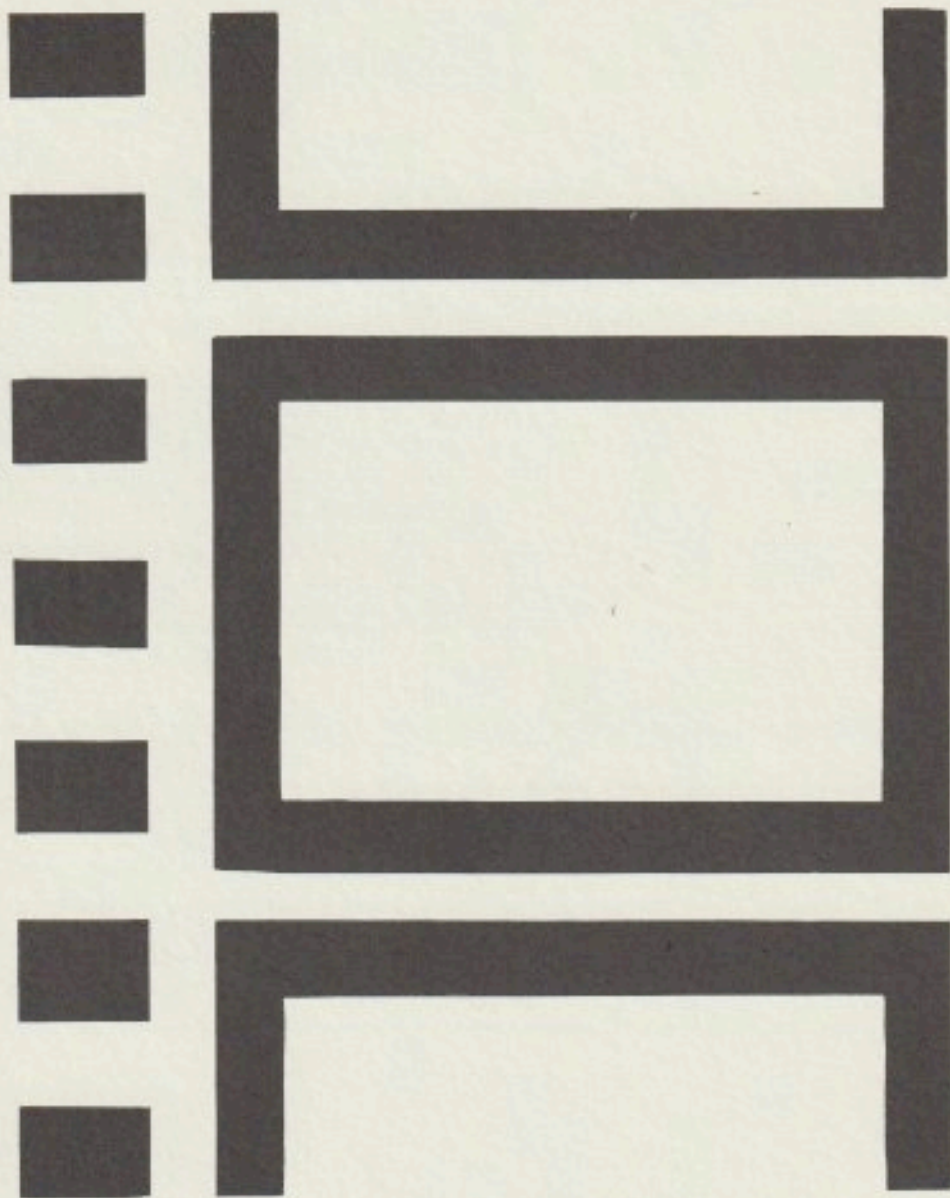


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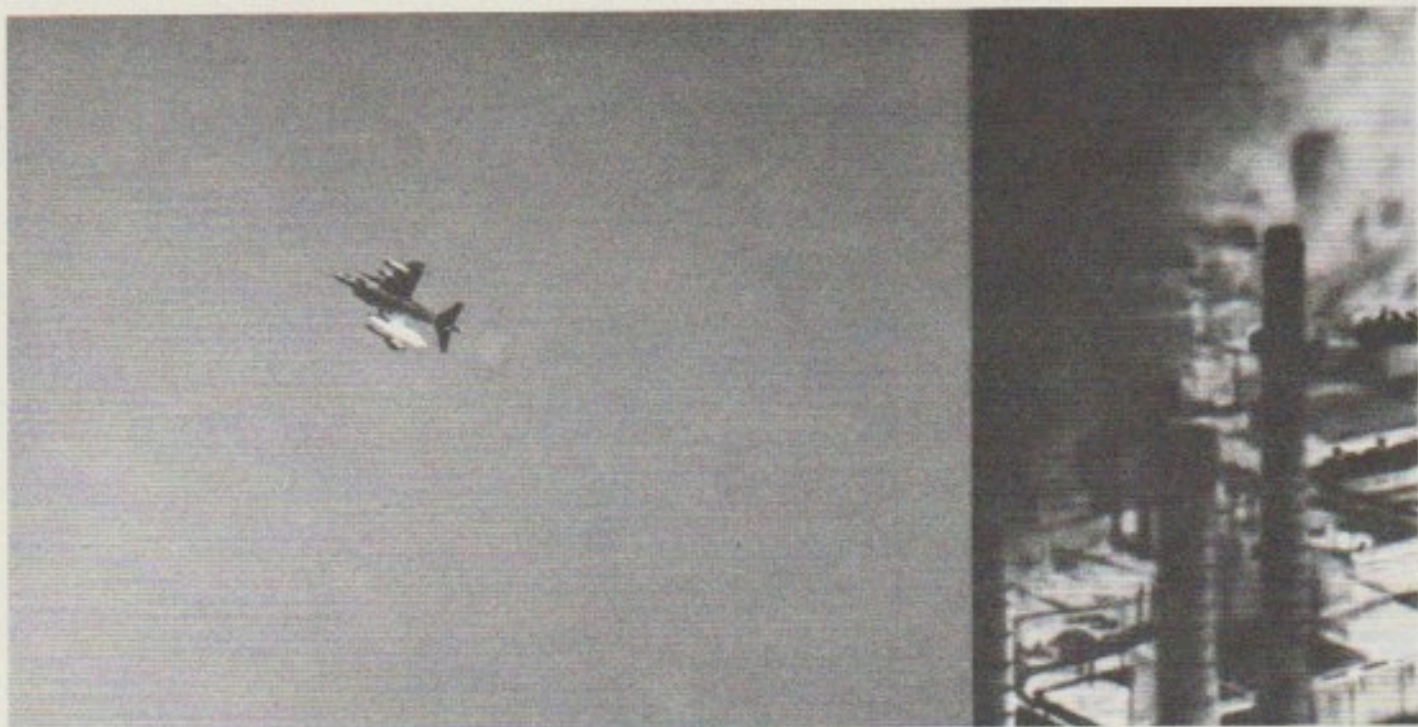
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LONG DISTANCE INFORMATION

by Thomas Lawson

We go to the movies. Maybe we watch television. Maybe we watch a lot of television. But we still go to the movies, and the experience is devastating. The screen is overwhelming, huge pictures of perfection; our dreams externalised. No matter what kind of story is being told, and there is always a story being told, we find it compelling, viscerally convincing; but totally unbelievable.

We learn from the movies. They are far more important to us than conventional educational institutions because they actually show us how to behave. Over and over we see the heroes and heroines of the screen reacting to a relatively small range of situations. These reactions, no matter how exaggerated, always look appropriate, and we soon find ourselves mimicking the elements that we remember. Movies are not realistic, but futuristic; they do not look like real life, but real life often looks like the movies. From them we learn how to walk, stand, sit; how to talk, laugh, cry. Mostly what we learn is how to keep cool, how to maintain a distance from events and retain control. How to go with the story without being taken by it, for unless you are writing the plot you cannot be sure what will happen.

You can be almost certain, but you cannot be sure. So you have to stay until the final credits. At the movies we surrender to narrative. There is no alternative. It is Stanley Kubrick's understanding of this which makes *The Shining* such a good film. *The Shining* is about the sheer terror evoked by narrative, and the image Kubrick chooses is the time honoured one of the labyrinth—not just the garden maze which is of such importance to the final scene, but the labyrinthine halls and passages of the huge hotel

itself. From the beginning of the movie the characters are trapped in an endless progression of tracking shots, increasingly fearful of what they will discover around the next corner. And what they do discover, from time to time, are images, standard images of horror—dismembered bodies, rotting corpses, rivers of blood, cobwebby skeletons and, significantly, an image of twin girls recognisably borrowed from Diane Arbus. Images too stale to be truly alarming. Instead the most terrifying moments in the movie are those when the screen goes black and a title comes up reporting a new day, a different hour. The senseless passage of time, the horrifying acknowledgement that nothing has happened. It is this entrapment in the relentless banality of imagination which finally drives Jack, the main protagonist, into murderous insanity. He thinks of himself as a novelist, but cannot invent a new story, only the predictable one he tells himself in his dreams.

