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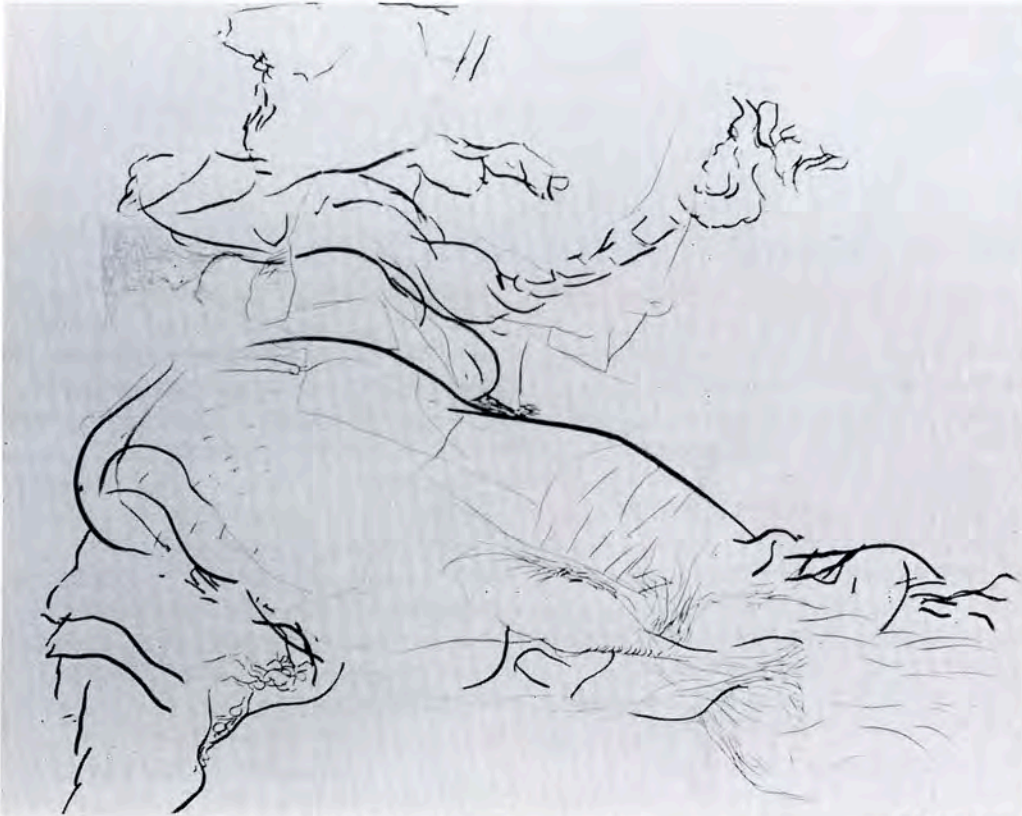
Creating Contemporary Art: Three Graduate Perspectives

by Matt Parr

John Bender, Jesse Murry, and Lisa Yuskavage, three Master of Fine Arts students in their second year at Yale, would agree with a statement that Sandro Chia made: "painting today is an

act of faith" (*ARTnews*, April 1983). Bender sees contemporary art as facing two distinct crises: one of too much freedom, too little definition, and the other of purpose. "The biggest problem," he thinks, "is to convince yourself that what you're painting is significant; that, at least in some sense, it matters." Yuskavage considers that one must persistently affirm a serious self-expression. Murry goes even further. "Faith implies to me simply asserting the importance of painting over not painting. But I think that in an even larger sense, against the insanity of the world, it is a kind of value formation. So we not only have to struggle to reassert painting as an imaginative act, we must possess it in an even broader sense." Hence, despite their common commitment to painting, Bender, Murry, and Yuskavage differ in their thinking about the pluralism of contemporary art, History of Art, and choice of subject matter.

"I'm only a neo-expressionist," Bender says, "because I'm doing expressionist



John Bender. Figure Study. Litho Crayon

ROY NANJO



Lisa Yuskavage. Untitled work. Black and white monochrome.

painting in 1985." He dislikes the label, but feels a great deal of sympathy for the neo-expressionist's motivations. "In the seventies painting died," he explains. "The strongest work produced was minimal and conceptual. Painters must have been living under a big rock, though I think they were unconsciously trying to revive painting." This need to restore power and energy to painting is crucial to neo-expressionism, he believes, and is also important for his work. "The resurrected medium is outlandish, bigger than life. There's an emphasis on the magic of the pictorial image, the profundity that can exist even in a stick figure, if it is done well." He stresses the importance of the paint itself: "One of the ways painting was revived was by homage to the paint, to its application. That's why neo-expressionist paintings are done so boldly, so freely."

Murry agrees that in the seventies "modernism was taken to an extreme." And while he has a great deal of respect for minimalist and conceptual art, he too recognizes its impersonal qualities. "It never directly addresses the issue of art as an extension and manifestation of the self. Things like performance art, narrative art, and video reintroduced the self in the form of the body, which I suppose led to figuration as being the dominant trend in painting today." Although Murry thinks that neo-expressionism makes today an exciting time to be a painter and agrees that the neo-expressionists have radically redefined contemporary painting, he dislikes "the kind of 'anything goes' pluralism of figuration," and sees its popularity as a function of vanity or an unwillingness to be thoughtful about art. "We are fed with these images of ourselves," he believes. "But they are fast-food images. They tell too much, do too much. They do not allow the viewer to imaginatively participate with the artist in the creative act. This, to me, is the lifeblood of abstraction or what motivates my struggle in painting."

