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THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN, 1983.
Oil on canvas, 66 x 96".
Courtesy Metro Pictures.

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Thomas Lawson, *Wild in the Streets, Hanged in the Park*, 1980. Oil on canvas, 51½ x 41". Courtesy Metro Pictures.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS LAWSON

D.A. ROBBINS

"I know a series is ending when I begin to know too well what the pictures mean."

DR: How did you decide to become an artist?

TL: As a child in Scotland I'd always had a sort of secret agenda. I'd planned to be an artist since I was seven or eight, but as I was growing up I read too many books about sensitive young kids whose parents wanted them to become lawyers. The society in general didn't seem to approve very much so I kept it pretty quiet and worked underground. During the first years in college at St. Andrews I appeared, even to myself, to be reading English. Pretending I was doing something else.

DR: Why did you choose painting as your medium?

TL: It just felt natural to paint. Technical things like cameras still baffle me a little bit. It's the same with writing—I write longhand, not on the typewriter. As an undergraduate before coming to New York, I started painting newspaper images. When I got to New York I felt I obviously would have to re-educate myself so I stopped making those for a while. In the middle Seventies there wasn't any support for copying pictures out of the newspaper. The reason I left Scotland was that it wasn't acceptable there at all.

DR: What did Scotland want you to paint?

TL: Well, there were basically two levels: there was the standard art school thing—manual skills and observation; and there was a tiny avant-garde group that was pretty much up to date: extreme minimal, process-oriented stuff, though more romanticized. About nature . . . Richard Long-ish. But I wasn't really sympathetic to that . . .

DR: What were the images in the early "newspaper" paintings?

TL: They tended to be standard political pictures, groupings of political characters, three men standing around smiling at each other.

DR: Identified in the titles?

TL: No. I had some problems with that at the time, actually. Edward Heath was always in the paper in those days, and he was so readily identifiable I hated to use him in the pictures. It was difficult not to have it just be a picture of Teddy Heath. It wasn't supposed to be a political cartoon, just very flat and dead pictures. You didn't get much from them in the way of information.

DR: Why did you want to make "dead" pictures?

TL: If painting is dead then that's what you make.

DR: At that time what did you understand the painter's life to be? After all, you were working in the mid-Seventies after the "death" of painting.

TL: Which, incidentally, was a death that hadn't been widely reported in Scotland!

DR: What did you see as the painter's function?

TL: I'd no idea. I just wanted to make paintings. I couldn't really paint in Edinburgh because I was living in a tiny little flat. To make a painting there meant taking up the entire living room.

DR: So you moved to New York for more room?

TL: In a number of senses, yes.

DR: What relation do you think the portraits bear to traditional portraiture? They are not pictures of familiar people; they are not people who are in the public imagination for longer than . . . fifteen minutes. You've taken Warhol's "fifteen minutes of fame" and made that the subject.

TL: They are people of whom you have no expectation of seeing a portrait. Neither mass culture nor high culture, but absolutely anonymous strangers. Furthermore they are not my pictures. They are doubly anonymous—both photographed and photographer are anonymous. They are taken from either family albums or school yearbooks, and in turn cropped and reprocessed for the newspaper. Though I do not know the portrayed,



Thomas Lawson, *Metropolis I*, 1982. *Oil on canvas*. Courtesy Metro Pictures.

I know a series is ending when I begin to know too well what the pictures “mean.”

DR: Why are you drawn to some subjects and not to others?

TL: Just by the feel of the picture. That’s where taste comes in.

DR: Just as the image is used, color is *used* in your pictures. It is employed as a tool or diagram, but it’s not used as an expression of your feelings about the picture.

TL: Not directly. The picture of the baby with the black eye, done in black and blue, obviously has some connection to its color, but mostly I try to step back from any obvious correlation.

DR: Do you mix color or do you use it straight from the manufacturer?

TL: I tend to use it as it is manufactured.

DR: Other people’s pictures of anonymous subjects, other people’s color, ready-made stretchers, straightforward canvas shapes, squares or rectangles . . . : you create a lot of screens, you expunge a lot of “personal” emotional expression from your paintings.

