

# Art & Text

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Thomas Lawson

Robert Rooney

Thomas Lawson: Well, first of all, there's no such thing as a career in art in Scotland unless you're a landscape painter – at least, there wasn't at the time I was growing up. I was a small boy in a provincial town. I didn't know much about places like New York.

Robert Rooney: What about art training?

I don't have an art training, I have a university training – English and Art History. . . I've always painted, made pictures, though. At university I made pictures of newspaper photographs. I wasn't interested in doing landscapes or life drawings and such. At Edinburgh University I started to learn a lot about contemporary art and got involved with a thesis on Jasper Johns and came over to New York to visit him. He was very nice and let me spend time in his studio and look through his old work. Anyway, looking around the museums and galleries convinced me that if I was serious about my secret ambition to become an artist I would have to come back to New York, and I did.

Is it unusual for an artist to have a university background?

It's unusual, I suppose, to have a degree in English or Maths or something like that. Quite a lot's been written about how the current crop of artists are more likely to be college trained than used to be the case.

By college, do you mean university?

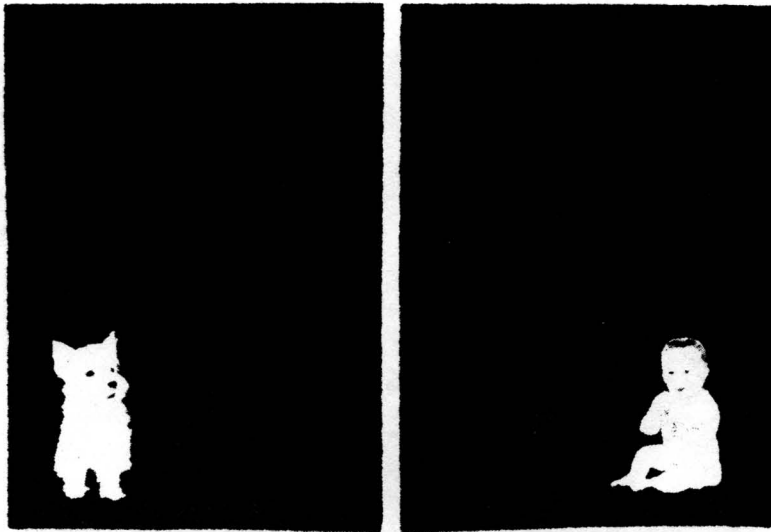
Well, different places, different terminology. I mean, in Scotland art colleges are not degree-giving institutions, so that's a problem because they don't have prestige. In America you can get an art training at a university, and so there's status there. It seems that more artists here have that sort of education.

Is your academic background the reason for your interest in art theory?

Not really, no.

You mentioned earlier that you've always painted. Some of your associates such as David Salle, Jack Goldstein, Robert Longo and Matt Mullican have worked in the areas of performance, film, music and so on, what about you?

Painting only. Partly through a lack of opportunity and partly through a lack of



Thomas Lawson, untitled, 1980

interest, though off and on I've thought about doing something like that.

Have you ever taught art?

I'm teaching a bit at the School of Visual Arts.

Many Australian artists seem to be teachers. This has created a situation where teachers tend to breed another generation of artists who in turn become teachers and so it goes on. What's the situation in the U.S.?

Everyone here wants a teaching job. Well, everyone wants to be able to support themselves by selling their work, but that's unrealistic, except for a small proportion. So everyone queues up for teaching jobs.

You once said that artists in American institutions were most likely to be the well-behaved ones who can hold a job. The kind of artists who knew too many things to take serious risks and who were afraid of criticism. You could've been talking about Melbourne, especially the bit about artists being afraid of criticism.

