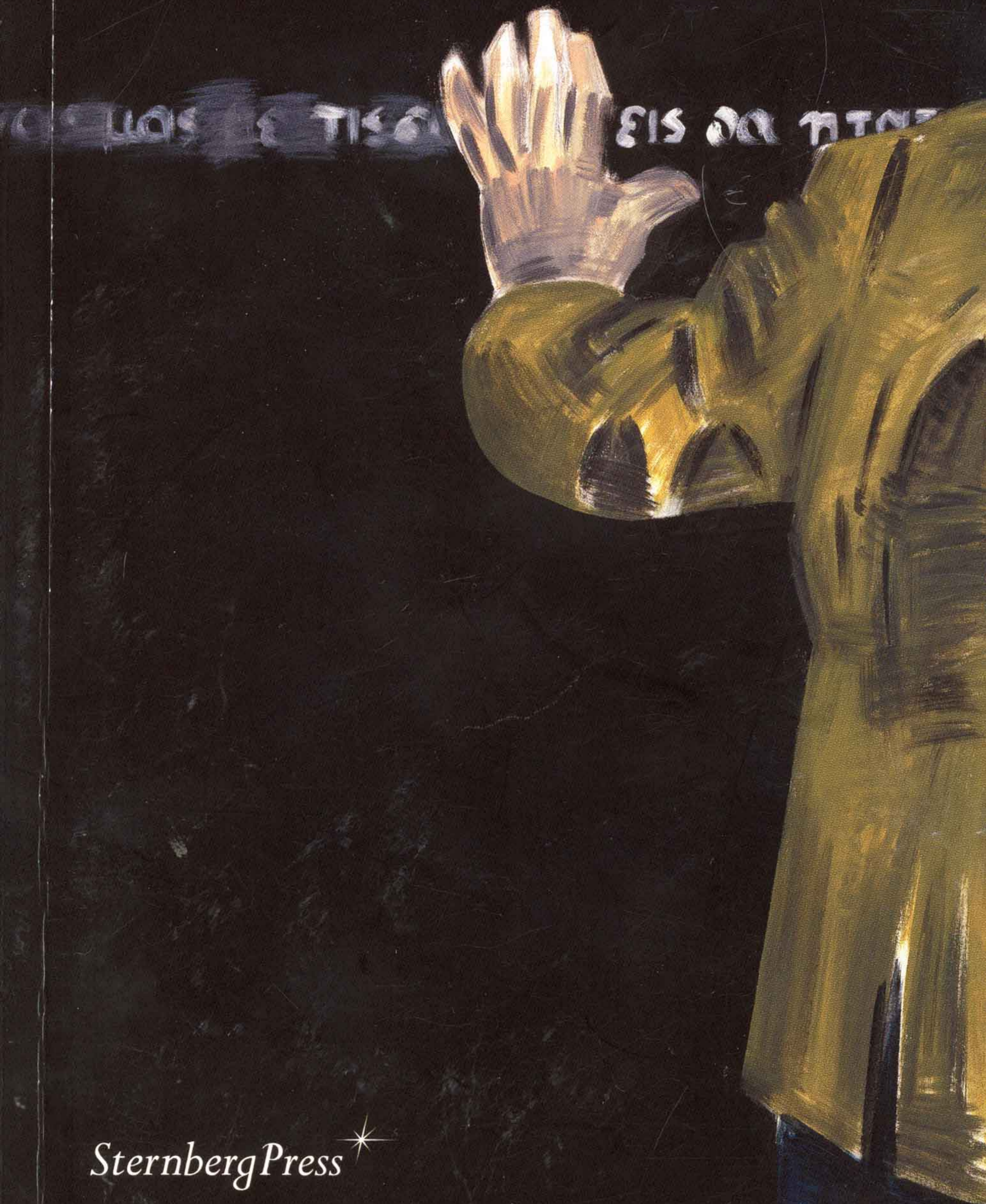


Barry Schwabsky

THE OBSERVER EFFECT

On Contemporary Painting



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The Observer Effect
On Contemporary Painting

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Picturehood Is Powerful: John Currin, Catherine Howe, and Lisa Yuskavage

