



STRADEPARTS  
COUNTERPARTS

CONTEMPORARY PAINTERS AND THEIR INFLUENCES

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Contemporary Painters and Their Influences

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# SOME THOUGHTS ON THE PRACTICE OF PAINTING

Thomas Lawson

A recent exhibition at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, *Enigma Variations: Philip Guston and Giorgio De Chirico*, considered the influence of De Chirico's paintings on the later work of Guston. The original point of connection, the first moment the younger artist saw his elder's work, occurred at the Los Angeles home of the well-known collectors (and patrons of Marcel Duchamp) Louise and Walter Arensberg, somewhere around 1930. A large blow-up of an old black and white photograph of their living room hung as preface to the show, revealing a Spanish-style house, heavy archway leading to a progression of rooms whose floors are covered in a variety of Middle Eastern rugs, floorspace crowded with heavy furniture topped with more rugs and small sculptural objects, and whose walls are packed with paintings, including a large De Chirico that uses an architectural arch to frame a much emptier, more modern space. The other paintings visible include cubist works and a neo-naïve jungle scene by Henri Rousseau. Imagine the modernist collection of a great museum, but instead of neutral flooring and white walls and plenty of space, the cacophony of everyday life in the house of people wealthy enough to buy everything they wanted to look at. In such a place you sense that the paintings and rugs and chairs and figurines are in lively conversation, the viewer's eye happily picking up rhymes and rhythms in form, color and material. The young Guston must have been blown away.

## Part One: A Question of Influence

All practices that have come before me are part of the available storehouse of resources to draw on. I am constantly looking for tricks, strategies and moves

in other people's work that I can use, absorb, incorporate, cannibalize or outright steal. But because that list extends to include all visual practices--film, comic books, video games, commercial graphics--it's impossible to name a few names.

Salman Rushdie changed the way I thought. I mean, I was young--18 or so--but *Midnight's Children* was the first time I realized the possibilities of being an artist; the first time it became apparent that it was possible to work from material from around one's environment to make things that could transcend that environment.

-Kanshika Raja

I have been visiting the temporary galleries at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art quite a bit recently. There is a show called *The Modern West*, and it is a fairly typical product of museum culture, a survey of various approaches to the representation of the American West in the modernist period, ending with a room of abstract paintings from the late 1940s. The whole show is moderately interesting, but it is sprinkled with some great paintings. Two of these are by Jackson Pollock, and we don't get to see his work often in Los Angeles, hence the repeat visits.

I like to check in with Pollock from time to time, marvel at the way in which clotted struggle gives way to a soaring, but no less intense grace. The two here were from 1945 and 1948. The earlier is called *Night Mist*, and is mostly black and white, with patches of vi-

brant color, all very sticky and jammed up, as if he couldn't get something right. The painting is loaded with the suggestion of many important meanings, and sinks under that weight. The later painting, the one to visit, is called *Number 13A: Arabesque*, and is a medium-sized horizontal that sits on the wall with a serene presence, as if Pollock had always known how to channel his eruptive energy with an easeful rhythm to establish an almost decorative equilibrium. The painting has a red brown ground, on which is established a scaffolding of interlocking black and grey paint, dripped and swirled, the industrial enamel of the paint glistening in a menacing undercurrent to the swooping arabesques of white paint that control the surface. The painting is taut and controlled, dense but spare in its reductive simplicity. It sits on the wall, still inimitable.

Where does such a thing come from? Of course we know the offered answers, the legacy of Surrealism, or Picasso, even the Anasazi rock art and Pueblo sand painting rituals seen on various cross-country trips. It is all there, but never quite enough. Oddly, this exhibition provided another clue, a more indirect influence, but undoubtedly a strong one. In a neighboring gallery hung a painting by Thomas Hart Benton, Pollock's teacher, mentor and friend in New York in the 1930s. This was a 1927 work called *Boomtown*, a typically manic depiction of the struggle and strife of modern America, here a weirdly bird's eye view of after-work knife fights in a Texas panhandle town



dominated by oil rigs and a rock-like plume of smoke burning off excess gas.

Pollock had long grown out of the desire to illustrate a theme, but he likely always felt a kinship with Benton's painterly approach, layering a flickering, nervous line over a complex ground of fractured color, the whole delivering a light-filled sense of movement against solidity. In a 1942 interview in *Arts and Architecture* he said that he felt it important to have studied with as "resilient" a personality as Benton, that he needed something strong and indomitable to work against as he grew more confident in his own search.

