

P R O F I L E



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.

THOMAS
LAWSON

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PROFILE Is an idea-oriented publication devoted to an exploration of artists' ideas by the artists themselves.

It has been said that history is really the record of living persons; a sort of collective biography of an era, a movement, a place. Yet, all too often the subject is obscured by a biography originally intended to illuminate it. Likewise in critical texts, one learns to read both the critic/author and the artist lurking somewhere behind the surface. While such studies form the mainstay of art literacy, both tend to blur the image of the artist as an actual historical or contemporary figure. The person gives way to the myth. There is no dispensing with the critic's role in mapping out the terrain of contemporary art but neither can we dispense with the need to gather primary resource data from the very artists at work in that terrain. The emphasis placed on these individual profiles gives a very real sense of the essentially solitary nature of art-making and creates an interface between subjective knowledge and critical subject matter.

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PROFILE

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On Art and Artists:

THOMAS LAWSON

The text that follows is a transcript from the video tape interview produced by Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Horsfield at the Video Data Bank in Chicago. Kate Horsfield interviewed Thomas Lawson.



I would like to start by asking you when you started to think about

being an artist or being involved with the arts?

I don't remember exactly when I started thinking about being an artist. It always seemed to be something I was planning on. I don't know. I have a little anecdote. When I was a kid, I lived in Glasgow which is the big industrial city in Scotland. It has its own specific culture but it is not Culture. Edinburgh is the capital of Scotland and it has Culture; once a year they have a festival--an arts festival. The biggest attraction for kids is the Military Tattoo in the castle. They have a lot of pipe bands and military displays and they have commandos climbing rocks and great excitement. My parents took me to see this, when I was six or seven, and we stayed at some friends' house. The next morning it turned out that these friends were art teachers. And they had this wonderful house, the kind I wasn't familiar with. It was a gracious apartment with a lot of paintings around and

nice things--pottery and such. To keep me quiet while the old friends got together over coffee, they gave me paper and color pencils and I made all these drawings of the night before. And they were supportive of it. I mean, they said, great, look, he can draw. Isn't that wonderful! Being art teachers they were just doing what came natural to them. But it was the first time I ever had any outside support for the idea--that maybe it was something that I could do.

Later on, once you decided to go into the university, what was your course of study?

I studied English and then I studied art history. There are a variety of reasons for that, some not all that clear. The education system in Scotland isn't exactly geared to art. The high school I went to didn't present art as a viable opportunity. I had art classes, but they were basically recreational. So I didn't have the qualifications to get into art school. I've had the feeling since that it is probably just as well. I mean I think I learned more by having a wider education than the craft education. In fact I think it is really quite important for artists to have more than the art school stuff, which is stuff you learn anyway. You learn by doing it, not just by hanging around at school. And I was painting the entire time, so I was learning it anyway.

When you first started painting, what kind of goals, what kinds of things led you further into it? Just the procedures and practices of being an artist? What were you looking for then?

I think I have this urge to keep making pictures. When I was an undergraduate I was really quite isolated in terms of art. I was in this old college called St. Andrews, which is in a Medieval city on the east coast of Scotland and a very traditional school--quite distant from the art world which is in Edinburgh. And strangely, considering what I have done since, I was making paintings there that were based on newspaper photographs. I cut out newspaper clippings that gripped me in one way or another and turned them into paintings.

What year are we talking about right here?

1969-1970-1971. Somewhere in there. I didn't know why I was doing this. I didn't have any reason for doing this. I had no justification for it. It was just what I was doing. I mean reading my art history and looking at art--it seemed to be that people made art about what they saw. And I had no interest in painting this incredibly pretty town of ruined castles and cathedrals, which is what the artists that I saw in that town were doing. It didn't seem meaningful in any way. So I was doing this thing with newspapers. I didn't know exactly why. When I moved to Edinburgh, I was very much an outsider figure. I wasn't part of the art school

group, so it was difficult to get people to take my work seriously. Plus I was doing this thing that didn't seem to come from anywhere--serious artists were trying to be conceptualists or minimalists or something like that. And the rest were doing their old fashioned landscapes kind of approaches. And so it was, what is this guy doing? What is this stuff about? But I kept doing it anyway. I had an urge to have some kind of social thing in there. Not exactly... well, at that time it was subject matter. I wanted to make paintings to do something directly about everyday life. Although there was always this constant realization that no matter how... this sort of distance between getting angry about something and trying to put it on the page. It was a distance that couldn't be crossed very easily. And so I hung around in Edinburgh a couple of years doing Masters work in art history and doing these paintings. Then I came to New York.

To what extent would you say that there was widespread influence of ideas coming out of New York and the American art world in Edinburgh at that time?

Well, it wasn't widespread. We are talking about a very small artworld and within that an even

smaller group that had any interest in real, sort of hard, contemporary art. But because of the festival, things did happen. There was an important show of Peter Ludwig's collection at the Royal Scottish Academy one year. And one part of that particular show was a lot of Gerhard Richter's work, which was important to two or three of my friends, not just myself. We saw that and began to think, oh, maybe there is something out there that we do have some connection to. At school, we got Artforum and Arts Studio was still published at that time and Art International. So there was a way that you could read about it. But I remember the first time I came to New York, I was just totally wiped out by the experience of seeing things. The Museum of Modern Art in particular was just astonishing. Demoiselles D'Avignon just sitting there--the real thing. It took quite some time to get used to the idea. One of the major realizations was just exactly what it means to see a real painting right there in front of you. For example, I had always sort of dismissed Stella as this decorator, because I had seen these color reproductions on the pages of Artforum where it just looks like magic marker. I mean, there is no sense of what it is. And that particular year, the month that I was there, the Whitney had a collection of recent American art--one of those kinds of shows. They had one of the Protractor series up. And I had this

realization that, oh, that is what it is about. It is this scale thing. Its presence. So suddenly I realized that there was something to be talked about. It wasn't just this dinky little image. And it was then that I realized that, if I was really serious about myself, I had to be a part of that--come to New York and deal with it.

So when did you move to New York?

I think 1975. When I finished my Masters, I packed my bags and came across. I mean I just came right over.

And what happened to you when you got to New York? How did you start to set yourself up?

Well, I found a little apartment, a little sublet in East Village. And just set to work. I mean I came totally alone, ready to start anew. I knew nobody and I brought just a suitcase. My work went through a complete change; it basically came to a stop because I had to re-educate myself with this hands-on kind of experience of seeing. So within that first year I worked right through minimalism. I did a whole lot of minimal paintings. And walked the streets a lot. I just wandered all over town. I didn't have very much money, so I just walked around and took subways, walked anywhere just to see the place. So I had this fairly intimate knowledge of lower Manhattan. I think that has been very important to me; just the sense of the streets and the way they work became important. And gradually, I realized there was

all this activity further down from the East Village, down past Canal Street and that I should find some way that I could move to it. I got a loft.

What type of impact did being in the city have on the development of your work when you first got there?

When I first got to New York, it was so shocking that there was this abrupt stop. I kept doing things, but they were real confused and uncertain. It was the excitement of the city and the excitement of being around real art--seeing so much of it and not having to explain it. One thing about Scotland is that art is very much a peripheral activity. If you are in a bar talking to someone and they say what do you do? You say you are an artist and they give you this really funny look. Oh yeah? What do you really do? Or does that mean I can buy a little landscape --about ten pounds or something? It's a real drag. You spend a lot of energy justifying yourself. It was nice to come to a city where there was absolutely no need for that. If you say I'm an artist here, everyone understands. In fact, it now seems that there are far too many people willing to say, "I'm an artist." At the time, that was a real breakthrough for me. That you could just be an artist. And it took about a year to feel in any way set or comfortable. It took about that length of time to get back into making work that I could consider of any use.