1997

If you're looking for signs of a rupture in art, it's always worth looking for what people hate, or what they love in ways that are curiously akin to hate. Unlike most figurative painters, John Currin, Catherine Howe, and Lisa Yuskavage paint as if they know their work is not a return to tradition but a break within it. Maybe that's why their works have been lightning rods for extreme, sometimes deeply conflicted feelings. Any gallerygoer is liable to run across scores of dreadful paintings, but only a special irritant could incite charges of having manufactured ones that are "knowingly dreadful," as Yuskavage has. I still haven't figured out whether one review of her 1994 show in Los Angeles is meant to be positive or negative; though its author also finds her trying "to make a travesty of the medium," his tone leaves it unclear whether that prospect is exciting or awful. In Howe's case, one early response was to see the paintings as wantonly seductive, like "a woman you know you should definitely not get involved with"; the severe advice concluding the review: "resist." As for Currin, even his critical supporters project notably ambivalent attitudes that materialize in titles like *A Can of Worms* and *The Weirdest of the Weird*.

Though hardly constituting a "school" or "movement," there are certain things these painters immediately

have in common. They are of the same generation (born in the early 1960s) and there is some social overlap among them: for instance, Yuskavage and Currin were students at Yale at the same time (both MFA 1986); Currin's first show was at White Columns, when Howe was part of its curatorial staff. More to the point, however, are the similarities of subject and approach their work has shared. All three began by painting single isolated figures—always female—against essentially abstract, spatially nebulous grounds. So far they've only departed from this formula to a moderate degree: Currin by doing some paintings of men and couples in addition to women; Yuskavage with multi-figure compositions without overt interaction among the figures (though she's still only made one painting with a male subject); Howe by gradually making her settings somewhat more specific, adding props to turn the scene into a generic studio environment. (Yuskavage and Howe have also tried their hands at still life.) For all that, the subject of "woman in painting" remains central to the work of all three.

From Currin, there have been eerily bland "portraits" of ghostly, dead-eyed, somehow nerveless blonde girls; pairs of mismatched lovers (he often a sort of effete scarecrow with a pipe and a seemingly pasted-on beard, she jailbait, gazing at him in inexplicable admiration) painted with the fluttery brushstrokes and airy palette of the French Rococo; and most recently, as overwrought as his first paintings were willfully anemic, exaggeratedly blowsy babes out of the smutty cartoon books of a secretive 1960s childhood. Howe has given us fantasy portraits of a different kind, their vigorously painted lineaments in irritating contention with the equally bravura character of their abstract surrounds, and with ever-increasingly

kitsch content as time goes on, both in subject (lately, the painter's model as sexually available female, in studio settings redolent of long-obsolete fantasies of the artistic *vie de bobème* like those in Anaïs Nin's soft-core tales of the 1930s) and in style (including lots of palette knife effects evocative of everything bad, from Bernard Buffet to paintings for 1950s ballet posters). Yuskavage, who first painted adolescent girls bathed in sticky-sweet candy-colored monochrome fields, has since inflated and mutated them into outrageous pornographic vampiresses.

For all their commerce with kitsch, however, what Currin, Howe, and Yuskavage are up to is not simply exploiting it as a Pop element, and theirs is not "Bad Painting" in the 1970s sense; instead, their work manifests an underlying intentness on the act of painting, which is almost disquieting in itself because of the deliberate and often unsettling collapse of critical distance inherent in it. But it is hardly accidental that, as Tomas Kulka has pointed out, "the term kitsch was originally applied exclusively to paintings; only later was its use extended to other artistic disciplines." These artists are fascinated by painting's fundamental affinity with kitsch, and they remind us that, close as a Courbet can be to a barroom nude, or an early Picasso to anybody else's sad clown, Good Painting and Bad Painting have more in common than we like to think. But they are emphatically in pursuit of Good Painting. Today, when we are so accustomed to stylistic slumming of all sorts, this may be most irritating thing of all. When Currin makes overt reference to Van Gogh (right down to the absinthe-green background) in a painting with a title as embarrassing as *The Magnificent Bosom* (1997)—or even more shockingly, to *Botticelli in Pelletiere* (1996), whose pose has been lifted from the Florentine's Venus; when Howe takes on a whole series of model-in-the-studio pictures that

