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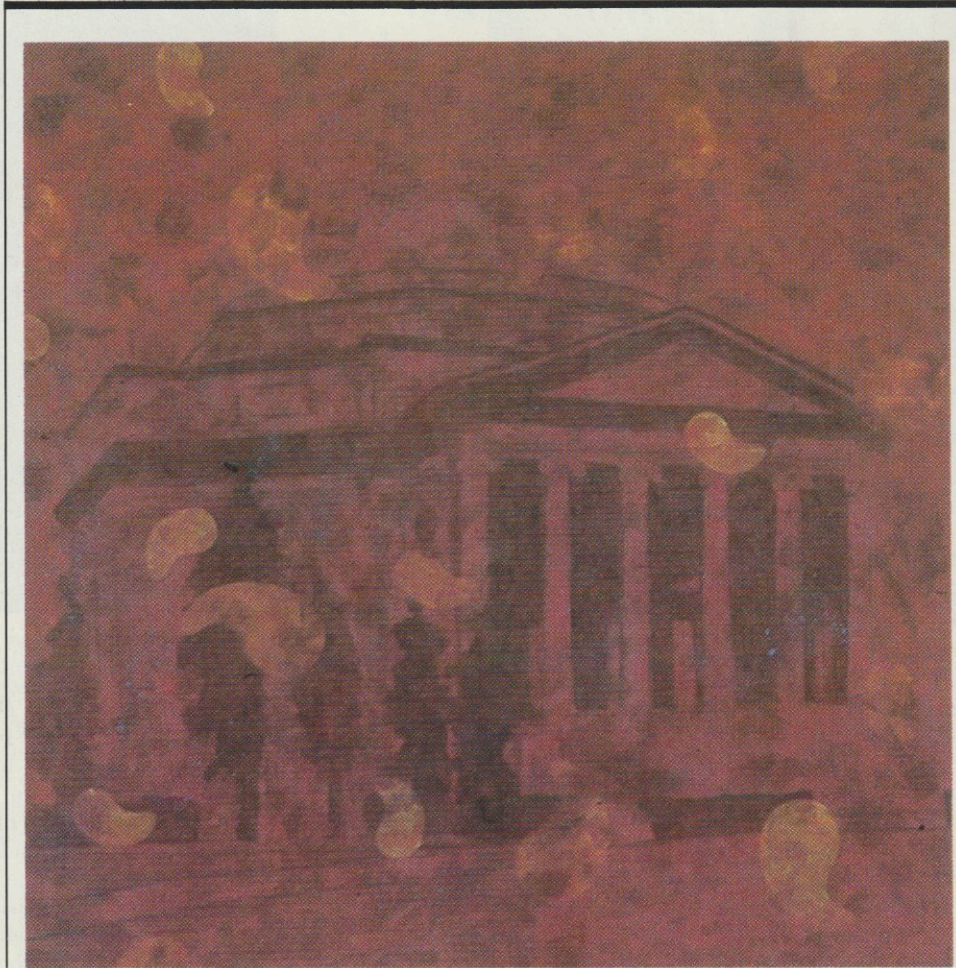
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SEEING IS BELIEVING: NEW PAINTINGS BY THOMAS LAWSON

RONALD JONES

Thomas Lawson shows a talent for subverting the strict and unimaginative, to prove them too slight to thrive outside their incubated logic. He finds that their prerogatives falter against the texture of real life. This stealthiness, present in his earlier work, continues to empower his recent and most impressive pictures.



Thomas Lawson.
The Temple of the
Kultur Kritik,
1984. Oil on
canvas, 72 x 72".
Courtesy Metro
Pictures.

Thomas Lawson.
Kulture Kulture,
1984. Oil on
canvas, 66 x 96".
Courtesy
Metro Pictures. ▶

Thomas Lawson.
El Diablo, 1984.
Oil on canvas, 72 x
144". Courtesy
Metro Pictures.

That which destroyeth a vision is the veil over it.

—Ptah-Hotep, c. 3500 B.C.

Jean Baudrillard has characterized late capitalist culture as lulled into a state of complacency, held in check by a veil of general equivalencies that normalize all experience. He describes our population as having succumbed to a digital code which never issues a gesture before the anticipated response can be assured. It is a culture where the terms of "objectivity" have become rehearsals of preconceptions. For more than a few, life under these conditions is a hallucination where discourse has been reduced to a charade and the syntax of the revered dialectic corrupted into a series of premeditated steps leading to an equilibrium, a resting point where confirmed reservations await.