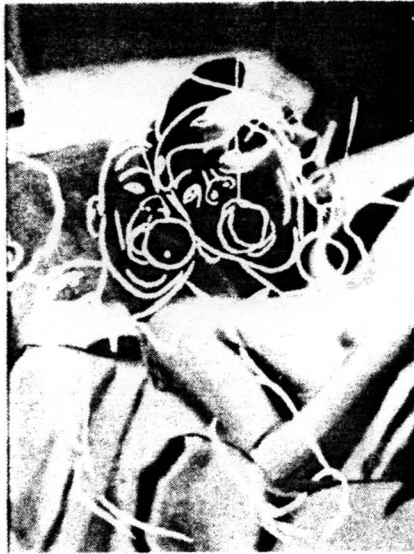
Yeah, I'm really skeptical about the whole thing, particularly now I'm teaching on a temporary full-time basis – before I was doing short-time gigs. It makes me uneasy.

But do artists in New York necessarily breed another generation of artists-teachers?

Not necessarily.

Then it's more of a casual or part-time thing?

Yeah, but the real trouble is that the education system breeds all these people who think they're going to be artists and the system's overloaded. Most of the stuff they do is a very identifiable MFA sort of art. It tends to move quickly and so the kids pick up on trends. The students I'm dealing with – I mean the ones who are hip and want to be something – are all making versions of work that could be identified as being like David Salle's, Tom Lawson's or Jack Goldstein's. I mean,



David Salle. *We'll Shake The Bag*. 1980

it's really horrifying, because there's no urgency in their work. They're copies, but they're kind of cynical. They seem to be saying "we're the best kids in the class because we're doing this work, we're in line with you."

You think that's cynical?

"Cynical" 's maybe too tough, but there's something wrong with it. That's why I'm uneasy about the idea of making a living that way, because I think that being a good teacher means not being a good artist. In some ways you have to reduce your own profile to encourage them to do something for themselves. But your real concentration in fact is increasing your profile to make a stronger statement. I don't think you can do that teaching.

You came to America from Scotland, when? Some of your peers came from places such as California or at least were trained there. Is there any significance in this?

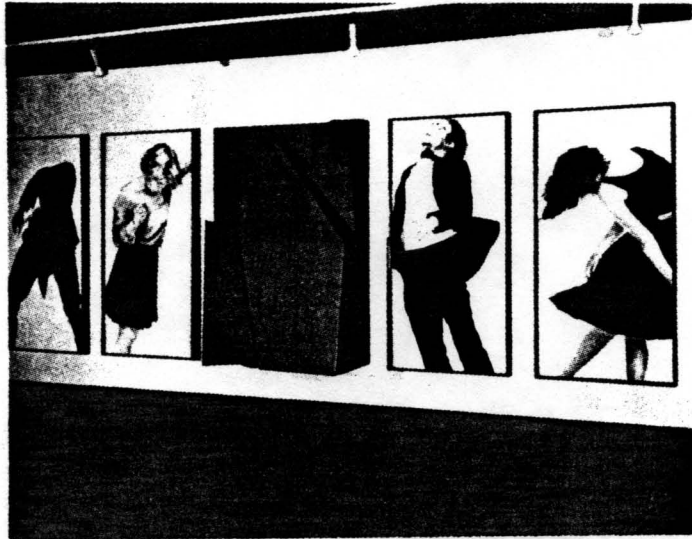
I came to New York in 1975, 1976. As for the other question, I think everyone living here seems to have come from somewhere else. However, we don't all come from California. Some come from Buffalo, some from Ohio and places like that. So I do think there's something significant in the fact that people come to New York from all these places.

And the reason is?

I suppose it's just rootlessness that we're all willing to give up some kind of locality and move somewhere else that promises a different kind of real world in which to work.

What exactly does it promise?

Well, lots of things. Originally it promised the excitement of meeting other people that you could talk to. I mean, if you're like me and come from a small place, you're lucky if you can find many people to talk to. You don't see much – you miss out on a lot of the movies and the art and everything. What was so astonishing, for me, about New York when I first came here was the accessibility



Robert Longo, *Men In The Cities, Final Life* 1981-2

of information and the fact that I could go to a bar and have a conversation with virtual strangers about the stuff that was really close to me. You couldn't have that sort of public conversation in Scotland. There, any conversation would most likely be about football or local politics or something. But to actually talk about my work would be really an exception. So it's a kind of liberation not having to defend the idea of being an artist. But that does have its side-effects and one of them is that everyone in New York claims to be an artist and that devalues the idea a bit. Initially it was a liberation. . .