evoke both Baroque allegories of the art of painting and the last gasps of that tradition of allegory in the late studio series of Corot; when Yuskavage takes over a practice of the Renaissance studios by making figures of Hydrocal (in the old days it would have been plaster), which she can then use to try out compositional and lighting solutions, and painting from those; then we are hardly surprised that Currin says—though any of them could have said it—that “I do find myself looking at old art ... because those are the best pictures.” If the results are ugly or vulgar, overwrought or sentimentally prurient, it’s thanks to a peculiar kind of obsessive love of painting, one so single-minded that even the flaws of the beloved, that is, of painting and its history, are cherished—even more, perhaps, than its beauties, according to an attitude not dissimilar to the one that led medieval saints to prove their love of God’s creation by drinking the pus from the suppurating sores of plague victims.

It is this intersection of vulgarity and earnestness, of kitsch and the great tradition, of disgust and desire, that distinguishes Currin’s, Howe’s, and Yuskavage’s work from some other current reappearances of figurative painting. For instance, artists like the late Peter Cain, Matvey Levenstein, or Richard Phillips show a similar earnestness about painting technique, but their work (in the tradition of Gerhard Richter) is mediated in the first place through its relation to photography and only tacitly to the tradition of painting that preceded and produced modernism, so they downplay the unruliness of the painterly mark. (Currin, Howe, and Yuskavage depend on photography too—it is after all our era’s primary mediator of images, whether art reproductions or stroke books—but that has not been a focus of meaning in their work.) On the other hand, while painters such as Karen Kilimnik (who earlier on

was better known for her installations) and Elizabeth Peyton also eschew seamlessly photographic surface effects in favor of the evidence of the painter’s hand, as Currin, Howe, and Yuskavage do, their styles are looser, indeed insouciantly slapdash to the point where they become self-consciously amateurish, recalling fannish reveries inspired by such forms of commercial art as fashion or record cover illustration more than by painting as a high art.

To cultivate the look of photography on the one hand or of illustration on the other is in either case, however, to sidestep a confrontation with the possible relation, or lack of it, between the figure in painting after modernism and in the art that preceded and gave birth to it. Undoubtedly that is wiser than to think one could just rejoin the grand tradition as if modernism, abstraction, Conceptual art and the rest had never happened—as if this history had been one big nightmare from which we could rise and shine. But the lucidity of the stance toward the figure evinced by the paintings of Currin, Howe, and Yuskavage lies in the way all three seem to paint with the awareness that modernism and its consequences just are (as Clement Greenberg long ago averred) the upshot of tradition, so that to reintroduce the figure, and the volumetric space in which it moves and breathes, can be no simple restoration of a lost continuity. That’s the sense in which their work appears as a rupture.

So is the point that these artists have found their way to the latest and most involuted form of the attention-getting “far-out,” in the form of the calculatingly regressive rejoinder to what we’re always told is a merely hypocritical “political correctness”? Now that we’ve had a few years to digest their work, and, more importantly, see a certain degree of development within in it (all three painters had their first one-person

shows in 1989 or 1990), it should be clear that the answer is no. Without a doubt there is something genuinely discomfiting, even at times obscene about their work—about how they handle the female body, the figurative tradition, even paint itself—and in part it's because they're trying to use all these things without glossing over the fact that, in the face of history, they've become "degraded," as Howe sometimes puts it.

In other words, these artists are grasping for emotional revelation by means of formal reflexivity. In a figurative painting, sometimes, it's not so much that the painting has been done as it is to render the figure, as that the figure exists to embody the painting or its effects. The painting allegorizes itself through the figure. Sometimes, as in my favorite painting, Correggio's *Jupiter and Io* (ca. 1530), in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, the figure stands in for the viewer, or as some writers say, the beholder; the painting, the substance of painting, one might say, is represented there by the enveloping cloud, that fluid interfusion of tone with tone, infinitely mobile yet animated by a lordly will and somehow more definite in its effects than in its form—and of course the "beholder" is not really beholding this thing at all but being taken over, overwhelmed within and without, though not passively, but with an active abandonment, an *amor fati*.