From the outset of his career, Thomas Lawson's course of action has been to negotiate the *appearances* of the cultural continuum Baudrillard describes. Over and again his pictures disclose a sardonic portrayal that ultimately takes hold as a repugnant denial of their subjects. Certainly the *New York Post* paintings were that. In those earlier works, Lawson quotes the distance that inevitably accompanies the media's pictorial evidence of sudden and anonymous tragedy, the ironic perversion of truth that results when discontinuous events and pictures are conjoined. More than the sequitur to Warhol's *Disaster Series*, the *Post* pictures recalibrate objectivity by the sparseness of their style and the dead stare of their subjects that retards empathy. In these paintings there is the invitation to either indulge the aura of the official discourse, the broad, smart smile across the face of the teenage star stricken with cancer, or to deny it, take exception, and turn it out as deceit. The



workings of these paintings do not swing on a dialectical hinge because Lawson has refused the terms of reconciliation. Rather, his is the stark objectivity of an either-or situation, a natural distance vacant of preconceptions ringing with a fair choice: either profit from the delusion betrayed or slip back into the continuum unable to deny it for what it is.

In 1983 the subjects for Lawson's pictures changed to the "authority of architecture" and the "mysticism of the landscape." He found these subjects in postcards he collected and pictures he took while traveling in this country and abroad. As a result, these paintings, like the *Post* pictures, acculturated the disconnected view or, more particularly, the tourist's remembrance. On the one hand, these pictures seem to offer an updated play-off on the likes of Etienne-Louis Boullée's views of architectural splendor; on the other, the ambience of Caspar David Friedrich's quiet, misting landscapes; and occupy-



ing the middle ground, the common ground, prefab Romanticism where, as in *The Magic Mountain* pictures, vacation architecture meets scenic landscape.

The ambivalence of time and space in these paintings distorts our experience of them in ways that create distance, a gap between us and them, similar to the earlier work. Standing before them one may be momentarily left without a clue, not knowing where to look first until the pleasant effect of sameness takes over and dispels order and sequence to put us at ease. Seeing these paintings together is like sitting in front of your television, remote control in hand, and flipping through channels, only catching glimpses, all perfectly illogical in their discontinuity until synthesized by the television screen's legible simulation of uniformity.

Lawson's pictures are framed by the sameness of their look, the iconography of tourism homogenized by a continuous veil of paint smeared across their surfaces. The veil, like the television screen, distills variegated perception into one dimension. Like the postcard view it cheapens experience by refuting distinctiveness. In a 1984 interview Lawson discussed the function of the veils: "There is a kind of screen between our real experience and the way we see it. And I think that, when I work in the studio, I try to work around that. My method tries to drag the image back out from the screen that is hiding it, and then hide it again in the depths of some other screen, an art screen—a screen that is very visible."¹ Taken together, the disconnected views these pictures portray, equalized by the seamless veil, express the uncertainty of experience at the distance imposed by the unified culture.

Representative of this group of paintings is the large diptych, *To Those Who Follow After*, a portrait of a war memorial. Like *The Museum*, *The Glass Tower*, and *The Magic Mountain* pictures, this is a monument to nationalism, the collective excuse for political, corporate, and cultural corruption. The massive marble slab, framed by two vigilant neoclassical figures, is the incarnation of Lawson's screen. It is the *tabula rasa* of all wars, a silent tribute to the

anonymous sacrifice of the past. This monument endures as a bit of conventional public consciousness that would rather eulogize than inquire, for to do so would mean risking the disclosure of the monument's identity as a double-entendre. Prodding might allow its other purpose to surface, somehow making a way through the tightly woven pretext.

Lawson summoned this monument into his painting and cut it off from the continuum to make it betray itself under interrogation. At first, the expanse of marble seems empty of presuppositions about war (a necessary attribute, for it is important to have erased bitter memories before chancing a new cause). It fails to register beyond seeming the appropriate thing to have done, to erect this solemn encomium to a vague past. But with time for inquiry, too long an opportunity to ponder its blind wall, it escapes the past tense to profile itself against the future. Its quiet praise of earlier suffering is turned inside out to reveal an insidiousness of forethought. Its vigilance pales, becoming nothing more than the pretentious preparations necessary to justify unforeseen wars, unspecified tragedies.