Jack's despair is that all narrative has a tendency to grow the same, to seem already known. He suffers from a sensation of *deja vu*. All he can hope for is that he might be able to create two or three images potent enough to overcome this disability, pictures which will dominate his audience's memory of the story. Jack's problem, an academic one, is that while he recognises that the images he invents are clichés, he fails to understand the power of such imagery. That they are clichés because they have the emotional resonance to withstand narrative, and might be manipulated as such.

These are precisely the pictures we take with us from the movies, the pictures which give form to our lives. Images of recognition, images often at

odds with the situation in which they are embedded. Images which haunt us.

* * *

Jack Goldstein presents images. He does this in a number of ways; in short films, photographic pieces, records and, most recently, in paintings. The images he chooses to present appear to carry the possibility of meaning, but, as he presents them, they are quite resistant to interpretation. His attitude towards media underscores this for he chooses his medium for its potential for transparency rather than for its inherent expressive qualities. The photographic and filmic work is made in a laboratory to Goldstein's specifications; it is therefore slick, professional. The paintings are similarly made to order by a commercial illustrator; they too are fast, efficient carriers, unencumbered by the conflicting messages of the artist's 'hand'.

The early film shorts were made in the mid-Seventies. They are all extremely controlled, so controlled that we feel rebuffed in their presence. We expect film to be seductive. We expect to surrender to size, movement, sound, colour. Above all we expect to surrender to narrative. The only kind of films which are not presented seductively are those made by artists, films rather than movies. More often than not these films deliberately flout the expectations of movie-goers, usually by exploiting the distancing device of amateurism—one or more aspects of production left careless, inept, above all, expressive. Goldstein's films contradict this. Their production values are extremely high, because they are fabricated by professionals. And they are short, just long enough to make an adequate presentation, but too short to create more than the first tremor of

anxiety about the probability of narrative development. They appear totally devoid of expressive intent, but in keeping their audience at a distance they manage to insinuate an unspecified desire to penetrate their secret, make them yield a meaning of some kind.

This teasing refusal of a relationship with the audience is unsettling. It is an irritant which prevents us from being absorbed into the flow of the moving pictures; we are dared to stare at them as unremittingly as they stare at us. Goldstein achieves this effect through an extreme use of artifice. The obviously controlled aspects of production are immediately apparent—the heightened colour, the studio lighting, the isolation of the image. We all know that movies are totally artificial in this way, that lighting and make-up account for the way a movie looks. But usually the look that is desired is a 'natural' one, the appearance of everyday reality. When this is not the case, when lighting and colour are used in an exaggerated fashion, the resultant distortion is an expressive device and we know that we are watching a movie which has its antecedents, however distantly, in Expressionist cinema; that we are watching some kind of melodrama, a movie which is meant to move us. Goldstein's films, however, stand against this, they deliberately shun any kind of emotive appeal. We are struck by the intense light and colour, by the quality of the sound, by the crispness of the image. But then, the seduction all but complete, the work resists and we are left with nothing to hold onto but a dumb picture.

Some examples. The earlier films give us images of a white dove, a dog barking, the Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer lion roaring. What these images have in common is that within our culture, particularly as seen through the veil of Hollywood, they all mean something, but something rendered simple, even banal. Even the lion, which, as a trade mark, does carry a specific meaning, comes, within a larger context, to mean simply 'the movies'. And it comes to mean that through the unconscious indoctrination of repetition,

We see it so often at the movies that it soon signifies the experience, just as white doves or barking dogs are soon understood as clichés, overworked images which have gradually lost all value because they have been so heavily laden, sunk under layers of intention.

In removing these images from their usual context Goldstein appears to be interested in investing them with a new lease on life. But this is a misleading appearance, for he does not really remove them at all, but only repositions them, thus rendering their signifying power ambiguous. They remain clichés, but it is no longer quite clear to what they refer. Because of the quality of Goldstein's production we are insistently reminded of the movies, and so reminded of the original context of the images. But they are determinately not a part of any narrative, and so the false reassurances provided by Hollywood are not available. They intimate inclusion, but effect rupture.

His last film to date, *The Jump*, completed in 1978, is a distillation of the previous work. A short loop of a diver turning in the air, the image is no longer responsible for any clear emotional undertow. We recognise it as something athletic, something healthy and clean, perhaps something selling deodorant. This near abstract quality is enhanced by the film's appearance, for the image of the diver has been rotoscoped so that it becomes a pattern of red and gold light shimmering against a black field. The physical beauty of this small explosion of light in a dark room, an explosion which repeats itself endlessly without any sound but that of the projector, is mesmerising. The film yields nothing but this, and in return all it can ask is that we surrender to it. Which is, of course, an exorbitant demand, the kind of unreasoning imposition which forces us to confront the ease with which such a demand can be made, and the ease with which it is accepted. It demonstrates that elegance is sufficient to intimidate reason, that intelligence can be levelled by the inscience of fashion.