What about the situation now?

The situation now? It's similar, but it's not so exciting in a way. I mean, these days it's all about distribution and the possibility of getting with the magazines or with galleries. That's what's important. . .

Is that because the scene has changed or because you're seven years older?

I think it's probably both. What's not good about it now is I feel that we've all tended to move apart from each other. We get isolated in our little coteries and don't talk in the way we used to and so there's something missing. Maybe that's just inevitable. I don't know if it has anything to do with New York.

You were recently accused in *Artforum* of having a European attitude towards America. What do you think about that?

I don't quite know what it means to have someone like Donald Kuspit accuse you of that. Increasingly, people in Britain think that my work looks American and they think that because it's bright and bold and strident, but people here find it European because it's complicated and because it has political associations which are unusual for America. Artists here tend to shy away from most art with political content. . .

Why is that?

I think it's because American culture on the whole is so de-politicised. I mean,



Matt Mullican. *Sign Poster*. 1980

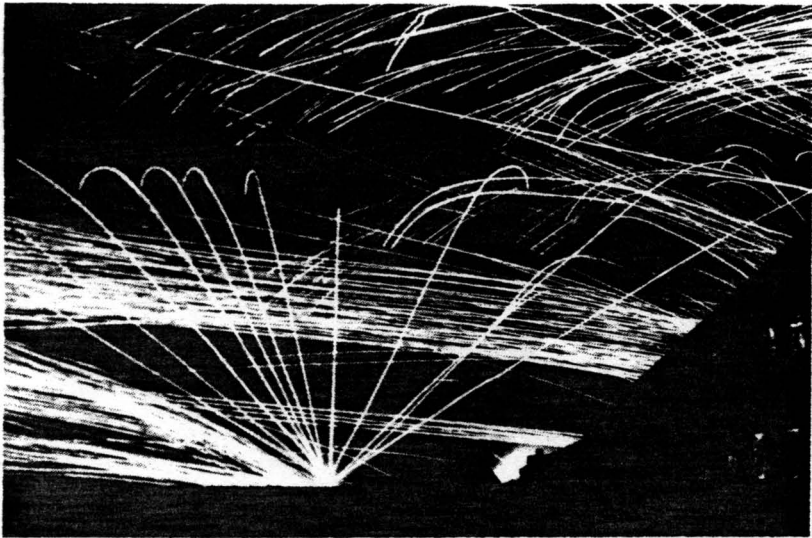
what's so European about my whole sort of being is, I suppose, that I'm used to sitting around talking politics, specific local politics and more generalized global affairs. Americans don't seem to be even vaguely interested. Everything's reduced down to slogans and a few names and faces that are clearly identifiable and their art seems to reflect that. In fact, just recently in this class I'm teaching at the School of Visual Arts I have an Israeli student who wants to make political art and she's kind of naïve and has lots of problems with her work. She uses the most clichéd kinds of gestures such as drawn-looking women with babies, people with fists raised and slashing paint strokes juxtaposed with posters that have inflammatory statements on them. However, I can't help but respond to her motivations. A couple of the better American students are also using similar source material from newspapers, but emptying it completely of any kind of significance, which in more sophisticated hands might be some kind of political statement. I've tried to set up a situation where both groups can talk it out. They just don't get what I'm saying. They just see it in terms of pretty images. It's really quite odd. . . Getting back to what Kuspit said, yes I am European. After all, I spent the first 25 years of my life in Europe. Actually, Scotland's had a longer involvement with Europe than England has, there's a lot of Frenchness in Scottish culture. . .

Where do your early paintings of comic-strip images – the one of Spiderman – and those of highland pipers fit chronologically? Did you do them in New York?

Yes, they're early New York paintings. I'd really like to know where you saw them. It's pretty amazing, as I had such little exposure at that time.