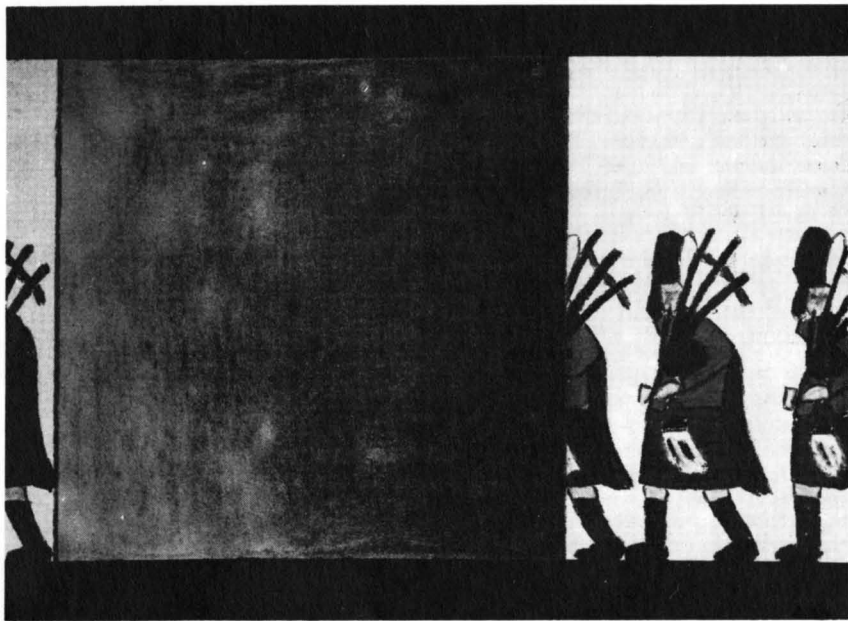
What did that first work look like once you started to make contact with it?

Well, it was sort of odd. It was this mixture of new New York vocabulary that I had learned and minimal kinds of things with Scottish imagery. This blend of nostalgia and spatial weirdness. And so I had cartoonish pipers and dancers on minimal fields, juxtaposed with minimal fields and squares. And funny. They were part melancholic and part funny.

What would be a title of a piece from this particular area you were working in?

I'm trying to remember. Scottish Painting--I think that is what I have them called. It's hard to remember exactly. Titles are one of those things I think about a lot. I tend to put through several before settling on any one. I know I thought of 'Scotch Mist.' I don't know if I ever used it.

Simultaneous to this, how would you say that you were beginning to analyze your reactions, critical reactions, your sense of wanting to make a contribution as a writer or at least make a statement as a writer? I know you consider that to be one aspect...



Thomas Lawson, Scotch Mist: Study for a Scottish Painting, 1978, oil, enamel on paper, 22" x 30".

At the time it wasn't actually. I got into writing because, once I began to understand what was going on, I understood that in fact it had been going on too long. And that the late minimal hegemony really had become intolerable. Every show was just the same, and the magazines were sort of stuck. They weren't talking about anything new exactly. Not that it was clear that there was anything new to talk about. There were artists who were trying to get back the image in some way. But it was very much this underground thing. And bar talk. And whenever we would visit one another in studios it was all such image-bearing work. But it was sort of difficult to get really excited about it. You kind of wanted to, but then you weren't quite as excited as you thought you should be. It did seem more interesting than more of the site specific installations and whatnot. It kept getting pushed out a little.

Who are we talking about now in terms of the beginning development?

Well, people I was friendly with at the time. Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, David Salle--people who lived in the neighborhood or hung around. We would also talk about our work and talk about the possibility of getting anyone to pay attention to it. Helene Winer, who was working at Artist's Space, was supportive in what limited ways were possible, given the job that she had there. But it was kind of difficult to get anyone else to take it out to the public.

So I started writing out of frustration--you know, if there is one more of these goddam shows, I'm gonna either tell them what I think of it, or write about what they should be looking at. I remember some of my first reviews were for early Nick Africano and Lois Lane--people like that who seemed to be getting out in this image way--who now are maybe not doing exactly what I'm interested in, but at that time were close enough to be real allies in some way. And then I discovered I had this ability to write fairly clearly. And so I went from there.

What were the first reviews that you wrote, and who were they for?

I think the Nick Africano one was the first that I wrote, and it was for Art In America. What happened was that I had been taking a course at the Graduate Center with Rosalind Krauss, and I met Doug Crimp. I wrote a paper for that course on Stella's bird paintings--the new paintings. I just wrote this thing because we all had to write something--and Doug suggested that I send it to Betsy Baker. I thought about that, and I thought, why not? So I sent it to Betsy. And she called back and said that she liked it but wouldn't be interested in publishing it; but if I would consider writing short reviews, she would like that. So I started writing them. And she was great as an editor. The first two or three times, she had me come up to the office, sat me down, and explained line by line what had to be done. What kinds of things were hopeless, what kinds of

things were good, just what you have to do to make something readable. And this compacted lesson in writing was really quite useful. I would get to do what I wanted to do. But after writing for her for a while, I got dissatisfied with it being a call-in thing that was filled with uncertainty. Plus, she wasn't that interested in allowing me to write about the stuff I knew best. The two shows which I remember sort of rebelling about, and therefore deciding not to do any more writing for her, were Cindy Sherman's show at Artist's Space and a David Salle show at the Kitchen or someplace like that. She claimed that I was too familiar with them, which seems like nonsense. Obviously she just wasn't comfortable with the work and didn't want to help promote it. Anyway, I thought it was time the stuff was talked about. And around that time I was introduced to Helena Kontova and Giancarlo Politi. They run Flash Art. So I wrote for them instead. I did quite a few things for them. That was around the time when I started really. I didn't write for Artforum until much more recently--that has only been about three years I think.

How would you say that the development of your writing was parallel or in opposition to the development of your painting?

I think it was parallel. The day is long--a long time. And I think a lot. And, to clarify my thinking, I write. If I just sit and think, my daydream doesn't go anywhere. But, if I write it

down, I make some kind of progress. It helps clarify my position to myself. Writing articles gave me a financial reward for doing that. And with that clarified head, I would go to the studio and paint. And, while painting, the thought would begin to change and develop in some other way that would perhaps lead to some further thought in the writing. So it was a back and forth. But no opposition, no conflict in that. They are two different ways of thinking. And so they can work around the same sort of area without messing up one another.

How would you describe what that area is? What those ideas are?

Well, very simply they are ideas about representation. How one represents oneself. And how it is represented. And so it is about image. And the way things look and the appearance of things. I think the writing either develops for my own purposes or tries to measure other people's art against that standard, to see if I think they are doing that or not. So sometimes everything seems a bit tough, because I try to be as tough as I can on myself. Why should I calm down for others when it seems important to judge everything on a sort of even standard. When I look at a show that seems to be getting away with something or trying to get away with something, I want to talk about that.



Thomas Lawson, Tragic Victim, 1980, oil on canvas, 51" x 41".

Some place in reading about you, I noticed you made a statement about the fact that the artist's job is to mediate a relationship between the self and the world. How would you describe that in terms of your own work and ideology?

Well, there is a major fact about the world that it is corrupted and tainted by the photographic images that are broadcast by the media, the t.v., magazines and newspapers. There is a kind of screen between our real experience and the way that we see it. And I think that, when I work in the studio, I try to do work around and through 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. Translating this transparent, invisible mesh into one that is very physical and very much there. The mechanism of the obscuring effect is almost tactile; particularly in the most recent work, it is this thick, goopy mesh.

I think you have also said that your process and procedure in being an artist is to select images, edit them, and send them back out in a different form. What kind of political or social commentary are you making through this process, and how does it show up within the parameters of the painting itself?

