

New York



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Thomas Lawson

Various locations

As a critic for this magazine, Thomas Lawson displays little patience with pretentious or sentimental imagery that rides behind the shield of the “new.” It is something of a relief to see that his paintings are the products of the same tenacious mind; his imagery alone—battered women, murdered men, brutalized children—safeguards against any accusations that the artist suffers from even a fleeting moment of romantic weakness. It is hard to walk away from his work without recalling not just the specific paintings, but the specific kinds of everyday atrocities to which they so grimly attest.

The major part of each canvas is covered with thick strokes of dark black or green ground, which presses against or around a group of tiny figures or an isolated figure. With the exception of one painting in the show, the depicted victims are small enough to allow Lawson to leave them faceless, though we can clearly see that in one tiny crowd around a tiny, sprawled-out man, there stand suited men in fedoras, as if looking on.

The exception, *Bound, Branded and Brutalized*, shows the mutilated, naked torso of a woman, glazed eyes half open, who looks as if she had been killed several times. Lawson accentuates the dried patches of blood on her body, and the sheen of light on parts of her skin. A mass of black strokes swirls around her head. The effect is almost as disturbing as coming across such a body in a moonlight ditch in the middle of the night would be. Though not quite as visceral, Lawson’s other paintings have a similar haunted quality, as if we were surrounded, in alleys and bushes and roads around the corners, by the unspeakable violence that he describes so plainly. Which we are, and which Lawson doesn’t want us to forget.

Few currently popular New York painters challenge our limitations and expectations of painting as pointedly as Lawson, and even fewer care so little about entertaining as he. Small visual disturbances like Lawson's paintings are often more resonant than angry explosions. That is why I might even be able to say that I "like" these unlikable paintings, particularly in light of the mannerisms and excesses of certain more fashionable artists, whose work seems so very tame.

—*Joan Casademont*

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Helmut Middendorf, *Electric Night*, 1980, dry pigment and acrylic on canvas, 88 × 140"

New York

RAINER FETTING and HELMUT MIDDENDORF, Mary Boone Gallery;
THOMAS LAWSON, Metro Pictures:

RAINER FETTING
HELMUT MIDDENDORF

To the Anselm Kiefer school of Teutonic mythomania may not be added the lush paintings of Rainer Fetting or the frenzied works of Helmut Middendorf. For these young German painters, the romance of twentieth-century European art history is far more exciting than that of German legend. Perhaps the only pursuit more thrilling than this for each is the act of painting itself.

Fetting's interest in naked young men in showers and bathrooms only superficially recalls David Hockney. His men just happen to be in bathrooms; their surroundings and states of nakedness aren't nearly as sexy as the colors and shapes that define them. In *Man in Mirror*, a heavily outlined green-and-flesh-colored reflection of a figure stands, hands on head, looking back at himself (and out at us) from a mirror above a sink. Sink, walls, and part of the mirror are all a flat, brilliant aqua, and a small, round bar of creamy soap teeters oddly next to one of the faucets, like a whimsical detail in a Matisse. It's hard to look at these paintings without thinking not only of the Fauves, but also of early Picasso. The reflection in *Man in Mirror* even looks like a Picasso self-portrait, while a head in *Man Reclining* is as delicate and sweet as a Picasso circus performer. In the latter painting, a brilliant-blue, one-dimensional figure is defined by outline and by black and

green-and-black shapes—an unabashed homage to the master. A figure in Fetting's most electric, expressionistic painting, *Large Shower*, is reminiscent of Cézanne's studies of bathers.

Middendorf's two paintings, *Electric Night* and *Singer*, explode with the sketchy hysteria of a Kirchner street scene. In *Electric Night*, black-and-blue, androgynous figures jeer at other masked and hooded figures waiting to attack from the wings. The background is lit in electric red. The abstractedness of *Electric Night* makes it less a testament to a specific incident than an expression of outrage at violence. *Singer* is no less charged; a bowed figure, legs apart and braced, sways with a tilted microphone stand on a frenzied, red-hot stage.

Despite the personal and issue-oriented nature of Middendorf's imagery, he, like Fetting, is an esthete and a stylist quite unconcerned with producing paintings that seem without a history. Being a sucker for Cézanne and Kirchner, which these artists' work recalls, I admired the beauty of Fetting's and Middendorf's paintings. The only problem with such direct references is that they lead to comparisons.

THOMAS LAWSON

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from even a fleeting moment of romantic weakness. It is hard to walk away from his work without recalling not just the specific paintings, but the specific kinds of everyday atrocities to which they so grimly attest.