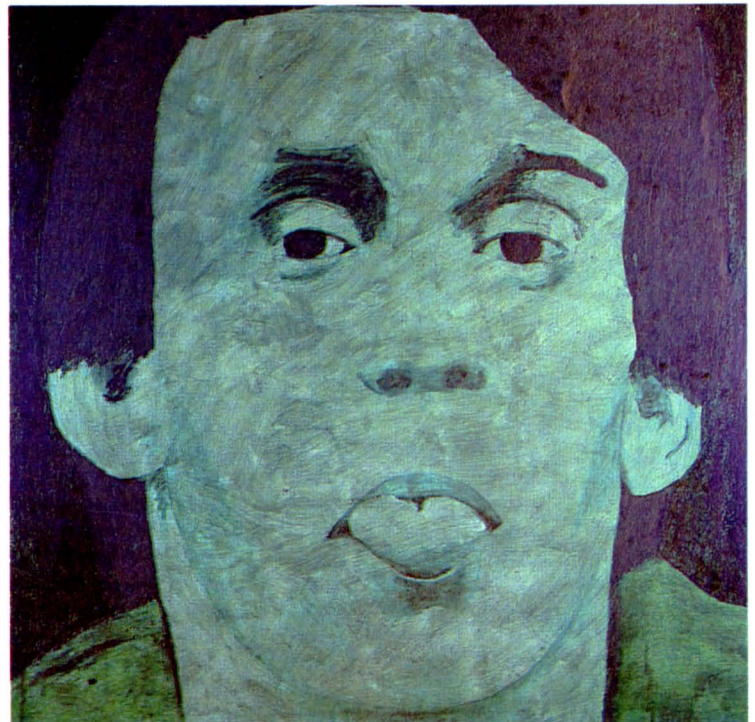
TL: I expunge conventional methods for demonstrating emotion which I don’t think carry any conviction. I don’t really expunge them, I isolate them. I might use a gestural mark that is so clearly isolated from itself that it becomes only that, but in doing that enough in a big enough field it does become a carrier of emotion. It is not wild passion, but a frustration of it.

DR: The desire for it.

TL: To some people it appears very cold, but I think that’s a misunderstanding of the way conventions work.

DR: And undermining these prefabricated conditions—subject, presentation of subject, color, size, shape—is the feel of the image itself, modeled by hand.

TL: It is a personal intervention which I think throws the whole



Thomas Lawson, *Burn, Burn, Burn, Burn*, 1982. *Oil on canvas, 48 x 48"*.
Courtesy Metro Pictures.

thing up in the air. How personal? How impersonal?

DR: The paintings of babies and dogs against "color fields" achieved an impersonal dumbness, in the sense of muteness. They are images that block your access to meaning. Your more recent paintings, though often of violent events, do not yell and scream.

TL: They are more like a clenched fist.

DR: The paintings' information is split into two: on the one hand you have the cool, noncommittal image, looked at through veils of color, glowing like a sucked-on lozenge. And then you have this very hot information just outside the edge of the picture, represented by the title: *Died in a Hail of Lead*. Why do you separate the painting into self-contained cold image and hot text just outside its borders?

TL: The hot information is in society. It's extraneous, it's the condition. And the art-matter is cold, it's removed, icy. It's that old bridging-the-gap. I'm inclined towards a more active confrontation of those two elements, slapping them together without penetration. Like two magnets that repel each other.

DR: The pictures in the last show at Metro Pictures were so clearly receding or fleeing from the viewer. The images' meaning receded while the titles, the hot information, advanced towards the viewer very aggressively.

TL: It's taken me a while to understand what this is all about. I think that is the central focus of my work, and not just the paintings. In other people's responses to the work there is always this puzzlement: "Well, what's he saying? Why can't he come to a conclusion?" It's the same response I got to "The Dark Side of the Bright Light" article in *Artforum*. A common response seems to be, "you raise a lot of interesting issues, but you don't resolve it for us. When are you going to tell us how it ends?" It doesn't! It is not the case that these pictures are the illustration of a theory, either by myself or by people who weave a theory for me and to which I am to fit myself. They are of course unsatisfactory as illustrations because they are not illustrations. They are not meant to be. I work at the conjunction of fields of information that don't help one another. The conjunction ends up being a barrier.