That's a big one, isn't it? I think that there is no political content in the way that political art supposedly works. I mean, it is not in the image. It is not a picture of politics. It is more, I think, about a model. I am trying to make sense of this stuff myself, and make it in such a way that what I am doing can perhaps be seen. Having the effect of, "He is looking at this kind of stuff in that kind of way." And I have tried various methods of getting the viewer to have an initial reaction of thinking. I have tried humor, shock tactics, displacement and sort of hands-off. Currently I am trying a more seductive, beautiful approach. They always seem to work in different ways. The person who is attracted by the humor is appalled by the horror. The person who is attracted by the horror thinks that the beautiful thing is somehow lightweight. You never seem to get everyone. But each time you get someone different. A different group. I think that it is important to do that--to change direction in a sense. Not the direction of the work but the direction of the impact and the direction it is facing. I'll do one set of work that looks this way and another set that looks that way. And perhaps over time that pattern will become clear enough to be recognized. And maybe more people can get at it. I don't mean to make anything that is very easy to understand or to like. It has to be difficult. Because it is difficult to make it, it should be difficult to deal with it. And it is in facing that difficulty that the

politics somehow reside. That is where the political content is. Somehow taking responsibility I suppose. And respecting individual activity.

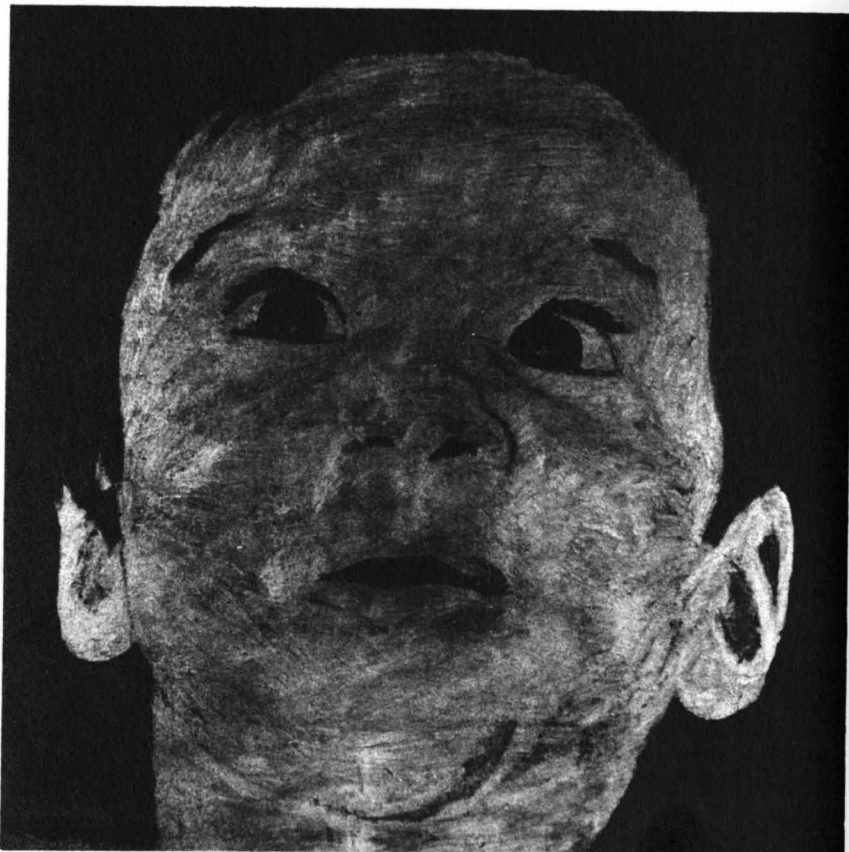
At the beginning of Last Exit: Painting, you started to describe two positions in the art world, one being the esthete, the other being the moralist. Where would you locate yourself between those two polarities?

I don't think I fit into either. Sometimes being an esthete seems sort of interesting.. But I can't always pull that off. There is a tendency, particularly when you are talking about political issues or social issues, to sound moralistic. But in fact, I don't mean it to be that way. I don't feel moralistic. A criticism that has been voiced quite often in the press about my work is that I take a moral position against the media, that I hate the media. And that, in fact, is not the case. There is a much more complicated relation to the media. I love it. I really enjoy watching dopey shows on television. I kind of look forward to seeing Magnum P.I. or something. I look forward to it in lots of different ways. I enjoy the goofy acting, the goofy stories and also the look of it--that kind of television color, the way they use the cameras. There is a lot of pleasure to be found in that. At the same time, one does get appalled by it. That seems to be a pleasure too. You can sit back and be appalled. So I would reject the idea that I am a moralist about it. But then again I sort of am. I would much prefer the

world to be a better place.

I think you have made some very important points for all of us to look at in terms of the collapse of meaning--irrelevance in terms of the way that things are presented or filtered through the media. Would you talk a little bit about that?

I can try. Well, to continue the Magnum story, here we are at the minor tail-end of the private eye drone with the Phillip Morrow voiceover and all that. But it is reduced to a real "character." One of those real stereotyped characters. He is an ex-GI, there is an English butler, and it is in Hawaii. So there is all this information being presented that is supposed to mean something. That he is tough, that he is a loner, that he is sexy, and the butler implies all this other stuff about culture and old-world values. That they have something in common. But it has all collapsed into nothing. And then opened up again by this joke thing--that it is in Hawaii, in the middle of the Pacific. And so it is like the whole world is the same nowhere. It could be a backlot in Los Angeles, which is where you would expect it to be, with the location shots put in to sell a few extra ads. There is this complete inability to really differentiate where the hell anything is. On any Thursday night you can watch the news, then watch Magnum, then Simon & Simon, which is another private



Thomas Lawson, Untitled, 1981, oil on canvas, 36" x 36".

eye story in San Diego, and then switch channels to Hill Street Blues which is set here in Chicago or some city like this. They all have their different styles and they are supposed to be different--but it is all the same. They run through the same group of stereotypes and cliches, and basically Hill Street Blues is Magnum on a rainy day. There is no real difference between the shows. And the whole evening is bracketed by the news--you've got Dan Rather and Ted Koppel or someone else telling you that is the way it is. And that is the way it is.

Well, what have you got to say about the way that human beings are portrayed in the media--I mean this giant gap between reality and what we think we look like on visual media?

There is a giant gap in fact. But what seems to happen also is that we try to model ourselves on that. Not perhaps so much in the way that people look, although obviously the fashion industry exists to make that attempt. People buy makeup or whatever to try to look like that, but it also involves the way that we relate to one another. Love affairs and all kinds of friendship can become imitations of these things that are supposed to be imitations of our lives. It seems to be a role

reversal. People identify with different characters, and think wouldn't it be great if my life were like that and I had this kind of relationship? So everything becomes more and more faked in a way. More difficult to separate what is really yours and what is yours just by being a part of the way we are learning to be. I think it is because of t.v.'s presence. Obviously this has always gone on. The movies have always given fashion clues--the Bogart look and all that. But now television is in practically every home in the country and on all the time, and the same shows run all the time on prime time or in reruns later at night or during the day. Even the real, if small, difference of fashion that occurs over a couple of years gets collapsed because of the rerun thing. If you watch Magnum and two hours later watch Hawaii 5-0, a collapse of fashion happens. Is what's-his-name really cool or a real jerk? I can't remember the guy's name but he's got this Elvis Costello look, something that was high fashion, then a little jerky and now high fashion again. So there is this constant and everpresent reduction of everything.

What ultimate effect do you think this has on the way we see ourselves?

It is not just the media in terms of...the non-space of television. There is a real spatial element of that too, which is sort of an architectural phenomenon. I travel around quite a bit going to colleges and giving presentations and whatnot.

So I have seen a lot of America. And what is so amazing is that you get off the highway from the airport--you turn off and you are on this strip--and suddenly you could be anywhere. You think that you are going to some quiet corner of Virginia or down to the south in Louisiana, but instead you are driving down mainstreet U.S.A. The Burger King, Big Mac, Jack-in-the-Box... plus the gas stations. And it is just the identical strip, and it is in every goddamn little city. So there is a sort of bizarre lack of difference in places. As you were saying, it even goes as far as the food we eat. There are no regional differences. That everyone eats in those places is an increasing denial of regional differences. Instead of eating their local food, people eat the standardized product. And I don't know what is going to happen. I mean, if we all eat the same, dress the same, think the same, it potentially is really scary. It makes a mockery of the whole idea of American individualism. We are all sort of individually identical.