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Few currently popular New York painters challenge our limitations and expectations of painting as pointedly as Lawson, and even fewer care so little about entertaining as he. Small visual disturbances like Lawson's paintings



Rainer Fetting, *Man Under Shower #4*, 1980, raw pigment and acrylic on canvas, 88 x 68"



Thomas Lawson, *Bound, Branded and Brutalized*, 1981, Parrisik and oil on canvas, 73 x 67"



Tod Papageorge, *Central Park*, 1980, silver print, 14 x 17"

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—JOAN CASADEMONT

"Walker Evans and Robert Frank: An Essay on Influence," and TOD PAPAGEORGE, Daniel Wolf; ED FAUSTY and BRIAN ROSE, Henry Street Settlement; HUMPHREY SPENDER, Prapas Gallery; ROBERT DOISNEAU, Witkin Gallery; CHARLES MARVILLE, French Institute:

TOD PAPAGEORGE

Tod Papageorge has a way with words. In the introduction to the catalogue for the Evans and Frank show, which Papageorge put together as an homage, there are moments of real eloquence. They come when he addresses himself directly to the photographs. He takes a surprisingly persuasive view of Frank's *The Americans*, for instance, as a kind of group portraiture in which "heads are drawn with the sculptural brevity of those found on worn coins." A phrase like that makes clear the truth of what Papageorge says in his first paragraph: this exhibition was "born of love and respect." Only someone who really did love Frank's work would take the trouble to make his description of it so precise and so apt. Papageorge does Evans' pictures equal justice when he speaks of "meanings which reside in [their] detail . . . as an etymology resides in a word." He means that from an Evans picture of a room, we can intuit

the uses to which it has been put, emotions that have been felt there—in other words, its history. "Etymology" isn't just an insight into Evans. It's a simile that applies to the whole photographic medium with the rare authority that only statements by working photographers have.

Papageorge's feelings as a photographer are what give his catalogue introduction its merit. I wish he had relied on those feelings more. Instead, he mixes what comes from the heart with pronouncements that sound as if made by an academic historian. Perhaps his position at Yale, where he is a professor of photography, makes him feel that his sincerity as a photographer is not enough, or not quite appropriate somehow. Whatever the cause, the effect is vitiating. The emotions he shunts aside are the very ones I would feel most privileged to have, the kind that I try hardest, as a critic, to keep alive in myself. As an historian, Papageorge is less provocative.

His thesis, which he outlined in the April 1981 issue of *Artforum*, is that "Frank used Evans' work as an iconographical sourcebook for his own pictures." This Papageorge attempts to prove by pairing Evans and Frank pictures that look alike, usually because they are of the same subject. Thus when Frank took a picture of a gas station, he did so, Papageorge says, because he was "remembering" an Evans picture of that subject. Art history written this way is a circular argument. The historian is drawing conclusions from an arrangement of images that he set up in the first place. Papageorge's image pairs illustrate the connection between Frank and

Evans, but they don't "demonstrate" it as he claims. You could make image pairs as close and striking as these out of all sorts of photographs that have no historical connection whatsoever. In fact, Papageorge himself did just that at a lecture I attended several years ago.

If Frank had imitated Evans' work as slavishly as this show implies, he really would be the "epigone" of Evans that Lincoln Kirstein recently called him in a letter to me. I just don't believe that influence between visual artists, particularly photographers, occurs in the mechanical way Papageorge suggests. Being derivative is so easy in photography that no one who hopes to do original work lets himself copy somebody else's compositions this closely. Serious influence occurs, rather, as a suffusion of one photographer's work through the imagination of another. Young photographers' ability to see the universals in the work of past masters, to abstract the masters' styles, is one of the things that makes them capable of great work themselves. It gets them beyond the mere duplication that this show supposes. The show is, as a show, not really necessary; the images, from Evans' *American Photographs* and Frank's *The Americans*, are all familiar and available. And as an "essay," I'm afraid, it's worse than unnecessary. It's misleading.

In 25 years, a former student at Yale might do an exhibition like this about Papageorge's relationship to Garry Winogrand. If the exhibition were based on the work of Papageorge at a New York gallery a year and a half ago, that relationship would also come out looking rather derivative. Papageorge had

been editing Winogrand's pictures for "Public Relations," the show at the Museum of Modern Art that capped the period Winogrand spent photographing press conferences and other public non-events. The images in Papageorge's own show, many of them taken at discotheques, suggested that he had fallen too much under Winogrand's spell. There were a few photographs, however, that still carried the stamp of Papageorge's best earlier work. One in particular that I remember was of a woman lounging at her ease against the body of her boyfriend, on the grass in Central Park.

Papageorge's new show, which he has entitled "At Ease," follows through on that image and reestablishes his photography in its own right. The theme of this show is also similar to one prominent in the work of Winogrand, whose company Papageorge kept on the streets of New York at one point in their careers. But here Papageorge makes the theme his. It takes on a different mood, a personality that's distinct from anybody's else's. Like Winogrand, Papageorge has always had a bluntly erotic element in his work. In Winogrand's photographs this eroticism has usually taken the form of a confrontation with women, the sort of confrontation seen in his book *Women Are Beautiful*. There is a high level of sexual energy in the exchange between him and his subject. In Papageorge's recent work, it is the languor and indolence of life to which the photographer responds. The sexuality permeates a different part of the spectrum of human behavior.

Many of the pictures in the show are simply of people sleeping in the park: