

Getting THE FALL SEASON IN NEW YORK Real



by Donald Kuspit

One of the most unexpected things about the new New York season is the large number of exhibitions devoted to realistic art. There's Jane Dickson at Marlborough Chelsea, Peter Drake at Claire Oliver, Christine Hartman at the Bowery Gallery, Izima Kaoru at Von Lintel, Philip Pearlstein at Betty Cunningham, Paul Sattler at Gerald Peters, and Peter Waite at Edward Thorpe, among other realists and galleries. Of course they're all different, and the artists are not all painters—Kaoru is a photographer—but the point seems to be the same: observing reality, whatever one then does with it.

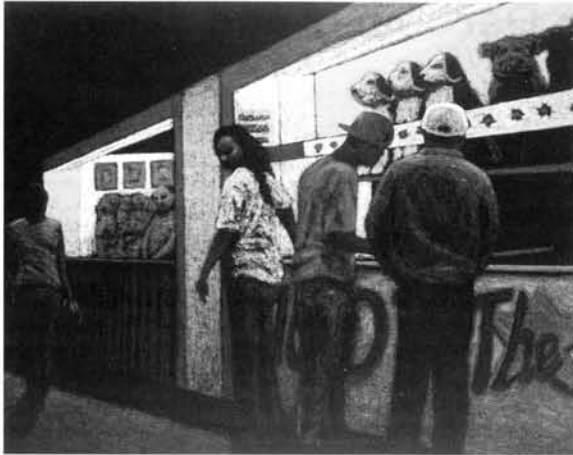
Is this a new trend? Of course, abstraction still abounds. There's Larry Bell at Pace Wildenstein, Barry Le Va at Danese, and Jules Olitski at Knoedler, but their works seem all too predictable and familiar—like that old Pop standby Roy Lichtenstein, at upscale Gagolian and Mitchell-Innes & Nash. (What a delight it would be to see a season go by without an exhibition of Lichtenstein and Warhol.) Is the point that reality is always unpredictable and familiar and that we're living in all too real times? Hard to hide one's head in the ostrich hole of purity these days, hard to be "abstract(ed)" when reality threatens to overwhelm us, the way the Iraq war and hurricane Katrina have. Reality has become news these days—America has certainly been in a new reality since 9/11—making it impossible to ignore, even by self-absorbed artists.

So is the gallery emergence of realistic art—of course it's always been there, but you would hardly know it from the few pieces of American realistic painting on exhibition in the entryway to the grand display of modernist works on the second floor of the Museum of Modern Art—a sign of the times? Is it a symptom of the new urgency with which social reality presses itself upon us? Or is it a symptom of the exhaustion of modernism? Or both? All of the above, but also something more subtle: recognition that everyday reality has always been enigmatic—and that there's something peculiarly morbid about it. This seems the point of Dickson's murky paintings of street life and carnival crowds; Drake's ironic renderings of suburban types and their world; Kaori's staged photographs of glamorous Japanese models committing suicide in public places; and Waite's aggressively melancholy images of the impersonal urban environment.

Hartman's conventional realism may be esthetically boring, but it reminds us that there is something "real" out there



Peter Drake, *Dianas*, acrylic on canvas, 55 x 70". Courtesy of Claire Oliver Gallery, New York.



Jane Dickson, *Shoot the Star*, oilstick on linen, 48 x 60", 2005.

is a means of mediating experience for contemporary realists, not an end in itself—everyday experience is not subsumed in and reconstructed as pure art, as it has been in modernism since Cézanne and cubism. If the artistic reconstruction of reality is another way of saying that reality is a social construction, then contemporary realism argues that however socially constructed there is an “unreconstructed” reality that survives every attempt to give it social meaning—a reality that is the case whether you like it or not, and whose meaning can never be conclusively pinned down.

I think this is the point of what might be called the technical ambiguity of most of the exhibited works. They are paintings that look like photographs or photographs that look like paintings; it is not clear at first glance which they are, and when one realizes that they are paintings rather than photographs it doesn't matter anymore. It is the friction between their photographic look and their painted physical reality that esthetically and epistemologically matters—that is, what we know when we say we know reality and especially what we experience when we experience it esthetically—more than whatever everyday scene, familiar object, or mythologized figure they represent, and whatever their narrative import. This holds true even for Kaori's ironic photographs, whose lush colorism and often impressionistic atmosphere make them seem like paintings, as though at odds with their photo-slick surfaces.

The point is decisively made by Drake's paintings, which from a distance often look like crude color snapshots but up close one realizes that they are subtly and intensely painted. Color sensations vibrate, forming the matrix of the image while ironically deconstructing it. In Dickson's works the oily surface seems to exist independently of the image, but the image seems based on photographs, however manipulated. Thus the friction between photo-type representation and paint medium remains, each offering a different surface for attention while deepening the emotional effect of the other. Dickson's dark oil stick and grim scenes seem in accord, and yet the sticky, heavy surface appears more resonant than the banal scene, suggesting that they have not been reconciled, certainly not seamlessly—friction remains between them. The accord of medium and mood seems better in Sattler's *Contact*, but then the paint stands out from the scene—it has a life of its own.

It is the friction between “photo-realistic” image and sensuous engagement—even sensual immersion—in the materiality of the paint medium that strongly suggests the artist's unconscious uncertainty about the substance and meaning of the reality represented, however substantially he or she represents it and makes it seem meaningful. Indeed, the friction reminds us of the inherent problem of representing reality, which always has to be represented in a particular medium: The question is what the influence of the medium—inmate to the art in a way that the representation is not—is on the character of the representation. Mastery of the medium—and virtually all the artists mentioned have a certain mastery of their

medium—tends to be confused with mastery of reality, as though understanding the properties of the medium automatically guaranteed insightful observation of reality. There is clearly a fair amount of insight into the reality represented. And there is a certain skill in representing it and in investing the representation with meaning—sometimes forcing allegorical and esthetic meaning upon it—but there is also a certain sense that the reality represented remains mysterious. ■

beyond our own reality, and that it demands attention, whatever the quality of the attention. Even Sattler's colorful variations of Charles Wilson Peale's *Exhumation of the Mastodon* remind us of the gross “realness” of reality—there are real monsters out there, and real time—impinging upon all artistic ambitions and creativity, and hard to manage emotionally let alone esthetically. Gross reality is indeed what we see in Pearlstein's paintings, even with his allegorical import and manneristic staging. A good deal of the power of Pearlstein has to do with his ability to convince us that objects and bodies are indisputably given—undeniable facts, whatever meaning accrues to them by reason of their estheticization and allegorization.

Reality seems to cry out for both, as though each can make its own meaning manifest even if that meaning is imposed or uncertain. The determined search for the meaning of ordinary reality can make for extraordinary art, if what makes art extraordinary is its ability to make us conscious, of our often unconscious feelings about the reality we experience.

But experience of reality is the issue of contemporary realism, not the experience of art (although it offers us a certain artistic experience). Art

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Peter Drake, *Sisyphus*, acrylic on canvas, 49 x 65". Courtesy of Claire Oliver Gallery, New York.