DR: It's pessimistic.

TL: Yes. Northern European. Doom-laden.

DR: Here's an old question, then: can art have any social purpose?

TL: Not in an obvious way.

DR: Can art change anything?

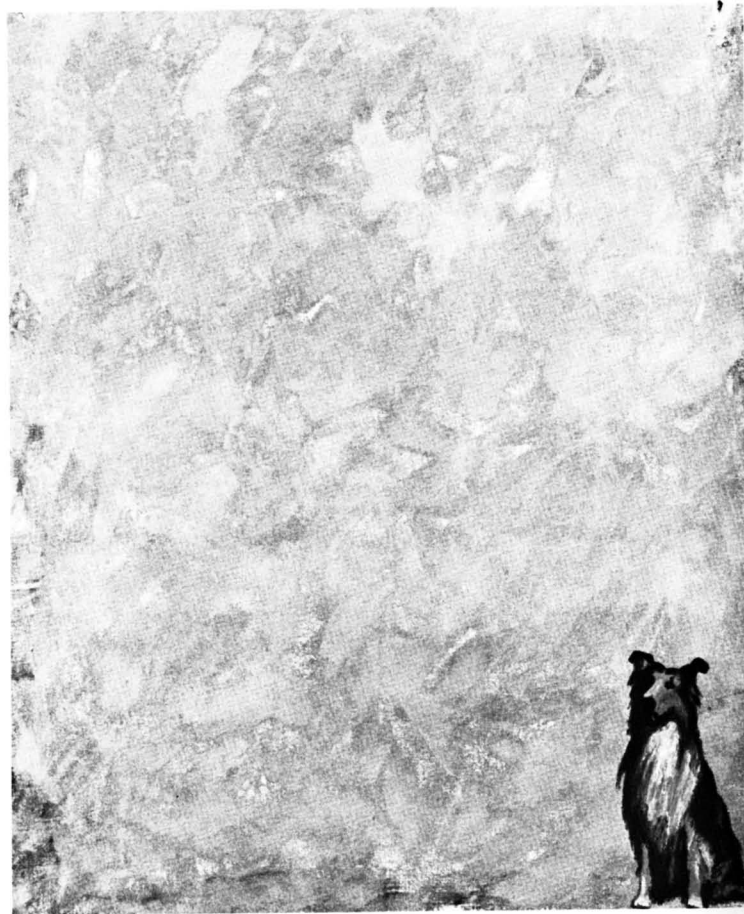
TL: I think so, by confronting people with information and making them think about that information. In some long-term way, art is a moral force. I believe that pretty strongly, and that's why I get so upset with a lot of stuff that seems to me to be either taking that responsibility pretty lightly or disregarding it completely, because that degrades the entire discourse. I don't mean that art's moral in any didactic sense of telling you how to behave. Its seriousness and the steadiness with which you have to work it through and deal with it are exemplary in some way. If you're making important art, you're looking at something and transforming it into some other thing. That remains a pretty unusual thing to do. Most people don't transform their information.

DR: Why transform your experience, though . . . into these excretions?

TL: Otherwise, why bother? It's what makes humans human, no?

DR: It's open to question, and that's the crisis that art is experiencing. But certainly it's valuable to document the crisis. Your art has a great deal of reportage in it, a great deal of recording. Isn't the work of Julian Schnabel, which you've been moderately vocal in opposing, equally reportage? Doesn't that tell us as well something about man's state of mind and how he perceives himself?