The way that relates to my art practice is that it makes me want to be more and more traditional. I find this odd contradiction in making advanced art and needing more and more tradition. I started making paintings thinking that there was a conceptual game going on with the paintings. Painting was dead, but performance and conceptual art seemed pretty much on their last legs too. And so perhaps one might make a fake

painting--a painting that wasn't quite a painting, something that was fast and very obviously fast. And had some elements of performance in it. Europeans and Americans were interested in the same kind of thing. Increasingly, that no longer seems to work. It was too easily adapted, easily mimicked by other people--basically it was a tactic that was too easy. What seems to be important is, to go back to this idea of difficulty, to insist on individual particularity. In art that seems to mean making people take the time to really stop and look and think. Complex, fairly traditionally worked paintings still have that ability. Not to say that is the only thing. I've seen some extraordinarily complex film and video that has the same importance, but it is this traditional value of making art that demands a great deal of attention. That seems to be counter to what we thought in the 1960s and the 1970s, where a lot of art was fairly easy; meant to be easy. But the only way to make any dent on the leveling effect is to say, "No, I am not going to take this."

Well, how do you relate this to the post-modernist trend of appropriation where a lot of artists have engaged themselves in a critique of the media and the use of media images? What kind of effect do you think that this can really have in the overall structure of cultural similarity?

The appropriation idea was once appropriate, but it was a way-station. It was only part of the idea. It sort of relates to fast painting. It is a fast idea. One that has unfortunate repercussions --too many people can pick it up and do it. We have seen that already.

There are no parameters.

And so again what seems to be important is to sink it. It is about making this hole in the media. And the appropriation idea --one aspect of that zooming in on some detail and then just somehow holding attention to that. Trying to reveal the meaninglessness of it. But simply cutting it out and pasting it on a piece of paper no longer does that. A more complicated amount of work is required at this point. You know, in 1978 or '79 Sherrie Levine cut things out of magazines. And it worked, but she no longer does that. I mean she knows that. A lot of other people don't, and you still find people cutting things out of magazines.

When you are talking about returning to traditional ideas of art, what does that exactly mean? Which part of the tradition?

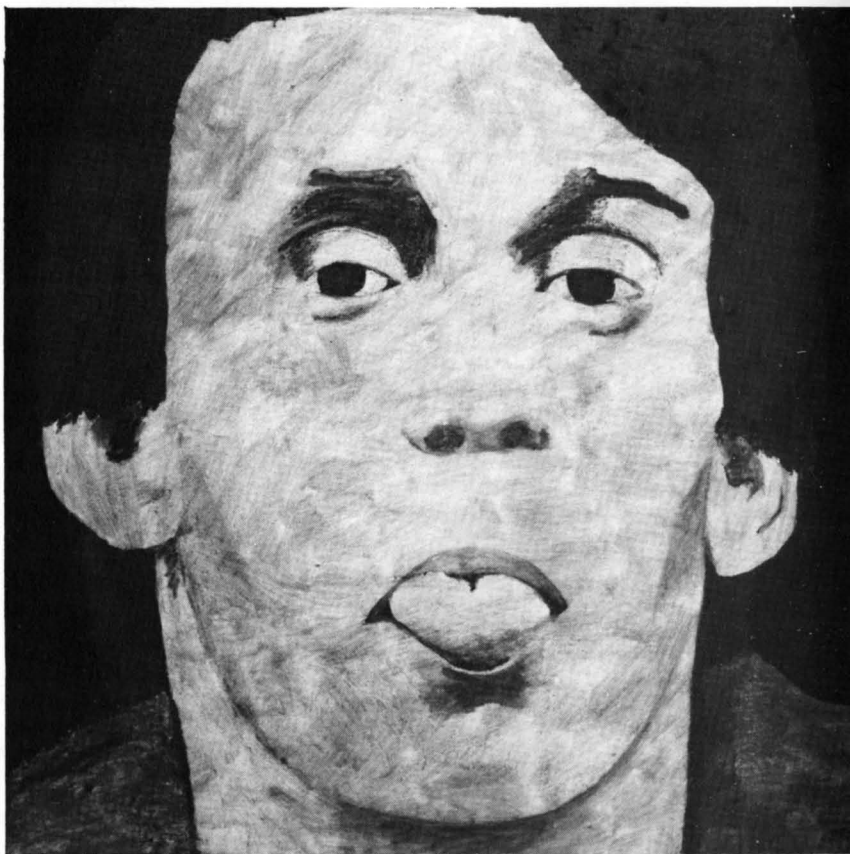
Well, the tradition idea, (I find that it still sticks in my throat even to say it because it is so odd in a way), of the privileged art object. Of this thing that has to be valued as something that you come to and look at--

give special attention to, think about and respond to. Something that stays there for a while and demands that you stay there for a while also.

In fact couldn't you just be talking about a new thing that can be absorbed into ideas of fashion?

Well, I think not. I think that kind of more traditional silence has an unfashionable scent to it. But it is obviously something that aligns itself very easily to being just another commodity or something. We have had that critique already. We know that. But then we do live in a society where that's how commerce works. That is how we exchange things. And so to pretend otherwise is a little bit naive anyway. Part of the quarrel I have with some other left-wing strategy in art is that it pretends it were already in a potentially socialist condition, and we are certainly not. And so they marginalize themselves before they even begin. So there is a critique of the left as much as a critique of the establishment that becomes important.

Well, how do you use the word traditional in regard to describing your own work? How does that show itself? Technique or image or combinations? Use of color?



Thomas Lawson, Burn, Burn, Burn, 1982, oil on canvas, 48" x 48".

Some sort of combination of these things. The works that I am engaged in right now are much more worked than anything I have ever done before. They are much more painterly. The imagery also is much less confrontational. It is architecture and landscape. They are cliched, dead landscapes and buildings. They are not picturesque. They have a real banal quality. They are not that traditional, and the color is weird. Actually, when you were fiddling around with the camera beforehand--it is that kind of color. It is video color gone off. Kind of post-nuclear. A lot of off-reds and blues and metallic stuff mixed into that so there is a sheen to it. And the paintings are built up as images which are then increasingly obscured with layers of paint. And each layer, from the image through the final surface, is very slowly and carefully worked so there are all these marks of passage of time and crossing the canvas. And they are big canvases. They are 6' by 8'. So it is quite a large surface to have so much attention paid to it.

Would you say that over the past eight years the course of your work developed in terms of trying to make a sense of quality in it? Are you more interested in dealing with formal issues? How is that working for you? What direction is that going?

I think there is an element of maturity involved in that, but yes, you do become more interested in making the thing hold up better. Both physically and visually. Initially it is enough just to get it done. And get it out. But increasingly I find I want my stretchers not to twist and warp like they used to. I want the paint to stay on and not fall off. Those issues do become important. But I think that has something to do with pride in workmanship. After a period, you want the things to stay around. I don't know if it is anything different than that. It is just that in any medium, whatever you are working on, at some point you want it to be as good as it... you know state of the art... the best that it can be. It is like these guys who started out making super 8 movies, like the B's, and it was perfectly fine for them to be making super 8 movies. They like the loop, they like the speed. But now they are making real movies. There is only so much effect you can get from shoddiness and quickness. And to give your work that extra resonance you have to then start considering the entire gamut of possibilities. And quality becomes one of those things. Quality of material. And so you find the B's making Vortex that has the look of being a real movie. And it makes the whole thing that much more successful.

What is the work process like for you? From the beginning of a painting to the end of one.

I tend not to work on one painting per se. I work on a group of things. So there is a period when I'm just sitting and thinking and looking for imagery or whatever, and then I finally decide what I am going to do. Then I collect the imagery that I am going to work with...