Mary Heilmann is great! I love her! I love her work. She is very direct and has such a strong relationship with her own work, it is very intimate and accessible. So it gave me permission to develop a relationship with my own work that was very open and free and personal.  
-Laura Owens

#### Part Two: A Question of Content

I would hope the viewer sees an architecture that is caught in a moment of simultaneous becoming and dissolution. A painted architecture that is at once ad hoc ingenuity and insecure vulnerability. These are particularly American pictures. American history, pioneering spirit, painting, and abject failure. I would hope they see a kind of split--the brutality of forces being disassembled or the creation of shelter. The dissolution of the home and the pile left behind.  
-Kevin Appel

What is the content of a painting? To many it is still what is pictured, and the exhibition notes for *The Modern West* want to suggest that Pollock's gestural painting is in some way best understood as a landscape. It was certainly painted out on the far reaches of what was still the remote eastern end of Long Island. It was painted on the ground, possibly outdoors. But it is not a landscape; it is a very cosmopolitan, urban painting, a work in dialogue with a history concerned with transcending the pictorial while remaining true to the specifics of material and moment. The modernist idea that a work of art should not mean, but be. This is such a difficult idea to process that it has been difficult to maintain. Most people still look for the picture.

I like paintings that tend to ask questions rather than answer them. Questions like 'why this painting now?' Or 'why paint something this way as opposed to that?' I suppose one idea I would like to convey is that a painting is more like a reflection than an image.  
-Barnaby Furnas

#### Part Three: The Persistence of Painting

I paint and draw because I can and I want to. Painting is a big enough practice that involves me physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. In painting I grow and change, I discover myself, truths change. I get better and my experiences manifest themselves in the paintings. Plus, I like to paint funny faces!

-Inka Essenhigh

Marcel Duchamp grew disgusted with painting while keeping company with the Arensbergs. Did he feel overwhelmed in an environment so determinedly visual, could he find no space to think for himself amongst the mute clamor of color and pattern? Was it this that translated into a disdain for the vulgarity of an art tradition that seemed to have been reduced to no more than ostentatious display and a speculative market?

Ever since the 1960s, with its paradigm shift away from the pictorial, art theory has given priority to the Duchampian view that painting is a dead end, and that the future belongs to an expansive field of alternative possibilities. Painting came to stand for the authority of a discredited culture, and the mantra, "question authority," became the new standard. This has now become commonplace, a mainstream idea suitable for advertising campaigns. Yet the art world still embraces the Duchampian question as if it were a self-evident truth, and as a result it has become cliché. Revisiting New York's Museum of Modern Art recently, I found I had been quizzed once too often, and I turned away from the gathered witticisms with impatience. Instead, my attention was taken by a small painting by Picasso, *Green Still Life*, from the summer of 1914.

It is quite a small painting, the kind of work long reviled as easel painting, as if the support an artist used to hold up a board, or a canvas, or a piece of paper somehow cast a moral character on the subsequent work. It is not a realistic picture, but neither is it abstract; a group of

easily identifiable objects in an understandable space can be described. It is quite small, but the scale is appropriately intimate, since the picture depicts a table top in the corner of a room. A side-table perhaps, narrow, with a fringed cloth across it, and gathered on that, in casual disarray is a empty fruit bowl, a newspaper, a cigarette packet, a bottle and glass, a pear and some grapes. Behind, perhaps also on the table, leaning against the wall, or perhaps hanging just where the table meets the wall, a framed mirror. The ensemble suggests the end of a meal, pushed to the side for later clean-up. It is a space of no great significance, but the continuation of everyday life.

As its title suggests, the painting is mostly green, with various shades enlivened by pointillist dots of yellow, red, black and white. This stippling seems brighter than the rest, and is executed in enamel paint rather than oil. There are also some scumbled areas in which white has been introduced to perhaps suggest the fall of sunlight against wall and tabletop. The bottle and bowl are given body with some more white and some black, and the bottle is further given shape and mass with some stripes in variegated yellows and reds. The effect of these greens and various passages of white and bright color is to suggest a cool corner on a bright day in the Midi. A bland, accepting glance at the painting rewards with a sense of well being and sunny comfort. A longer look and the color renders

everything unstable; things seem to be jostling for attention, edging each other out of focus. The brashness of the commercial paint clashes with the subtler variations of the studio oil. The trompe-l'oeil effect used to render the cigarette box brings another note of dissonance to the surface. The perspective suggested by the drawn outline of the table has the viewer looking down vertiginously at this table-top, as though leaning uncertainly over it. The pervasive green, penetrating all surfaces, makes the solid turn to mist. A hangover view. And since the picture of the glass here resembles Picasso's famous three-dimensional *Glass of Absinthe*, it may be a hallucinatory absinthe hangover.

