are the usual pop exploitation of the ugly and the banal, a reminder that pop, though utterly dead, now aspires to a revival under the banner of this realist movement. The kind of work Mr. Close produces is interesting only as evidence of the kind of rubbish that follows in the wake of every turn in the history of taste.