This painting, like the monument it indicts, is adaptable to future, even unexpected circumstances. To be sure, this is a prerequisite of critical expressions expecting to do more than draw up sides again by restating one-dimensional adversarial relationships. Versatility, a kind of cultural agility, is the difference between reflecting politics and radiating partisanship. In a 1980 essay, "Spies and Watchmen," Lawson roughed out a model for conjoining art and politics, writing:

It is the despair of the self-styled political artists that art work is entirely marginal, but it should be cause for joy, for it is this marginality that gives it a certain subversive potential. Since no art work is likely to have the impact of a political rally or a television appearance, the activities of artists are ignored by the powerful, or at best considered interesting argument for their wives and daughters. In such a case it is therefore possible for a successful artist to climb the ranks of society, gaining access as a kind of high-minded entertainer, and once there in-

sinuate subversive ideas. Nothing dramatic lest his cover be blown, just a steady, niggling assertion of doubt in the homes and monuments of the people who hold power.

The artist who wishes to effect political change while continuing to work in his own small area of expertise must learn the ways of the mole. He must be content to dig in quietly, and stay dug in, perhaps for years, causing a small amount of damage to the foundations of society, nothing visible, nothing too extensive. Enough only to cause a slight subsidence of coincidence, perhaps.²

Like the mole, Lawson's tactic is quiet subversion. It is a plot that stands the same chance of taking its toll as does the stillborn honor promised by the war monument.

Lawson interrupts the balanced meter of the unified culture's reassuring monotone by the innocuous biopsy, an intrusion on our lexicon of previously assigned meanings. His is a talent for subverting the strict and unimaginative, to prove them too slight to thrive outside their incubated logic. He finds that their prerogatives falter against the texture of real life. This stealthiness, present in his earlier work, continues to empower his recent and most impressive pictures.

The new paintings disarm expectations by quoting the veil style as well as the landscape and architectural themes of their immediate predecessors. The *da capo* technique invites the interpretation that these are paintings of his earlier style rather than *in* it. The repetition is covered by a new dispersal, a random pattern of dots, pills, and paisleys across the smeared veils. On the first take, the new screens serve to hold his art at arm's length, to distance it as it might be found within the reticulum of the art magazines. Lawson has reclaimed his own paintings, appropriated his earlier style, to resound a clear and unmistakable tone: like every other discourse in a unified culture, parley in the art world is subject to a baffle of screens that mediate ideas. With a deftness for satire Lawson applies the fresh appliqués, not to condition or marginalize, but rather to cancel and cast doubt.

The poignant example is *The Temple of the Kultur Kritik*. Here is the sanctimonious air of collegiate architecture, Jefferson's and Palladio's true source in the Pantheon reconstituted as the chapel on the campus of Syracuse University. This picture turns slowly, flashing concern for the diminishing possibilities of intellectual freedom within a culture addicted to the euphoria of enduring "quality." It addresses the unequivocal devotion to standards somehow beyond reproach, passed off as transcendently self-evident and conjured up by a Palladian decoy. Harboring reflective appraisal, the Temple picture evokes a measure for critique similar to the sliding scale of *To Those Who Follow After*. It quietly reserves the right to transform broad assessments into precise critical acumen when the occasion calls.

Stirring amidst the Scottish paisley screen that holds the aura of this architectural monument in check is the estimation Lawson has publicly expressed of one of the guardians of mediocrity and a defender of the status quo: Hilton Kramer, Syracuse University Class of '50.³ To judge from *The Temple of the Kultur Kritik*, the addition of the new screens, of the dots and the pills, adds more than just another degree to the polysemous metaphor for the cultural monotone. The paisley's Scottish legacy⁴ acuminates the Temple picture from a general set of misgivings over the myth of "quality" internalized by an architectural code to the critique of an ideology with a specific grammar and a particular personality.