Yuskavage likes some works by neo-expressionists but, like Murry, thinks that too much of it "tries to grab the viewer by the throat." She prefers to look back for models and influences. Among the relatively few figurative painters who have achieved any kind of recent prominence, she does not find intentions similar to her own. Eric

Fischel, for example, "is technically very good, but his work is narrative. It tells a story which you could just as well do with words." She also regrets that most painters today are simply uninterested in beauty, and feels that those who are tend to be abstractionists, like Bill Jensen. "Beauty is just not 'in'," she says, "and this is one reason why I'm quite willing not to be mainstream."

Yuskavage looks very strongly toward past art, but not in a nostalgic or reactionary way. "I don't think that I look to the past as an academic. Nothing could be less interesting to me. The misinterpretation of Art History is the most important thing because misreading is a way of being influenced, a way of asserting my own personality without losing reverence for the art I love." As an example of this process, Yuskavage explains the way her work borrows from Giovanni Bellini's *Sacred Conversations*. "The saints in his paintings seem as if they are in a state of complete introspection. Yet in the way they are standing and glancing and the way their forms are revealed through light and color they seem as if they are communicating on a higher level--as if psychically." Her own recent work seeks to capture the knowledge one might gain from a sudden insight before it is understood. She restates what she sees as crucial to Bellini: the notion of a silent utterance that one can sense in the tone and composition of the painting.

Bender and Murry as well consider the History of Art important to their work. "I look backwards and forwards in time," says Murry. "Giorgione and Fra Angelico are no less

important to me than, say, Turner or Rothko. These are among the painters who inspire me through their use of light and color, and who poetically express their beliefs about spirit and being." Bender considers the anxiety of influence a motivating factor for his work.

"Pollack, for example, felt he had to swallow, to digest Picasso. And that's a big meal for any man. It's hard sometimes to think that your work may be worthless because someone has done it all better before. I think it's important to have great painting in any age."

The age-old use of painting as communication is

JONATHAN REFF



Jesse Murry in his A&A studio. Work in progress.

another source of dissent among these Yale graduate painters. Yuskavage does not consider the figure "just something to paint" but "a place to start." Although her subject matter is very specific (generally figures in interiors), figurative representation is less an end than a means for communicating the sublimity of a moment or a scene.

Bender agrees that the presence of the body, in some form, is crucial, but for quite different reasons. "Art without flesh makes me angry," he says. "I have to ask why? What is its purpose? There's no conflict between man and God without sex, and it's that conflict that generates heat, creates friction, without which painting is uninteresting."

"In drawing," Bender continues, "I've been trying to think of the process almost literally, as an act of creation. I don't simply intend to recreate the illusion of what I'm seeing--I'm trying to make something new out of what I'm looking at." Whether or not the finished product bears any resemblance to its model does not particularly matter to Bender. "It should tell more about me," he asserts, "myself, and the systems I've created. I don't want you to see the object so much as my self and my thought reflected in the object."

Murry also sees painting as an act of creation, as a kind of "language of forms." Whereas Bender attempts to enact the conflict between man, sex, and God on his canvases, Murry thinks of painting in terms of a different trinity: the "window, wall, and dream." For him each painting exists at once as "a window, in that the space is penetrable to both the mind and the eye; a wall, in that all canvases are flat and two dimensional; and a dream, because the language of the painting expresses a subconscious state." These three elements, unlike Bender's, are not in conflict with each other. Rather, it is crucial for Murry that the three must be inseparable. "Painting is both fiction and fact," he says. "The big struggle is always with the material, the stuff, the paint. That needs to be transformed, needs to create an image or a feeling which is transcendent. The paradox is that they must come up at once; they are inextricably bound together."

Murry believes that art must please. In fact, he is "sick of the aesthetic of the ugly." He does not think, however, that abstraction necessarily lacks the power to please. "Painting about painting," he says, "is often the abstractionist's subject. And while I think this can be interesting, I want my own work to do more." Murry wants to achieve in painting the kind of position Wallace Stevens proposes for poetry in his "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction." It must be abstract, it must change, and it must give pleasure. "It is color as light and light as color that gets me going. I want to use light to create a sensuous and ambient space, one that breathes and moves and changes like the hum of being." His work is abstract in that it invents its own language of forms, which is nonetheless expressive of his self. In a way, this is a kind of representation or figuration, but one which is open enough to allow for the viewer to participate in interpretation, one which does not fix its meaning as if concrete. Unlike many abstract modernists, he acknowledges and embraces "the role the subconscious has in shaping and intuiting the language I invent into a new reality."

This "new reality," however, cannot simply exist for its own sake. Murry says that it must relate to the objective world and communicate to the viewer. "I know," he says, "that there is outside of me this over-determined otherness called 'the world,' and that I constitute an indeterminate something I call 'the self.' What bridges, links, connects me to this otherness is the mediating circumstance of art, the act of painting. And I don't think that's just my condition. The new figuration seeks to identify with it as well, but hasn't. Only abstract painting, today, has the capacity to address this condition fully."

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