The quantum leap which brought Goldstein, who started his career as a sculptor, to be interested in painting, is thus explained, for there is nothing more insolent than a good painting—an artifact which announces its presence as handmade object, yet attempts to transcend that objectness to remain in the mind's eye as a single, clear image. Photographs and films attempt this transcendence also, but find themselves trapped in the technology which makes them possible; they remain forever locked within a mundane reality of uncontrollable details. As a result their interest as art rarely resides in themselves, but in the manner in which they have been manipulated. Photographs appropriate the world, but cannot exert full control over that appropriation. Paintings can incorporate the world, and in doing so provide the artist an extraordinary degree of control.

A photographic triptych from 1976 must be understood as something of a trial run for Goldstein's current interest in painting. Isolating very small human figures against quite large, faintly tinted fields, Goldstein here attempts to depict a non-specific ambiguity. The figures all seem to be falling, but on closer inspection some are perhaps in better shape than others; a deep-sea diver or an astronaut might expect to float free of gravity, but a man in a business suit would not. The triptych works, therefore, by suggesting that the positioning of these three figures may mean something when, on consideration, it does not. The device fails, however, precisely at the moment that it falls into place, for by looking close to search for the missing connection we are faced with the specificity of the photographic images. The figures no longer remain simply falling men; the photographic process itself takes over the work, reiterating at this least helpful moment three separate instances from the lives of three individuals who are of no concern to either Goldstein nor us in the context of the art work.

Goldstein solves this problem by turning from commercial photography to commercial art. By rejecting the

specious naturalness of the photograph in favour of the artificial nature of the painting, he allows himself the power to influence absolutely what the viewer sees, the implication of the earlier work is made manifest. And, lest the inevitable brushstroke, trace of some 'other' activity, become an obstacle in the way the specificity of photography did, he covers the entire image with plexiglass, thus removing the picture from the surface and from our too penetrating gaze.

The images themselves are romantic. They seem to flirt with danger, with violence. They assert the glamour of machinery, and the destructive power of that glamour. But to say that is to read more into these works than is there, it is to allow the idea of the image to usurp the image itself. For the paintings are flat, done in a standard illustrative style. They are totally uninflected, deadpan. They are large enough to command attention, not so large as to be pretentious. They are vacant, and rather pretty; pretty vacant. Extremely elegant and therefore totally noncommittal. They accept no responsibility; they dare you to react.

One painting of two fighter planes. They have a period look, Second World War, a period with a terror of its own. Appropriately the painting is black and white, reminiscent of an old movie still, misty and out of focus. Airbrushed. Framing it, a strip of yellow wood which holds the plexiglass in place. The airbrushing makes it look atmospheric, seductive in a melancholy way. But the romantically dream-like quality of the picture of the fighters is flatly contradicted by the sharp yellow frame, and by the highly reflective plexiglass. You can surrender to it, stare at it; but it keeps its distance, refuses to yield.

A more enterprising piece, a diptych. On the left the smaller panel has another, similar black and white airbrush picture, this time of smoke billowing around buildings and tall chimneys. Next to this the larger panel is bright and crisp. A saturated royal blue field, and in the centre a small jet, flames flaring from one engine. Is this

a glorification of war, a celebration of the power of technology over bricks and mortar? Perhaps, but the details do not fit. It's a fighter, not a bomber, and too recent a model to be destroying old factories. And anyway the factories are not burning, merely smoking in the way that old factories smoke. Perhaps then an allegory, a Phoenix of modern engineering rising from the old, moribund industries. It hardly seems likely. After all it is well nigh impossible to look at the two panels together. The saturated blue is so intense it dominates the smaller, greyish panel. But the overall pattern created by the image on that smaller panel is definitely interesting, demands attention on its own. The painting divides itself and refuses our attempts to bring it together. It proposes interpretations, but denies them before they can be fully articulated.

Two images are brought together. Separately they may mean something. Together they may mean something else. But they may not. They ask that we take them on, but offer nothing beyond the attraction of their surface. Apparently transparent, they are utterly opaque. Goldstein's earlier films demonstrated something of the sculptor's concern for situation in the way that space and light were manipulated. Now that concern has narrowed in focus. The work now addresses the situation of the viewer. The subject is in progress. These paintings offer a certain kind of information, but it is at a long distance and the information is about the control that that distance exerts.