From?

Well, it varies. There was this period when it was quite simple. I decided it was the front page of the New York Post, and all I had to do was go out everyday and see if it was worth buying. That was quite straightforward. More recently it's the landscape, cityscape thing. And it is a combination of photos I have taken and postcards that I have collected. The photographs resulted from my travels. I was carrying a camera wherever I went. So there are pictures of German cities, pictures of American cities, visiting in Milwaukee and Los Angeles, all these different places looking for real banal modern architecture. Plus hunting in drug stores for postcards. Postcards that would commemorate buildings that are of no interest. Local monuments--not the Art Institute--some other place in a suburb somewhere. So I would gather all this information and start looking at it, and sifting it and eventually, who knows exactly what the reason is, you favor some over others. And then I start working.

What is the process of selection about?

It is what appeals. I suppose it is a taste thing. It is not what is immediately the most interesting. With these new paintings, there is really an avoidance of traditional kinds of composition. There tends to be a real horizontal breakup, three or four very dramatic breaks right across the entire image. But I can't say that that was exactly deliberate. I mean, that is what happened. That is how the cards fell. Once I decided that this was the bunch I was going to use, it turned out that that was one thing they all had in common. So I don't really know. The procedure is not that analytic.

What makes you know that one painting versus another painting is successful for you?

Unless it is a real loser, I never know. It changes so much. Things in the studio look different when they are in a gallery. They look different in a solo show then in a group show. I never really know if this is better than that. I mean, I have favorites but they are favorites for other reasons. Because I happen to like that color, or I remember a day when I worked on it.

What kind of effect do you hope your painting has on the spectator?

That also varies. These new ones I hope, will somehow be overwhelming. They are very

luscious. And at the same time they are kind of mysterious but resistant. They don't tell me very much. So I hope that they are appealing and attractive, then repellent. Previous years it was more repellent. The idea was that it would push you back. And this one will suck you in first and then push you back out.

Would you say that these paintings are more pleasurable in a certain way?

I think so. But then I have such an odd idea of pleasure, I suppose. I actually find the other, older series pleasurable. I find them to be beautiful. But then again, it is a sense of beauty that isn't common. Most people find them repelling.

How do you feel about the fact that, increasingly through the past 30 or 40 years or even longer, art has spun into this very small, tight, compact elitist circle that is not really giving too much out to the larger population? What is your particular feeling about that in terms of the role of art within the society?

I think that its role is elite in the way that it's like any academic work--that it is available to anybody who has the equipment to deal with it. But it is a difficult thing and it needs to be. You can't just expect to come in and like it. That idea of art is appealing on one level, but on another it is, in and of itself, an idea of art as entertainment. That is what a lot of folk art is.

It is a way of passing time and it is not a bad thing. It is really great. But as the role of the artist has developed in this society, we're involved in this much more rarified activity that is extremely elite. But it is not an elitism that is necessarily economic. It tends to favor the economically favored because they have the greater opportunity to spend time reading and looking. But theoretically it is open to anyone as long as they have the time and the equipment to deal with it. And I think that it is important that it is that. Otherwise it becomes easy art and either serves some kind of propaganda for left or right, or becomes some kind of entertainment. Rarely is it anything else. In performance areas there is more chance of a popular kind of art. I'm talking about music, some kinds of theatre--Bread and Puppet Theatre has a real different impact. Visual art does require a fairly elitist position to work. Unless it can be some equivalent to small magazine pamphleteering. That is a possibility I think. But I am not quite sure exactly. The whole artists' book thing--so much off on the wrong track. But potentially it was an idea that could have been a popular kind of art. But it seems to have been bogged down completely in a lot of real worthless expression--people just making books because there is a market for books. I don't know.



Thomas Lawson, Installation, Metro Pictures, 1981: 1. to r., Baby Jody Happy at Last, Teen Star has Cancer, Inches from Death.

I have seen so many horrible books that it really put me off the whole idea. But there should be an area for the popular... like, what do you call those things that were popular in France in the 19th century that Courbet was supposed to have looked at? They were basically little engravings, political cartoons they passed around. That seems a possibility--having little, fairly cheaply produced things that could be handed out and passed around. But basically, I think art is a real elite kind of activity.

In the mid 1970s there were a lot of artists who wanted to go back to primal sources. In terms of taking source material from prehistoric sites, etc. And this created a whole type of movement that seemed in a sense a desperate search for meaning. To restore a sense of sacredness or higher values in terms of art.

Well, I think a lot of that is unbelievably insulting. In fact there is an analogy there again to the mass media collapse of meaning. In the way that media makes us tourists of everywhere--we just sort of go around looking. Those artists were doing that to primitive cultures. They were going in and saying wow, isn't it great that you guys jump around in feathers. I'm gonna get some of those feathers and jump around in my loft in Soho. And be real cool. And, in doing so, they destroyed both the meaning of the activity and much more importantly the meaning of the original act--whatever

or wherever it was from. We are beginning to understand that perhaps unconsciously--I don't want to be too negative about it--but a lot of the work of the early 1970s in retrospect seems to have been done in kind of a bad faith. It was anti-institutional--let's get out of the museums and onto the streets and bring in some ethnographic stuff. And it was just phoney. The guys claimed to be doing work that was impossible for the museum to maintain, things that were critical of the museum. In fact, in the last ten years, the museum has been their only real sponsor and site of their work. There is something extremely unacceptable about saying this is bad while taking it. Again it has to do with this whole idea of tradition. A return to traditionalism. Art exists within that place. I mean, the museum is a problematic entity because it collects bits and pieces from all over. There is that collapsing; but the art does require that privileged environment in which to work. The artists and conceptualists demonstrated that by trying to get out of it and finding themselves back in there. The only way that we know that some piece of earth moving out in Nevada is art, is because we have seen a photograph in the art museum. The only reason we know that some fabric with stripes on it is art, is because we see it in the museum. There is this consistent requirement that the work be seen within the context of the museum, even while it is pretending otherwise. And you know, the fabric or the paint looks real nice on the doors of the public

transportation, but it is by being framed through the windows of the museum that what they are about is revealed, and not as they travel through the suburbs.

It seems like artists have made some rather failed but dramatic attempts to defeat an awareness of the capitalistic forces, as viewing their work as product, etc. And this vast sense of consumerism in the art world. What kind of opinion do you have about that--the way that the art world relates to the overall capitalist system?

In fact, the art world is a very crude capitalist system because it is unregulated. It is the marketplace at its rawest. And it is one of the best places to see capitalism absolutely at work. You see all kinds of price rigging, cartelism, the whole gamut is there for you to watch. Which is really a whole other subject. It is not so much about the art--it is the art market. Or the art world. And it is fascinating. And I think that a lot of artists who consider themselves to be above that or critical of that--weren't or couldn't be. It is too sharp of a market. You either sink or swim. And to survive you have to be somehow a part of it. Otherwise you get shunted off to the art departments out in the providences somewhere and no one ever hears from you.

And, on the other hand, you don't really have any control over your own life or your work.

You perhaps don't have any control over your income, but you maintain control over what you do with yourself. You can maintain control if you are strong enough to do that. I find that question comes up all the time all over the place about selling out and making art for the market. If anyone does that they are just feeble minded. If you allow yourself to continue making a particular kind of art simply because it is selling well, you deserve everything that you get in terms of bad conscience. And on top of that, you are likely not to make the killing that you thought you were going to make. Because after a certain point people can tell when they are being sold a bill of goods like that. What is not so easy to control obviously is what people are going to buy and what they are going to pay attention to. That is not simply related to pure market force. There is a more complicated relationship. People seem to be willing to take my work seriously, but so far they haven't exactly fallen over themselves to buy it. So I get spoken about and written about all the time, but huge sums of money aren't changing hands. The connection isn't that direct. And there are other people who make out like bandits, sell tons of stuff. I mean, people just

love it and lap it up and buy it all the time, yet no one ever thinks about it or talks about it. Neither situation is good particularly, and neither is all that clear to understand. I mean, it is not exactly clear why a group of collectors goes for this one this year rather than that one. But it does seem to be this year only. I mean there isn't anything certain about it at all. What everyone is buying this year is not what they are going to buy next year.