More often, perhaps, the figure inscribes not the viewer but the painting itself as an object of vision. In Corot's late figure paintings, for instance, we witness the paradoxical moment in which the figure allegorizes the withdrawal of its capacity to allegorize pure painting—a withdrawal emblematic of the inception of modernism. But for Currin, Howe, and Yuskavage, painting the female figure turns out to be a paradoxical way of submitting to what might be called a "minimal"

notion of art inherited from modernism—the intention to start from what is most basic. For them, however, this notion applies not so much the idea of the painting, reducible to the material components of color and support as in much abstraction from the 1960s on, but rather that of the picture, which can be reduced to an ideological minimum: it must be a picture of something, and most saliently of someone; and if the sense of "picturehood" is strongest when the picture is of a person, it is all the more so when the person pictured is a woman, that is, when it is a person who is always already—to use a term redolent of the 1970s—"objectified." So, just as the "primitive" abstract painting will tend to be (of) a square, though it obviously need not be, the "primitive" representational one will be (of) a woman. And to be really powerful, to be bodied forth as more than a pictorial device, this woman will have to be conjured into some kind of volumetric space.

As Clement Greenberg once pointed out, it was neither the figure itself that modernism sought to subtract from painting, nor even the figure's narrative and symbolic baggage that accompanied it, but rather the "illusionistic" space that made the its full-bodied depiction possible. His intuition is supported by the numerous attempts, in his own time and since, to produce a figuration sufficiently flat to count as modernist, including those of the great pioneering modernists themselves—the likes of Picasso, Matisse, or Léger—and extending to Pop, New Image, and even Neo-Expressionist painting, as well as the work of such fundamentally unclassifiable figures as Alex Katz or Chuck Close. The constraint on illusionistic space ends here: to paraphrase de Kooning, big breasts would be the reason for deep space to be reinvented.

At the same time, this focus on the single figure militates against the development of any kind of narrative interest within

the painting. (The cautious developments away from single-figure paintings in Currin's and Yuskavage's recent work seem to be testing how complicated a composition can get before it begins to explicitly call on narrative.) This is not exactly to say that the emphasis thereby falls neatly on any typically "modernist" formal issues instead—although it does become hard to avoid such scholastic essentials as figure/ground relations. But the overt content of the images is too highly charged to allow for anything so convenient. Instead, the subject of the work becomes focused on the one-to-one encounter between the painting and its viewer—a narrative of sorts, it's true, and a formal relation as well, but from either point of view, one that takes place outside rather than within the painting.

In the work of all three painters, that relation has shifted as the work has developed. Currin's early "white girls"—pale, faint creatures out of some high school yearbook, painted in a wan yet correct style that seemed to mimic their own fear of standing out—seemed almost to shrink from view, cocooned in a ghostly innocence in the face of which any spectatorial intention whatsoever had to seem somehow corrupt or brutal. Likewise, in a later group of pictures of older women, like that of the neurotically gaunt figure in *Ms. Omni* (1993)—all angles, lines, and elbow, her razor-edginess emanating a peculiarly expensive form of tasteful grotesquerie that remains as weirdly seductive as certain played-out forms of hard-edge abstraction—we can hardly help but be aware that the complexity of the beholder's share in resolving his attitude (both aesthetic and social) toward this image and its relation to the painting that it ambivalently embodies is as great as that in the most reductive modernist work.

By now, in a painting like *The Bra Shop* (1997), whose brushwork is as improbably robust as the physiques of its

subjects, Currin puts the viewer in an overtly voyeuristic peep-hole position that is implicitly subservient even as its male adolescent fantasy is being fulfilled. As abject as female sexuality becomes in Currin's paintings, the supposedly dictatorial gaze is always even more so. If, as I have said, Currin (like Howe and Yuskavage) began with an effort to grasp a minimal sense of the picture, it might be that the overdeveloped girls on whom his pictures have recently fixated imply the recognition that painting—at least when the painting is also a picture—can never really be minimal enough, even if it's reduced as severely as *Ms. Omni*. Like the Bra Shop girls, it will always be "too much," somehow placing both its subject and its viewer outside the boundaries of impeccable taste.

Yuskavage's work has followed a similar line of development. Not that the adolescent girls in her early paintings sloughed off the gaze the way Currin's did. Their problem was that they might have wanted to withdraw from it, but couldn't. Their presumably newly sprouted breasts betrayed them to visibility. By now, though, Yuskavage's flustered schoolgirls seem to have grown up and into their own opposites, dominatrixes projecting the invulnerability of the blank stare, their absurdly upturned nipples pointing skyward like little spires on gothic buttresses. As in Currin's paintings, the breast in these works represents a pure locus of visibility, but here it is a paradoxical visibility that pretends not to need a viewer; its power comes, so to speak, from above.