I didn't actually see them. I read about the highland piper paintings in Carter Ratcliff's essay in 'Illustration and Allegory' and Valentin Tatransky made a passing reference to 'Spiderman' in one of his articles. The early New York paintings are 1975-76?

I'd say 1976-77.



Jack Goldstein, untitled, 1981

Why did you choose what Ratcliff calls the “emblem and field” format for your early paintings? Has it anything to do with the small centered image in some 60s Pop art?

It probably has something to do with that. It wasn't an altogether conscious decision. The original influence in the little piper paintings, at its clearest, was to merge an abstract type of field with an image that was loaded with sentimental associations or readings. That was how it started. I was positing a kind of equivalence between the sentimentality of the Scottish image as it's sold abroad and the same sentimentality implicit in New York abstraction as it was sold abroad. It was not an emblem on a field but an emblem on an emblem, the field being another emblem. I like to start with a fairly simple-minded procedure because I think the simpler a painting looks on the surface the more complicated and unbalancing it becomes. . . I can be dismissed as this European who's out taking America by placing images of popular culture on top of the suprematist square, but already that simple description allows a whole lot of other inferences and references, trains of thought to develop. I prefer to do that than to lay out all the possibilities and discoveries in a very didactic explaining sort of way. I'm more interested in packing as much as possible into a very simple statement. The depth of the interpretation is up to the viewer. It comes from the account of time spent looking and thinking. I can't then be accused of being some kind of political artist.

What about the connection with Pop art?

I want to do something with both popular culture and high culture. The way one has effected or devalued the other. It works both ways, I'm not simply talking about popular culture devaluing high culture because high culture also devalues a true mass culture. It's simply about that, and how this is involved in some kind of social control. That's the centre of what I'm talking about.

Let's talk about *Real Life* magazine. Did it come about because you were dissatisfied with artists books?



Richard Bosman. *Drowning Man 1*. 1981

To some extent, though more through a dissatisfaction with art magazines. At the time *ArtRite*, which had been a viable proposition, was beginning to fail. It was doing single issue things, giving over to single artists and wasn't serving as an information thing anymore. Also, the major magazines were still too involved with a Bochner and LeWitt sort of art, yet I knew there were all these people around who despite the immaturity of their work were doing interesting things. I thought we would all benefit from a bit of exposure. One of the few places that showed this sort of work was 'Artists Space' with Helen Winer. We talked about my idea for a magazine and she thought she could get some money from the funding agencies. The first little issue of *Real Life* was done with hardly any money, but it was something to hold in my hand when asking the agencies for support. "Look this is what I want to do." And so it went on from there.

In the first issue you included a section of short reviews of shows at alternative spaces which it seemed was going to be a regular feature. However, it didn't appear in subsequent issues. Was this because you had come to view alternative space in a less favourable light? Or was it because they were now receiving more coverage in the art magazines?

I've since come to view alternative spaces in a less favourable light, but actually, it was stopped for purely logistical reasons when I realised that no one person could cover everything in a way that was fair to all. I didn't have a group of people I could trust to do it for me. It just wasn't possible. I didn't want to go to see all these miserable performances and have myself bored silly looking at films for the sake of reviewing them. Basically, I don't think anyone else should either (laughs).

And why have you lost interest in alternative spaces?

It's partly because the art has changed in some way and I think they've all tended to become petrified. The older ones have all turned into what are basically showcases for new talent.

Is that necessarily a bad thing?





Eric Fischl. *Help*. 1981

I think so, because when I was first in New York a place like 'Artists Space' operated more as a workshop where you could try out an idea and test it publicly. The public was mostly your peers and they told you fairly clearly what was wrong with it, but there was no pressure on it. Now, it's a big deal to have a show at somewhere like 'Artists Space' and everyone comes down and the media covers it. There seems to be this sort of unwritten understanding that if you have a show there then you're good enough to be in a commercial gallery, that perhaps someone will pick you up, maybe 'Metro Pictures' or Mary Boone will discover you or something. I think that's detrimental to the whole idea, so that's why I continue to like places like 'White Columns' because they have a low-key attitude. They allow things to happen and then be forgotten. I think the whole point is that they should be forgotten. The other places are now run by people with more of a professional museum type of interest. I don't think it's healthy anymore.