And I would think that that process also leaves a lot of artists hanging in the wind at about the age of 35.

Yes, probably. There are a lot of people who seem to think that the world owes them a living in some way. They say, "Hey, I'm a special person, I'm an artist. I've been doing this for ten years since leaving graduate school, I should be getting my just reward." But there is no such thing in the world outside. No one expects that because you are a great guy you get great money. You have to be a little more realistic about the way the capitalist system works. I mean we are selling something that is of limited use/value. It would be nice to make money, but you can't expect any money. And so you have to think of other ways to make a living. You know, my preference is a patchwork of small jobs and bits and pieces of this and that, so that nothing becomes dominant over painting. Other people would like the security of a job and look for that. But I think if you plan on

being an artist you have to plan on living a very uncertain way economically. And to think otherwise is really wishful thinking.

I would like to ask you a couple questions about REAL LIFE Magazine. What was the point for you in terms of founding it, and how would you describe the outlook of the magazine?

The original idea was that there was all this work beginning to be made, that I knew of, by people I knew of, that wasn't getting very much attention. And it seemed quite clear to me that it would never get attention if it wasn't made public-- and it wouldn't grow. You need a certain amount of critical discourse to know what you are about and develop it. And the major magazines were quite clearly not going to do that. They just weren't interested for whatever entrenched reasons. They didn't want to be in the avant-garde at that time. They had had periods when they had wanted to be, but in the late 1970s they didn't. The little local magazines that had existed, like Art Rite, seemed to be dying, or dead! There was a real vacuum. And so it was one of those things, sitting around talking and saying, it would be great if someone started a magazine. If no one is going to open a gallery that will help, perhaps someone can start a magazine. And who could do it? And I realized that if no one else was going to do

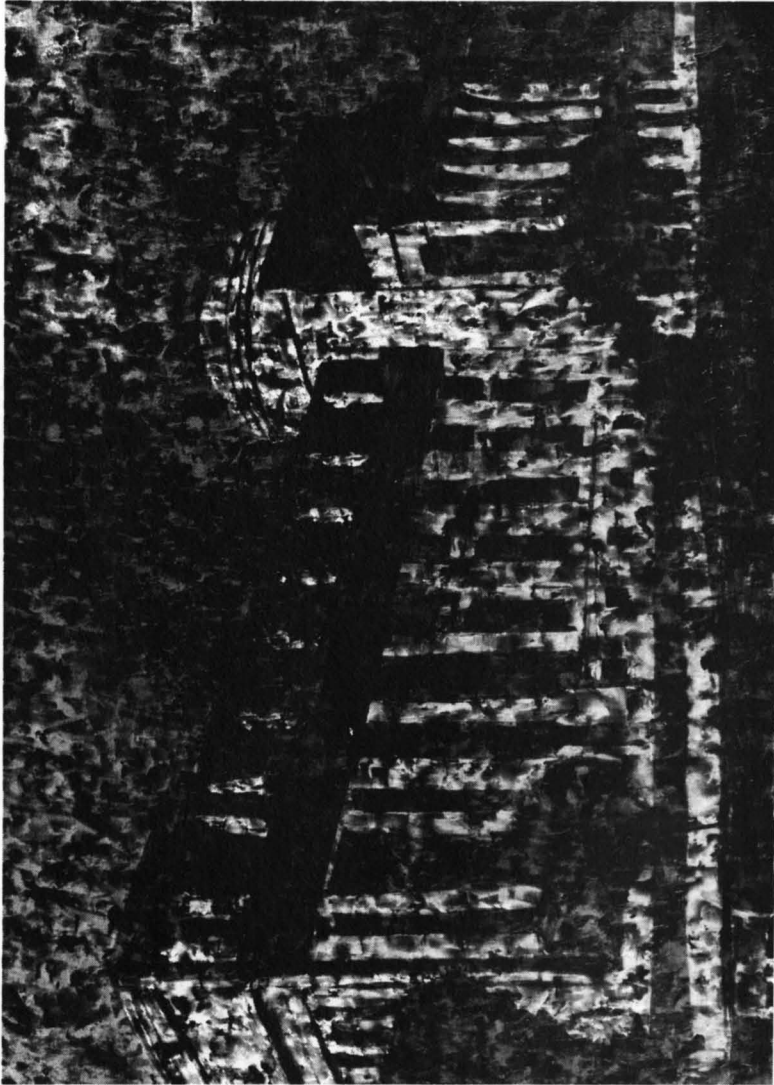
it, I could. So it began with this idea of being a forum for talking about certain kinds of art and media influences and trying to get artists to talk not only about art but about the media, about t.v., music and other things that influence them. It sort of went from there, and it actually seems to have been surprisingly effective. For something that has remained really quite small in terms of its circulation, an astonishing number of people are aware of it, have seen an issue or read something in it. In terms of continuation, we are now five years old and have arrived at a fairly crucial stage--finally getting incorporated. We now have a little office that is solely for REAL LIFE Magazine.

Are you funded?

Funded by the NEA and the New York State Council basically. And this current year NEA gave us a very generous grant, so we are in great shape at the moment. But this has resulted in an administrative problem of realizing we probably need to have some kind of secretary or administrative assistant--but someone who is willing to take the risk of maybe we can pay them this year but who knows what will happen after that. It is difficult finding people in the art world with business skills. It is interesting suddenly having to deal with all that.

But also with this extra money we are now putting the finishing touches on a big double issue. I'm really excited about it. It will come out in January 1984. It is about politics and art. There is quite a range of things in it. There is stuff that discusses the potential--you know, is it possible to make political art? What is political art? Are people who make pictures of raised fists kidding themselves or what? There are a lot of interviews, (with the people who make up Group Material, with Komar and Melamid, Lawrence Weiner, and others), and also some real political things.

Susan Morgan (associate editor) discovered this horrifying piece in a Life magazine that was published in October 1939. In the period of the 'phoney war', when Poland had been invaded and Britain and France had declared war, but fighting hadn't quite started on the Western front. Just a little bit of skirmishing. And America was very neutral and being sort of uppity about that and basically protecting their capital interests. They didn't know which side was better. The moral issue hadn't really surfaced in the media, and so here is this Life magazine which has this incredibly balanced report with German stories and British stories. And there is a human interest story about Hitler's painting. The text is just so sickening. It is sort of patronizing and bland and really awful. It calls him a shrewd politician who at heart is an artist.



Thomas Lawson, Metropolis: The Museum, 1983, oil on canvas, 60" x 84".

The whole article is just astonishing. They reproduce paintings and interior shots of his house in Berchtesgarden. And they critique the paintings. And I mean they are just terrible watercolors. So they point out all his formal weaknesses--he can't do figures, he doesn't paint figures very often because he can't do it. There is a picture of a battleship in a big cloud of smoke and they say something about that, that he must have made an error and just corrected it by making the smoke thicker. And then they talk about the good taste of his interior decor. That the furnishings are furnishings a man would like--solid but comfortable. And there are paintings of nudes on the wall. And so, the ending of the article says it might be a loss for world politics if he retires; but, if he does, he would probably be better to retire into interior decorating than into art. It is just astonishing. So we are going to reprint this thing verbatim with a little paragraph explaining when it was published.

Also included is a piece by Coosje van Bruggen on the repression of the University of El Salvador. So we have this real range of stuff in this issue. There is art stuff and real hard politics. And everything in-between. I am really excited about it. It will bust the bank as far as we are concerned and probably have future funding repercussions, but it seemed important to do it. Perhaps it is some kind of climax to the series of the issues.

I want to ask you if you think that art really has the ability to affect social change in any kind of positive way?