Actually, the formal crux of both Currin's and Yuskavage's paintings often turns on a sort of contest between the face and breast. In some recent paintings, Currin has even executed the two features with completely distinct and, I would say, incompatible styles of paint application. In any case, it's a tension between a communicative visibility (one that can

return the gaze) and an objective visibility that is unidirectional, and therefore between an encounter with explicit ethical claims and one in which such claims might possibly be elided. In both cases, the serious possibility is raised that, despite our humanist denials, the second kind of encounter may exert a more powerful attraction. In that case, insofar as we see their paintings as being about women, we have to see them as taking a position of cynicism, but if we see them as being about painting, that is, as we see the women in them as being figures of painting, then we find in them an ironic affirmation of the power inherent in painting's mobilization of vision, its ability to dominate and direct the sense of sight in a way fundamentally different from that available through our encounter with another person. In this view, precisely through the use of a person as a figure for painting, we come to see ethical incommensurability between persons and paintings that sanctions the aesthetic response proper to the viewer/painting relation.

Howe's paintings operate, and have developed, somewhat differently. One way to put it might be to say that her work has not made quite as much of an issue of the breast as Currin's or Yuskavage's, which might be to say that it has never contradicted modernist flatness quite as flagrantly. (If nothing else, her proclivity for the self-sufficient bravura brushstroke would have made sure of that.) And yet in some recent paintings in which the models are portrayed in clown suits and faces, the breast does emerge, so to speak, as a problem. Most of the figures in Howe's paintings have been nude, or mostly unclothed, but there was never any sense of abjection or obscenity in Howe's representation of them—in contrast, perhaps, to her representation of the genre of “the nude”—until their bodies and faces were disguised. It was then, when

their breasts began to peek out through strategically unbuttoned shirts as the only overt signs of the figures' sex, that something deeply unsettling began to happen.

Howe began with paintings that staged a clear dichotomy between passages executed in the style of modernist abstraction and others, those depicting the figure, based on the *retardataire* model of Ashcan painterly realism. As her work has developed, the dichotomy has become more and more a dialectic. The two modes have intermingled and mutually inflected each other to the point where the dichotomy is becoming untenable, and a synthesis is in sight. So even aside from her recent use of a setting suggestive of an old-fashioned painting studio with all its props and appurtenances, the fact that her work allegorizes painting has always been patent.

But in the contest between the revealed breast and the hidden face in Howe's clown paintings, it's the face that always holds the viewer's eye longer. In contrast to Currin's and Yuskavage's work, it is as painting about painting that Howe's work reveals a certain cynicism, for there modernism and kitsch become inextricably entangled. And yet from behind the painted face, the exaggerated vizard of the clown, there emerges the real gaze of a person, the artist, which the viewer cannot help but recognize. For Currin and Yuskavage, the power of the picture lies in its impersonality, but Howe begs to differ.

Like Correggio in *Jupiter and Io*, kitsch art always has designs not only on the eye and mind but also on the body of the viewer; it aims at an almost biological immediacy of response, the way sugar has no need of contemplation to make us experience its sweetness. It is this bypassing of reason, I think, that has always made the problem of kitsch, in the eyes of its most astute critics, more of an ethical than a

purely aesthetic one. It's also what these painters envy about kitsch, even as they keep inserting its stigmata into works too artistically and emotionally complex—too well painted, if nothing else—to qualify for the peculiar simplicity of affect proper to kitsch.

In *The Observer Effect: On Contemporary Painting*, poet and critic Barry Schwabsky looks at the different directions that painting has taken since the turn of the millennium. He deflates the twentieth-century belief that abstraction and figuration in painting are dichotomous. Instead, Schwabsky argues, they are methods of asking or answering the questions: What is painting? What can painting become in an observer's encounter with it? This wide-ranging selection of essays emphasizes the coextensive work the viewer brings to painting alongside the artist—the construction of form and meaning.

Edited by
Rob Colvin and Sherman Sam

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