In Australia the artist/critic is usually regarded with suspicion. The expression "conflicts of interest" was used when I got the boot from *The Age* in Melbourne. Have you encountered this sort of attitude to your own role as an artist and a critic? Also, is this the reason for the editor's note at the end of your article "Last Exit: Painting" in *Artforum* (October 1981)?

Of course my activities as a critic are received with suspicion, that's one of the reasons that makes it interesting to do, because it's so irritating. Among the reasons I think that Kuspit and Ratcliff jumped down my throat so severely was because I was poaching on their territories – as if I was simply a dumb painter. I think it's important that artists should write. Why let someone like Carter Ratcliff tell us what art's about. It enables you to state certain issues clearly and publicly that would otherwise remain bar talk or private conversation. I think it's good to get that stuff public. I answer some of this in a coming piece in *Artforum* which I start by quoting the editor's disclaimer and ask why they thought it was necessary. It seems that the gossip was that they were afraid of this sort of conflict of interest business, that I was involved with the same gallery as some of the artists and it was self-serving and it was serving the gallery



Sherrie Levine. *After Walker Evans*. 1981

as well. At the same time they had to acknowledge that Morris and Smithson had done similar things ten years previously and it was part of *Artforum's* tradition. They found themselves in this double-bind and they didn't quite know how to get out of it, I think.

Recently, I've noticed that critics are starting to refer to *Real Life* painting or the *Real Life* movement, as though it is something well-defined. Do you object to this?

Yeah, I don't think it's well defined at all, and it's not a movement, nor is it just painting. It's generally about representation and the way images are controlled and are controlling. In this context, painting just becomes one of many ways of presenting images.

Is that to align painting with advertising?

No, it's to identify painting as working in a similar way to advertising. It does the same thing, but in a different mode.

Does it do it all the time? Does it do it when it's abstract?

Yes. Being abstract doesn't stop it doing that. In fact it makes it easier to do it properly. When art has any kind of validity it tries not to do it and that's the whole point. I mean, that's what makes it real life, you know (laughs). There is such a thing as *Real Life* art. It's art which is conscious of its position and struggles against it. When a painting is placed into a museum it becomes a sign of culture. It becomes, especially in abstract expressionists like Pollock, a sign of freedom. It's presented as liberation, but it's the same kind of liberation as, say, a horse charging across fields that is used to sell a certain kind of beer. It's just an image of that kind of freedom and can be used and abused in that way.

Is this regarded as an aesthetic objective as well as a political one?

Mine is. You see, that's why the whole idea of a *Real Life* movement collapses, because a lot of the people I have been associated with don't have political aspirations at all. In fact, it's quite the reverse. But I do, because I have this

European background (laughs) since we're speaking of the same critic who's invented *Real Life-ism* and who's criticising me for being European.

Well, just one last thing. If it's not a political thing with these other artists that you're associated with, what is it?

Why am I associated with them? I tend in my writings and whatever to use them as political, but their own intentions are probably different. A good example is Richard Bosman because right from the start when I first wrote something about him he was furious. He felt that it totally countered what he was really about, but at the same time, he couldn't have been that furious because it helped him tremendously in getting some attention.

I just wondered if the things that associated you with the other weren't necessarily political, but you say they were. There is an element of similarity between your work and, say, Cindy Sherman's.

Yeah, there's all that kind of stuff and a sophistication about image that's similar. What seems to be different is that I want to say something about that sort of sophistication. A lot of my peers don't want to do that. They, quite deliberately, want to have no content. They just want to make a sophisticated kind of image and gesture. I suppose, what makes it odd is that I find more sympathy intellectually with people whose work I often find irritating or over-determined, like Sherrie Levine's. But it's always a danger with any political ambition that you become didactic or illustrative. What's good about Cindy's work is that it's so alienated, yet in a way, it allows someone to come at it critically.

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