I think so, but not in any direct, quick way. Again it is this whole idea of art's elite position. We are involved in the conscience of society. That is where we operate. Where we think we are going, what we think we are, who we think we are. So the importance that art has is in that region. And if artists want to make political change they have to work on making a change in the way that the power elite present ourselves. So it has a long term possibility. And I think it's genuine. I think that America does, in particular, have an image of itself as being a morally good place. And the actuality doesn't quite match up to that. Part of that moral condition is a source of embarrassment--and a brake on some people who would prefer to straightforwardly exercise the power that they want. There are people in this administration who would clearly like to go into Nicaragua and clean up. And into El Salvador and just fix things to their satisfaction. But this image of America as a nice place, prevents them, or slows them. Our strength lies in reinforcing that moral content.

When you say our, you mean we as artists?

Yes. We as artists. It is not just artists. It's cultural workers of all sorts. If you are genuinely outraged by political conditions, art is not the field to exercise that outrage. You have to do something more directly if you want to see real concrete change.

In other words, you have to leave "the parameters of art" and go into the real world?

Yes. Become an activist or something. You know this winter, this Artists Call business--a demonstration of solidarity with the peoples of Central America--is somewhat like that. It is an activist attempt. It is not so much about art per se. It is not an art show. It is just a demonstration like any other kind of march. It is an attempt to show that there are this number of people working in the art field who think that these policies are wrong. That is all that it says. Individually, some of the art that will be shown may attempt some deeper, longer term kind of change, but the Artists Call idea is not an art idea. It is an activist idea. Collecting radical bric-a-brac doesn't really make for anything more than just another archive of stuff, for getting people on the streets or getting people to organize. But that is not art.

How do you see your own role, in terms of being a painter, a critic and a writer as contributing dialectically to this sense of consciousness that has always traditionally been a part of what we thought artists were?

I hope there is a disruptive, interruptive presence so that the work, in whatever form it appears, makes you stop and think. And not be as complacent. I would think something like that.

Fragments 1977-1982

THOMAS LAWSON

These notes were culled from my files; none has been published before. They are working notes, excerpts from unfinished essays, and random jottings. Most date from the late Seventies, in part because I have since had the luck to see most of what I write in print.

The subject of art is always the same, and to deny that is to deny both life and art. But the subject in art is never the same, even if it appears to be. To think otherwise is to allow art to be taken over by some other discourse, by some uninvited text.

--1978

The painting is grey all over, grey cross-hatchings indicating the possibilities of space while constantly denying them. Divided in half, each part reveals the other. Double exposure. Its density and self-enclosure recall the claustrophobic early works. It is called Corpse and Mirror.

The cross-hatch motif first appeared in the large painting of 1972, Untitled, a painting constructed around the notion of pairing. It consists of four large panels. The center two bear near identical flagstone patterns, implying a horizontal rather than a vertical flatness. This central pair is flanked by panels that can also be read as up or down--cross-hatchings linked to an array of dismembered body parts

nailed to slats of wood. The painting is ungainly, awkward in its confusion of visual axes. It is a celebration of fragmentation (with that taken to mean as much as it can); a latter day crucifixion, it bears comparison with the gothic horrors of the Isenheim altar.

--from an essay written at the time of the Jasper Johns retrospective in late 1977.

Art thinking is sensuous, not intellectual. This does not mean it is not intelligent. Intellectuals seek perfection, but this has nothing to do with the making of art. The search for perfection is the search for an ideal. A lot of recent abstract art seeks perfection, the elimination of physical reality through an extreme concentration on material. It is full of ideas. It uses the idea of physicality to deny presence. It uses the idea of reductive structure to distract attention from real life. It uses the idea of autonomy to imply a beyond. It is empty.

--1978

Representations indicate longings, since they stand in for something not present. They encircle a perceived lack at the center of life. Art which uses representation is not empty, but it acknowledges emptiness. It is fake, but it acknowledges the truth of real life.

--1978

When one thinks about representation one eventually has to think about the relationship of criticism to art. Criticism tends to represent art to the public that cannot see it. That is why I can find no reason for artists to give up that role--I want to take part in the representation of my art. Writing criticism allows me to present the kinds of things I think are worth considering, and those I don't. It also allows me to foreground the way in which criticism can suck meaning from art and make it a second-hand experience, and a second-rate one. I can do that by making my criticism quite clearly a representation of my position, and quite often a misrepresentation of the work under discussion.

--1982

Art is not an imitation of life, it is an interpretation of life. This interpretation finds expression in various formal traditions which mark the boundaries within which the artist works. Art is also an interpretation of art. I make paintings which are in some sense about painting. Since painting is my everyday life, there is no contradiction.

--1978

Most performance art appears totally self-referential, its authenticity guaranteed only by the personality of the artist. It hopes to transcend itself, but bases that hope on wishful thinking. Expressionist painting is a similar procedure, a pathetic attempt to secure personal authen-

ticity through fiat. But most of the poseurs and fakers who make this kind of art enjoy characters so stereotyped even TV producers would hesitate to use them.

--1979

Conceptual art is an art of refusal. It is art at a distance, a method of entertaining ideas (not always an entertaining method). In this sense it is a traditional art form, an anti-Romance, one that privileges art practice as a means of contemplation rather than confrontation.

--1979

Declarative statements (Buren's stripes) do not represent the communicative range of language--if one is limited to declaration then one is limited indeed. The audience tires and begins a desperate search for alternative readings. This means that the work tends to lose its polemical meaning, and becomes understood and accepted as decoration only.

--1979

There is a curious embarrassment in the art world about the idea of artists' writings, a category of discourse that is clearly marked off as separate from and inferior to serious art writing. As if to prove their point, art historians love to quote the metaphysical mumbo-jumbo of a Kandinsky, but rarely even mention the more direct, pointed writing of Barnett Newman or Don Judd. Smithson's writing has been allowed a place, but a strangely denatured one as

part of the expanded field of his art. The clarity with which he analyzed his position in the art world is reduced to a personal expression. One might begin to suspect a conspiracy to keep artists dumb and terribly distanced from the ideas that surround and inform their work.