TL: Yes. The reason that Julian presents such a problem is that he is a polar opposite; we are natural antagonists. I think he tries to do something similar but with a completely different set of circumstances. His work is tied into a sort of romance about history. Mine is tied to the particularities of the present. He has a sort of romance of the ego and creativity, a whole set of mystifying notions that I find . . . right-wing: unquestioning individualism, an unquestioning free will. I come at it from the oppos-



Thomas Lawson, *Untitled*, 1978. Oil on canvas. Courtesy Metro Pictures.

ite direction: that we don't have that kind of free will, and that in fact the ideas of genius and creativity are not universal but instead pertain to local and specific pockets of Western civilization. He represents this operatic, Wagnerian organizational power, but he doesn't transcend that. I can make myself see value in some of his paintings, I can see some of them working, but I just can't support it. Its entire meaning is alien.

DR: Your generation of painters is very much about what a painting means. The stakes are so high, everybody is trying to wrest control of history. Your generation addresses itself to what an image is, and what the meaning of an image can be. Do you think that we are now seeing two kinds of art: one that picks up the "mantle of history" and one which refuses to feel obligated to historical imperative in any linear sense? I think you are concerned with the former. It's the difference between being used by history as a tool and using history as a tool.

TL: I don't think the individual is bigger than history. It's too naive. It becomes reduced to a cynical manipulation of symbols and/or a grasping for temporal power or position. That's the problem with the neo- or pseudo-Expressionists: they want to take Yves Klein's leap out the window into the void without realizing that you fall on your face.

DR: Who decides the meaning of art? Is the artist the final authority? Is the critic?

TL: I don't think it's ever decided.

DR: But there was a time not long ago when critics had considerable power over the interpretation of the art object, and seemingly over artists. The best thing about the last five years is that artists have found a variety of ways to work that frustrates and confounds the critics' role. The critics cannot quite figure out how to address this new art. A round of applause for the artists, please. . . .

TL: Absolutely. That is one of the more interesting developments. The meaning resides somewhere between the artist, the

critic, and the public, and the meaning never settles down. It is the drawing of a circle. The important work has a leeway built into it that allows it to shift as history continues. The most typical failure is Greenbergian painting: so much of it is so tightly tied onto a list of theories that you can look at some of those paintings and just check them off, one by one, down the list.

DR: So theory's swelling has gone down?

TL: Yes. It's something to be used but it's deadly when the theoretician takes over, you know, the hard-line conceptual edge to pictures.

DR: But how did artists escape it? They seemed to go either for imagery that had hermetic, autobiographical connections to them or to impersonal, media-source imagery. Autobiography cannot be fixed to any interpretive referent-system.

TL: Autobiographical art is not as random as it's often presented as being. When you look at a lot of younger artists' work, young artists who are using so-called "personal" imagery, you see the same elements repeated—headless bodies, wounded torsos, severed heads floating around, the same gestures—and each one of those young artists really believes those images have deep personal meaning specific to them. You could put together a show of, say, one piece from twenty young artists working this way, and that would be the real Zeitgeist!

DR: The "other half" of the avant-garde chose to explore these intensely impersonal images, images that are essentially just edited and selected. Images that they didn't make. I find it a much more meditative kind of art: the "zen of media," a peculiarly sensual void advancing towards you. An art focusing on the essence of the perception of an image.

TL: It's not as passive as a "zen" of media; it's an active viewing relationship as well. The initial impulse towards that for me came from walking the streets of the city, learning to accept the city. When I first came to New York I used to go on long walks, exploring all over the city. I knew no one here. One neighborhood was all bombed out, another filled with boutiques, dry cleaning stores . . . A continual flow of information and sights. And on every corner there's someone selling newspapers, so the framework for the entire experience becomes the media. I think the TV is secondary. The newspaper is the experience of the city. My work has a pretty distinct precedent in Futurism.

My new paintings of landscapes operate, on the simplest level, as a step back, putting down the newspaper and looking up.

DR: That flow of information is a cinematic flow. It's also a kind of schizophrenic flow. You can feel a schizophrenic edge to much of the art of the last five years—the desire to continue to make these things coupled with the nagging suspicion of ultimate worthlessness . . .

TL: Yes.

DR: But that cinematic attitude towards the flow is scary. It is an attitude towards the world that says, "this is a film." These unemployed are just a film. The hard essence doesn't get through.