So this small painting, made during the summer months of a year in which Europe was heading into war, manages to raise a considerable number of questions about art, without the fury of end-gaming it. These questions arise from the practice of painting itself, a critique in the form of a riff on the conventions of representation. Picasso dazzles us with a bravura display of these conventions, almost decorative in its elegance. Here non-illusionistic flatness is played off against various technical devices used to simulate three dimensional space--yellow stipples suggest the light bouncing off the surface of a mirror whose frame is shaded in a typically Western manner, while the bottle is given depth and volume in a Cubist manner, with fractured outlines and striated shading. We know the rectangle between bowl and bottle is a newspaper because we understand the three letters "JOU" to be

a fragment of *Le Journal*; we also know they spell the word for play. Light is transformed into a material, a physical interruption of the surface.

Furthermore, Picasso asks us to consider the power of observation, and the consequences for perception on a state of mind. The color green may be ascribed any number of meanings--emotional, psychological, spiritual--it may also be the prevailing atmospheric color in a particular room on a particular day, under particular conditions. This may be quite objective, a purely visual effect. Or it may be colored by a mental state, a differently tuned awareness.

A small, decorative easel painting offering itself as picture, and object, and treatise on art.

I like this thing that stays the same while the world around it changes. A painting is frozen, it is awkward, it is singular and clunky and in spite of itself, it resists reproduction. I like how the small ideas change from painting to painting.  
-George Rush

#### Part Four: After Photography

It was the painter Paul Delaroche who first declared the death of painting, on seeing a daguerrotype in 1839. Imagine, a shadowy reflection on a small piece of metal, heralding the end of an art form whose ambitions had spanned centuries. Clearly, the painter had limited ambitions of his own, seeing the illusionistic representation of the world as the only task at hand.



Photographs present a fragment of the visible. Looking at a photograph, one is always conscious of the frame. There is an implication of loss, of something missing or truncated: something not in the picture. Paintings, by contrast, are always whole, even if incomplete. They are composed to be an entirety. Duchamp wanted art to be open-ended, something completed by an interaction with a viewer; another reason he disliked painting.

Whereas, my earlier working process had a greater interest in newspaper photos, I don't really collect them like I once did. That period of collection has become internalized-- almost like a place in my brain that serves as the attic for past interests. It can be referenced but expresses itself in a more muted way in my current work.

-Laylah Ali

A photograph captures the moment in front of it. It is a record of a fleeting second bathed in a particular light. Paintings do not result from instantaneous action; even a Pollock requires deliberation and plotting, a careful choreography that extends the moment until it is ready to be captured. In the end a painting is a constructed object, reflecting its own reality. It does not necessarily point to something else. It exists, but does not insist on the existence of anything else.

Photography is an immediate medium, and elicits immediate response. It appears to be the most appropriate medium for representing the modern

world. Painting functions in a detached state, distanced from reality. It provides a vehicle for considering the modern world within an extended dialogue with other aspects of visual culture, through time and across space.

I am fascinated by what the photograph so readily achieves in its ability to stop time and index a moment. Photography is mechanically formed. Painting, through the use of gesture and material application, more directly relates the viewer to the consciousness of another human being. In a world that is increasingly dominated by mediated imagery, the boundaries between reality and representation become endlessly blurred. By referencing the illusionism of photography and film, painting is able to amplify the rupture occurring between image and experience. A new continuum of meaning and sensation is made apparent in the self-contained narrative of the painting.

-Judith Eisler

Thomas Lawson, Dean of California Institute of the Arts' School of Art, works in many media as diverse as the projects to which he commits. He has shown paintings at MetroPictures in New York, Anthony Reynolds in London and the Richard Kuhlenschmidt and Rosamund Felsen galleries in Los Angeles. His paintings have also been included in group shows at the ICA Philadelphia, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Houston, The Brooklyn Museum, The Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney and Laforet Museum in Tokyo. Surveys of his work have been mounted by the

San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art at La Jolla, the CCA in Glasgow and the Battersea Arts Centre in London. He has created temporary public works in New York, New Haven, Glasgow, Newcastle and Madrid, and proposed many others.

Lawson's essays have appeared in such journals as *Afterall*, *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Flash Art*, *frieze* and *October*, as well as numerous exhibition catalogues. From 1979 until 1992 Lawson, along with Susan Morgan, published and edited *REAL LIFE Magazine*, a publication by and about younger artists interested in the relationship between art and life. He has organized and selected many exhibitions for such venues as Artists Space, PSI, The Clocktower and White Columns, all in New York; National Touring Exhibitions/Hayward Gallery in London; and the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. His work has been collected by the Brooklyn Museum, Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, Arts Council of England, Scottish Arts Council, Emory University and University of Colorado at Boulder among others. He has received three Artist Fellowships from the NEA, project support from Art Matters, Inc., and Visual Arts Projects, and a residency fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation. He has taught at SVA and RISD.