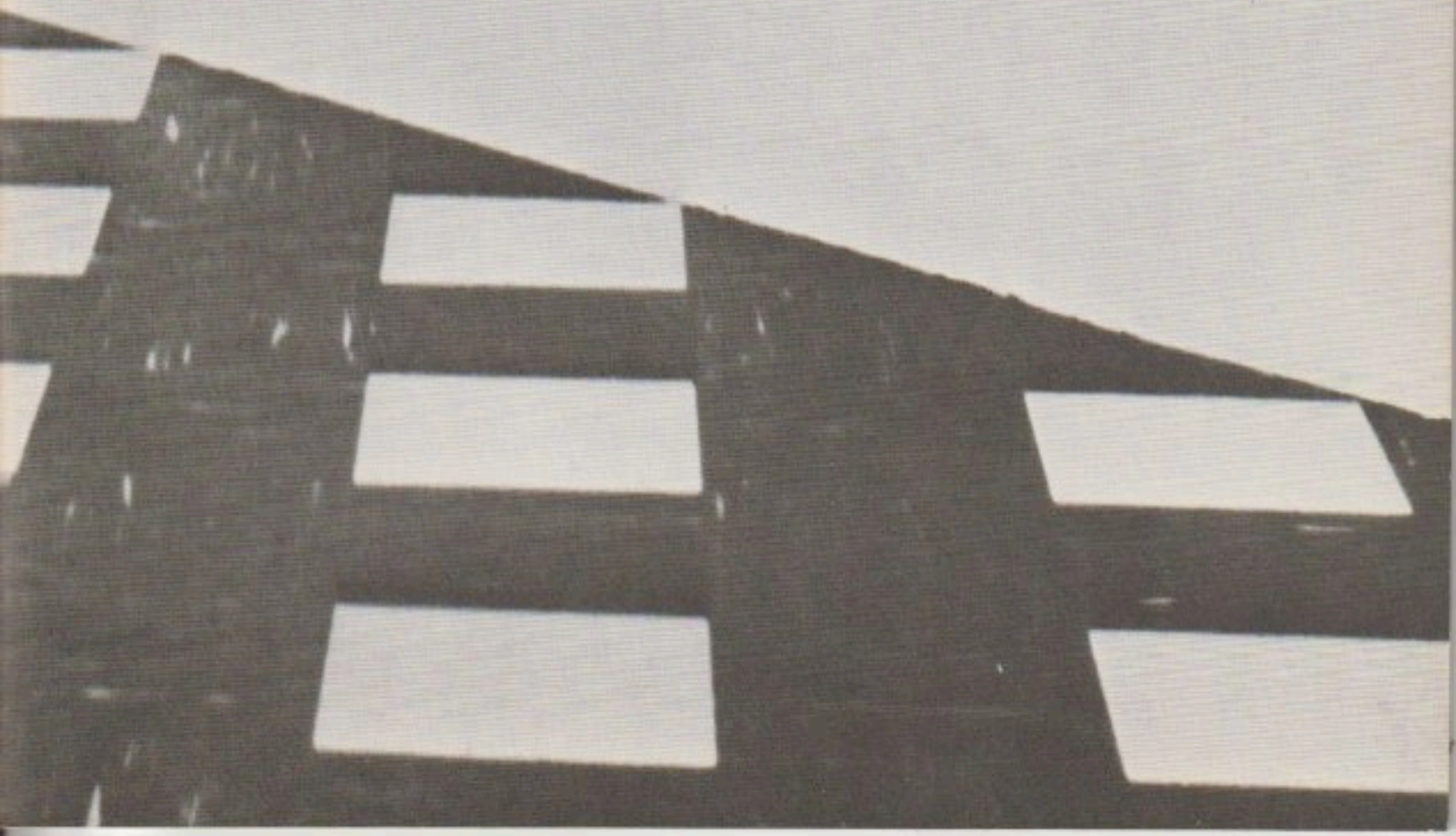




*R E A L L I F E* Magazine

Autumn 1981 \$2.00





# REAL LIFE Magazine

Number 7, Autumn 1981

**Editor:** Thomas Lawson

**Associate Editor:** Susan Morgan

**Design:** Deborah De Staffan

**Contributors to this issue:**

Douglas Blau writes art criticism for *Arts Magazine*, *Flash Art*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.

Eric Bogosian writes, acts and directs. This year he will tour his solos through the US and Europe. In March, *The Kitchen* will premiere a new 'play.'

Jenny Bolande is an artist living in New York.

Malcolm Kesselman is a painter living in New York.

Mitchell Kriegman is a writer and performer who works in radio, television, and live performances.

Paul McMahon is a jack-of-all-trades, master of . . . Best known as a musician, he will be putting out a record later this year.

Robin Peck is an artist and teaches sculpture at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

David Robbins is an associate editor of *The Paris Review*.

Mike Roddy recently published material in the anthology of artists' writings, *Hotel*. He is now working on a novel to be published by Tanam Press.

Fulton Ryder is a pseudonym, and *Pissing on Ice* is a selection from the forthcoming publication, *Paperback Bible*.

Address all correspondence to the editor,  
41 John Street, New York, NY 10038.

Telephone: (212) 349 4053.