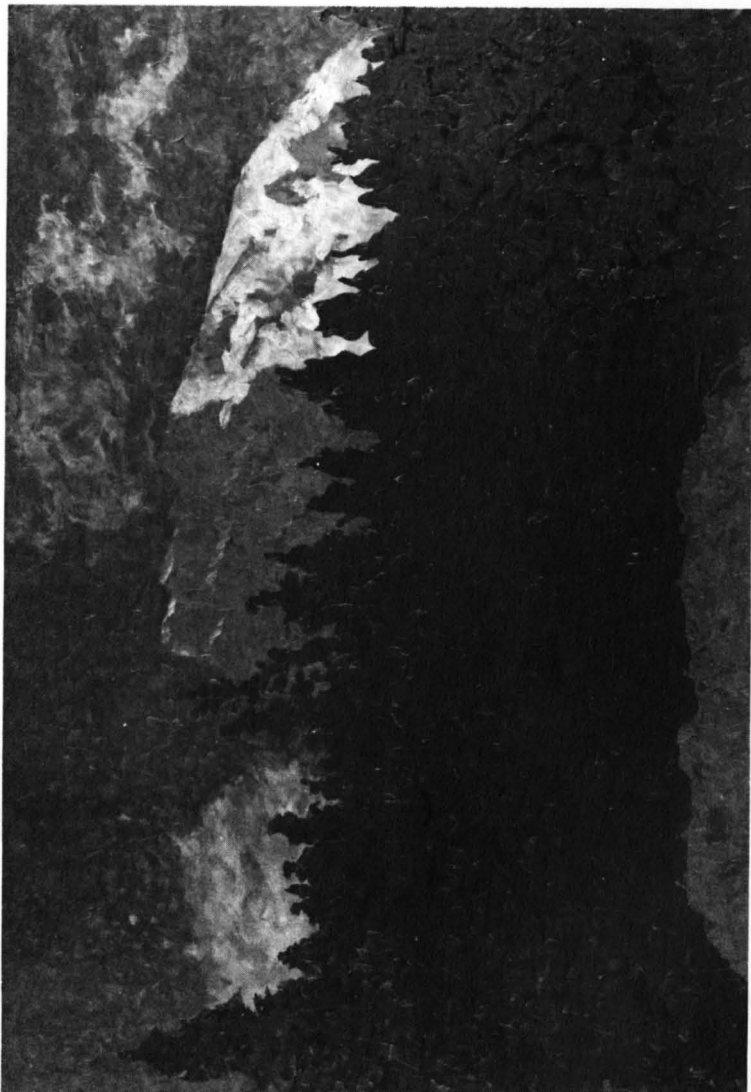
--1981

We live under a tyranny of explanations, a relentless repression through the allocation of meanings. Every aspect of life is reduced to a few essentials, easily packaged ideas that can be used to console, advise, teach, entertain, bamboozle, control. We know this, but remain transfixed, unable to remove ourselves from the gaze of the spectacle. We watch, and are consumed by our watching. We are entertained, and are consumed by the entertainment. We consume, and find our independence ebbing away, drained of substance, lost in an overload of short-circuiting information. Specific, individual meanings are lost in a web of allusions, so that they appear spectral, figments of an over-active imagination.

This tyranny of balanced opinion is a refusal of genuine thought, a craven will to reduce confrontation to the unthreatening arena of sports-like competition. It is a rejection of real knowledge, and is thus oppressive. Inevitably I am speaking of the mass media, but the refusal of discourse also permeates the institutions of high culture. Over and over,

simple-minded categories are erected, real differences struck down. History is erased, criticality abandoned. Any contemporary art worthy of consideration is necessarily implicated in this. The best creates a distanced condition for the viewer that makes a critical awareness possible, the worst merely mirrors the situation and encourages the viewer to succumb to fate with a delirious abandon.

--1982



Thomas Lawson, The View from the Berghof, 1983, oil on canvas, 66" x 96".

THOMAS LAWSON

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In addition to the following articles Lawson publishes and edits REAL LIFE Magazine. He has also published reviews in ART IN AMERICA and FLASH ART, and continues to do so in ARTFORUM.

1983

An interview with Komar and Melamid, REAL LIFE Magazine, #11/12, Winter.

Work in Progress presented at the Mountain Lake Symposium, Blacksburg, October.

1982

A Fatal Attraction, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, May.

Conflicting Panaceas, COVER, #6, Winter.

The Dark Side of the Bright Light, ARTFORUM, November.

Untitled Sound Piece, Just Another Asshole, #5 (record).

1981

Emerging Artists at the Guggenheim/The Whitney Biennial, FLASH ART, Summer.

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1980

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1979

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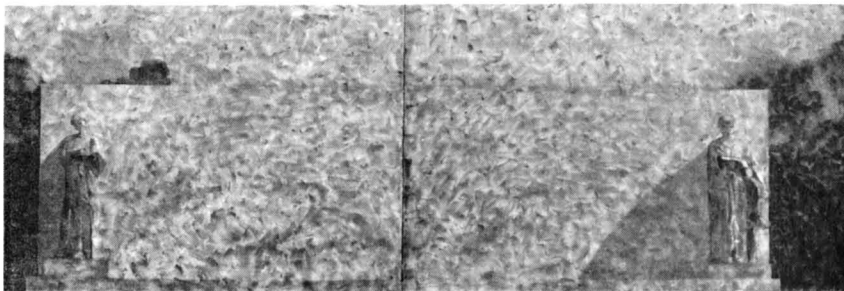
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1978

Gas: 1978 Exxon National Exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum, SKYLINE, #3, June.

Joseph Cornell, a Concept of Performance, presented at the Goodson Symposium at the Whitney Museum, NY, March.

David Rabinowitch, 1968-78, Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, West Germany, November.



Thomas Lawson, To Those Who Follow After, 1983, oil on canvas, 60" x 168".

THOMAS LAWSON

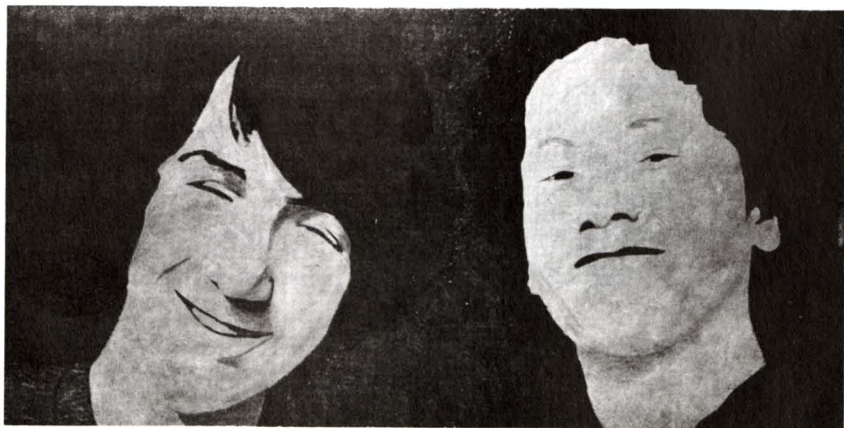
One-Person Exhibitions

- 1983 Metro Pictures, New York.
Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery, Los Angeles.
- 1982 Metro Pictures, New York.
- 1981 Metro Pictures, New York.
- 1980 *Drawings*, Mercer Union Front Gallery, Toronto.
- 1977 Artists Space, New York.

Group Exhibitions

- 1984 *The Heroic Figure: Thirteen Artists from the United States*, Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Exhibition travels to Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Santiago, Chile; Museo do Arte Contemporaneo, Caracas, Venezuela; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston.
- 1983 *La Forma e l'informe*, Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Bologna, Italy.
Metro Pictures, New York.
Contemporary Drawings, Damon Brandt Gallery, New York.
Artist/Critic, White Columns, New York.
Landscape, Ben Shahn Galleries, William Patterson College, Wayne, New Jersey.
Other Views: New Landscapes, Semaphore Gallery, New York.
Art on Paper, Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
- 1982 *Painting*, Metro Pictures, New York.
New Drawing in America, The Drawing Center, New York.
8 Critical Perspectives, P.S.I., New York.
The Human Figure in Contemporary Art, Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans.
Record Covers for Show, White Columns, New York.
7 From Metro Pictures, Middendorf/Lane Gallery, Washington DC.
Art and Anomie, Josef Gallery, New York.
New York Panorama, Stockholm International Art Expo, Sweden.
Art and the Media, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago.
Frames of Reference, The Whitney Museum, Downtown Branch, New York.
Metro Pictures, New York.
Dead or Alive, Lerner Heller Gallery, New York.
The Erotic Impulse, Roger Litz Gallery, New York.

- 1982 *New Figuration in America*, Milwaukee Art Museum.
The Image Scavengers, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.
Compassionate Images, Herron Gallery, Indiana University,
Indianapolis. Exhibition travelled to N.A.M.E. Gallery,
Chicago; University of Tennessee, Knoxville.
- 1981 *Realism*, Proctor Art Center, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson,
New York.
Figuring, Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York.
Drawings, Metro Pictures, New York.
On Location, Texas Gallery, Houston.
REAL LIFE Magazine Presents, Nigel Greenwood, London.
35 Artists Return to Artists Space, Artists Space, New York.
- 1980 *New Image*, Palazzo della Triennale, Milan.
Illustration & Allegory, Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York.
Opening Group Exhibition, Metro Pictures, New York.
- 1979 *Four Artists*, Artists Space, New York. Exhibition travelled to
Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax; New 57 Gallery, Edinburgh.
- 1978 *Object Show*, 3 Mercer Street, New York.
The Drawing Center, New York.



Thomas Lawson, Saved, 1982, oil on canvas, 48" x 96".

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