TL: No, it doesn't get through, and it's also partly a distinctly lonely feeling.

DR: An unquenchable loneliness.

TL: I've always tended to be a bit of a loner. I knew no one when I got here, and it was as though I were encased in glass. I had no way of meeting all these people. That cinematic remove is absolutely part of . . .

DR: The immigrant experience.

TL: And continues to be. Recently I was wandering around Germany thinking about these new landscape paintings I'm doing, shuttling from city to city on the train, the little zombie walks.

DR: The terror that is tourism.

TL: It's that, but it's also a great joy. I think travel and tourism are meaningful because they accentuate the usual daily condition. Travel makes the tourism mechanism more apparent and in some ways more manageable. The tourism aspect can seem more extreme in your very own neighborhood: here we are sitting in the heart of the financial section and I have no connection with that. I don't even have access to the buildings next door to me. Even given a landscape that we know, and neighbors that we know, we tend at this late stage to be tourists.

DR: Due to what?

TL: I guess to the standard Marxist alienation effect: commod-

ification, reification . . . All the things that make the world itself seem unreal, and our relationships within it a bit foggy.

DR: Knowing how the structure's machine operates but being unable to control the machine.

TL: Yes.

DR: I think art offers the possibility of channeling the flow of the machine while retaining some autonomy, some skepticism towards the machine.

TL: To go back to the use of art, it's the opportunity to try to think a bit deeper than business culture. But I think art tends to end up alienating even further. Not only are you doing something, but you know it's kind of hopeless.

DR: But that vision of man as corporealized ghost—

TL: The Flying Dutchman—

DR: Yes, but where does "real time" joy come in? Joy never overcomes the sense of absence. Your pictures don't include it.

TL: No. Temporarily real-time joy can win out but it's not available constantly. But everyone always complained about "the present"; seventeenth-century monks did! It's worse now because there are so many more people and much heavier impositions; it's harder to escape—there is a structure that extends around the world now instead of just existing in the West.

There is a constant passivity encased in and issuing from the media. The fact that you don't see poor people or old people—the level of reality, even in the most "realistic" presentation, is a cosmetic one. It adds to the ghostliness of life. You watch, you see characters get together, you see a "situation" "resolved" and you think it's over, but then you realize that one of the characters is the main point of the show and that character will go through it again next week, and again and again and again. It's the longer term insinuations of media that make the ghost more apparent.

One misunderstanding about my position towards media comes from a simplified version of what I'm doing: that my work is a critique of the media. Along with that is this terrible misunderstanding that I don't like the media, when in fact the whole point is that I can't get enough of it.

DR: So now what do you imagine the painter's life to be? Decorator?

TL: I have higher aspirations. Which means I tend not to be very successful as a decorator. I think cultural work is an aspect of public conscience.

DR: Monitoring?

TL: More along the lines of what we could do with ourselves but largely fail to. And alarm and dismay at what we're actually doing.

DR: Do you see painting as a transcendent object or as an investigatory tool?

TL: I have an enormous problem with transcendence. Transcendence to where?

DR: So you're anti-utopian?

TL: Yes. I'm not much of an idealist, though I would like to be.

DR: Are you anti-art?

TL: Well, the kind of art I prefer is anti-art. But I think that probably means I'm pro-art. I hate "arty" art: sensitivity and extreme craftsmanship bore the pants off me. They're so self-involved. They don't expose in any way the mechanism of viewing.

Art is a public discourse. What I go through to make it is not important. The dialogue should be kept public and not be confused with my personal life. What is important is the end result and what happens when the end result goes public. That's when the art starts generating information. And that's what is so odd about being a critic, particularly a critic who wants to write negatively about expressionist artists, that those people don't differentiate between themselves and their work; so if you criticize their work, there tends to be a personal reaction, as if slapping them in the face. Which isn't really what I'm thinking.

DR: Does it bother you to function as an irritant in your roles as critic/painter/editor?

TL: No.

DR: You figure you're the sand in the oyster and eventually you'll be the pearl?

TL: Lovely.