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Realism: 'The Painting Is Fiction Enough

By Hilton Kramer
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NEW HAVEN, CONN. OF the many forms of visual art that currently compete for our attention, by far the most difficult to come to critical terms with is that congeries of styles and counter-styles that goes under the general name of realism. For tastes nurtured exclusively on the more radical forms of modernist art, realism of any sort constitutes a betrayal of the faith, and little more needs to be said about it. Those who pride themselves on a more pluralistic approach to current art are, on the other hand, haunted by the sentimental appeals to so-called "humanistic" values in the name of which really bad representational art has so often been defended in the past. Realism does not lack its partisans, but it does rather conspicuously lack a persuasive theory. And given the nature of bur intellectual commerce with works of art, to lack a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial—the means by which our experience of individual works is joined to our understanding of the values they signify.

'Though realism flourishes, it does so in an intellectual void'

This lack of a theory has certainly not inhibited a great many artists of both the younger and the older generations from producing work of a realist. character. The New York galleries fairly groan at the moment under the weight of one sort of realist painting or another and the museums too have been quick to organize exhibitions attempting to encompass this development. None that I have seen has really clarified either the general issues involved or the particular talents selected for exposure. Though realism flourithes, it continues to do so in an intellectual void.

One of the latest of these museum shows is the exhibition called "Seven Realists" at the Yale University Art

For Art Mailbag, see Page 32. Gallery. (Two others, which I have no seen, are currently installed at the War caster; Mass., Art Museum in Massachu setts and the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Conn.), The Yale exhibition though it boasts some powerful pictures does not in any way modify the situation I have described, and this cannot help being a disappointment to those us who would like to see the academic community 'exercise some initiative ib the realm of critical thought. Where, if not in the universities, can we expect a disinterested criticism td originate? Certainly not in the marketplace. But the sad fact is, our universities are so busy keeping abreast of the marketplace that they have little energy left for the kind of disinterested pursuit I have in mind.

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Before discussing the Yale exhibition, however, it may worth asking why it is that realism finds itself in this peculiarly theoryless limbo. The reasons are probably many and complex, but foremost among them, I think, is precisely the hold that theory exercises on the art against which the realists have set themselves. In his brief preface to the catalogue of the Yale show, Alan Shestack (who is Director of the Yale University Art Gallery) refers to the tradition of formalist criticism that has placed all forms of realist art beyond consideration. To this tradition he does.not oppose any alternative theory—there is, as I say, none at hand that can be pressed into service—but simply offers the present exhibition as an attempt "to bring attention to the work of several individual artists whose work we especially admire and consider to be of high quality." In this

respect, at least, he echoes the attitudes of the artists he has chosen to show by consigning theory itself to the opposing camp of modernism.

Mr. Shestack speaks of “works of art which are rooted in concrete reality,” and looking around the galleries that contain these “Seven Realists,” one more or less knows what he means. The nude models and accessory props that are observable in the paintings of Philip Pearlstein are nothing if not concrete representations of a quickly identified “reality.” Likewise the eggs and stilllife objects and the structures on which they repose in the paintings of William Bailey. But what constitutes a “con crete reality” for one realist does not at all answer the esthetic needs of another. Whereas Messrs. Pearlstein and Bailey (and even Stephen Posen in his very different fool-the-eye arrangements of objects literally under wraps) find their “reality” in the artifice, of the studio set-up, others here are intent upon evoking a world “beyond” the studio's “boundaries:

Thus, in Paul Wiesenfeld's painting, it is not a pictorial idea conceived in the studio that is forced on our consciousness but a certain kind of domestic interior—all elegance and atmosphere, with every detail of its Victorian mise*en-scène* lovingly rendered. Mr. Wiesenfeld cultivates precisely the kind of escape-to-another-world illusionism that Mr. Pearlstein painstakingly eschews. Similarly, the super-realistic polyester and Fiberglas three-dimensional figures, of Duane Hanson—banal figures I would scarcely call sculpture inhabit an illusory “reality” that Sylvia Mangold's austerely conceived compositions of mirrors occupying empty rooms have no esthetic traffic with. Among contemporary realists, there is a vast chasm, it'seems, between those who would like to persuade us to suspend our disbelief in the “world” beyond the studio and those who aspire to entrench us more deeply than ever in the mysteries of the studio enterprise.

For myself, it is the latter group that seems to be engaged in the more serious artistic pursuit. In Janet Fish's giant still-life paintings of bottles and jars, for example, there is an evident concession to artifice that effectively removes the work' from any “concrete reality” other than the surface of the painting. We are not invited to entertain the fiction of a world outside the painting; the painting is fiction enough.

This, it seems to me, is where the expressive strength of current realism lies—in painting that is able to draw upon the resources of the representational function without relying on the easy evocation of a world beyond the painting itself. It is a strength that Mr. Pearlstein has in great abundance, and that Mr. Bailey, too, working in a somewhat snore romantic vein, sustains with remarkable virtuosity. It is therein the paintings of Miss Fish and Mrs. Mangold, and it even begins to make itself felt in the latest of Mr. Wiesenfeld's paintings on view—the “Still Life” of l973—in which the soft, cosy light of the earlier paintings gives way to something tougher and more rigorously articulated.

In their refusal to traffic in a fiction beyond the boundaries of the picture these painters have a good deal more in common with their alleged adversaries among the modernists than either group could probably bring itself to beieve. Perhaps when the time comes for the champions of realism to suspend their suspicion of theory and actually examine what it is realism is up to—not simply as representation but as art —we shall have this relation to the modernist tradition more fully explored.

The “Seven Realists” exhibition remains on view at Yale through June 2.