The subjects for the new paintings—Cathedral Rocks, the Temple of the Scottish Rite, the Acropolis, the Diabolo nuclear power plant—are neutral views, incoherent but for their indentured service to the peculiar strain of cultural promotion disclosed by *The Temple of the Kultur Kritik*. These subjects telegraph a pompousness, dangerously stupid, often ridiculous, that cultivates the suspicious technology of nuclear power and coerces nature to pay homage to the cathedral, to accept its name as praise from the occidental impresario of spirituality and beauty. Here are the testimonials to the sublimity of our culture proclaimed with a shrillness that collapses every natural latitude and cultural longitude into a seamless measure of self-esteem.

A visual ambivalence in Lawson's new canvases withholds the en-

dorsement of these cultural pendants that might have otherwise created a decorous rapport between screen, veil, and setting. It is an ambiguity that denies reconciliation and yet specifies an ultimatum (the tactic of the earlier *Post* paintings). Just beyond the spots before our eyes, Lawson flirts a tantalizing view of a bombastic culture, tempting us with pride. Then, abruptly refocusing at the surface of the painting, he mocks this hallucination of frothy self-importance, cancels it with silhouettes of pills, flashing the symbol for modern delusion. This is the siren of come-hither, the promise of rapture induced by aggrandizement, a means of entrapment that betrays the addiction of the client.

In his last exhibition at Metro Pictures, Lawson hung *El Diabolo* beside *Kulture Kulture*, the darkened profile of the troubled nuclear power plant next to the postcard view of the ruined Acropolis. The Acropolis scene, covered with pills across the picture plane, transgresses two of the "great achievements" of the ancient and modern periods: the precise optical illusions of temple architecture with the measured after-images of Op art. Over *El Diabolo* fewer but more radiant pills, recast as nuclear pellets, pepper the surface, either having escaped or having been withheld from transfusing their dangerous power. The conjunction of these two pictures will spark more than a few references, one of which zeroes in on a passage from Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations*:

In its indefinite reproduction, the system puts an end to the myth of its origin and to all the referential values it has itself secreted along the way. Putting an end to its myth of beginning, it ends its internal contradictions (no more real or referential to be confronted with), and it puts an end also to the myth of its own end: the revolution itself. What was profited with revolution was the victory of human and generic reference, of the original potential of man. But if capital erases from the map generic man himself (for the sake of genetic man?) the Golden Age of the revolution was that of capital, where the myths of origin and end still circulated. Once short-circuited the myths (and the only danger capital confronted historically came to it from this *mythical* exigency of rationality that accompanied it from the very beginning) in an operability of fact and without discourse, once capital itself has become its own myth, or rather an interminable machine, aleatory, something like a *social genetic code*, it no longer leaves any room for a planned reversal; and this is its true violence.⁵

As if indexing Baudrillard's ideas, these pictures collide history. Origins and endings are pronounced as in one tense, equalized by the common veil that enforces congruity. This sudden coincidence is a timeless tragedy that intones the dirge of ruin, not just of failed cultures that destroy themselves, but of the irreversible terms of their suicide. The meanings of *ruin*, descriptive and predictive, noun and verb, slide together as one part of speech. It is in that language that *El Diabolo* and *Kulture Kulture* express an inauspicious resistance to distinguish decadence from healthier forms of cultural life. Entranced by their own sameness, and unable to do otherwise, Lawson enfolds them in the continuum which ushers all experience into the cadence that marks their even facades.

El Diabolo and *Kulture Kulture* call back to one another in the neutral code that expresses Baudrillard's notion of digitality "where the offer swallows up the demand, where the question assimilates the answer, or absorbs and regurgitates it in a decodable form, or invents and anticipates it in a predictable form."⁶ There is a pathetic little dialogue, the rehearsed contact of evil and enlightenment where no differences remain between a source of power and the power of a source. Their consolidation measures influence in terms of half-lives, a means of illustrating that under present conditions a culture's influence is never likely to disappear but will become so inconsequential as not to matter.

1. Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Horsefield, eds., *Profile*, 4, no. 2 (March 1984), p. 10.

2. Thomas Lawson, "Spies and Watchmen," *Cover*, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 1980), p. 17.

3. Thomas Lawson, "Hilton Kramer: An Appreciation," *Artforum*, 23, no. 3 (November 1984), pp. 90-91.

4. Lawson, who is Scottish, has used the paisley design, indigenous to Paisley, Scotland, as a means of leaving his calling card.

5. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), Inc., 1983), p. 112.

6. Baudrillard, p. 116.