Subscription rates: \$8.00/year; \$15.00 foreign airmail. Please include remittance with order. All contents © REAL LIFE Magazine. All rights reserved.

REAL LIFE Magazine is published quarterly.

This issue is supported, in part, by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the Committee for the Visual Arts.

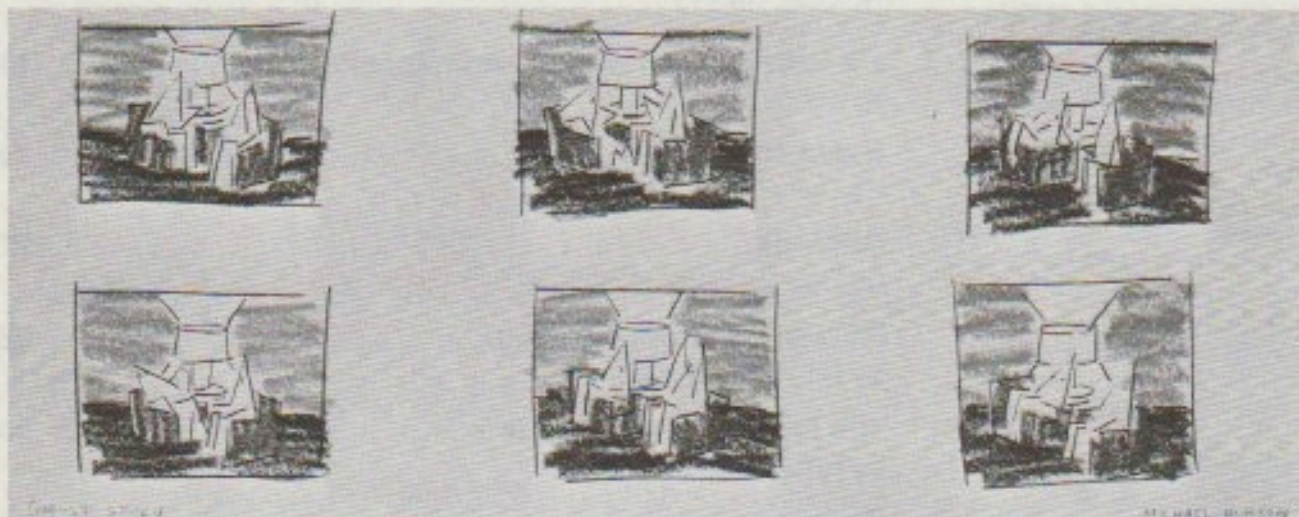
<b>Too Good to be True</b> . . . . .	3
by Thomas Lawson	
<b>Paintings Are More Than Medals of Honor</b> . . . . .	8
by Malcolm Kesselman	
<b>Out of Breath</b> . . . . .	9
by Mitchell Kriegman	
<b>Painted Babies</b> . . . . .	10
by Paul McMahon	
<b>Michael Powell</b> . . . . .	12
an interview by Laura Cottingham and Richard Martin	
<b>Better Living Through Chemistry</b> . . . . .	15
by Susan Morgan	
<b>Untitled</b> . . . . .	17
by Mike Roddy	
<b>Elk Grazed as if Nothing had Happened</b> . . . . .	19
by Jenny Bolande	
<b>Notes Toward Film</b> . . . . .	20
by David Robbins	
<b>Driftings</b> . . . . .	22
by Douglas Blau	
<b>Filmmaker Seeks Funding</b> . . . . .	25
by Richard Howorth	
<b>The Extinction of Sculpture</b> . . . . .	29
by Robin Peck	
<b>Pissing on Ice</b> . . . . .	30
by Fulton Ryder	
<b>Fascination</b> . . . . .	32
by Eric Bogosian	



*The instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.*  
—Walter Benjamin



Neil Jenney: Study, 1971. Private Collection, London.



Michael Hurson: Ghost Story, 1971. Courtesy Paula Cooper.



# Too Good to be True

by Thomas Lawson

The following text was written to accompany an exhibition of current painting in New York which *REAL LIFE Magazine* presented at *Nigel Greenwood Inc.*, London this October. The show included work by Richard Bosman, Eric Fischl, Michael Hurson, Neil Jenney, Thomas Lawson, Sherrie Levine, Gerry Morehead, Walter Robinson, and David Salle.

Ten years ago the paintings of Neil Jenney and Michael Hurson, if known at all, were considered decidedly eccentric and rather marginal. But items on the margin have a way of insinuating themselves into the main body of the text they annotate until sooner or later they come to dominate it. By the mid-Seventies these paintings had become more public, and a younger generation was looking at them from a point of view shaped by a knowledge of the work of such artists as Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Art & Language, and others who campaigned vigorously against the continuation of the painting tradition as an ideologically tainted repository of the myth of personal authenticity. Although virulent at times, the campaign was mostly carried out by a policy of neglect, and the Conceptual artists devoted their attention to an investigation of the structures of language and the photographic image—media which can be characterised as 'factual'. The dialectic of this work depended on the common-sense understanding that a photograph or a declarative sentence presents reality with a minimum of distortion. At its best this kind of art undermined that common-sense view of things, and demonstrated its entrapment within an ideological construct. The 'factual' was shown to be fictional.

The quirky paintings of Jenney and Hurson participated obliquely in this debate, and as the success of Conceptual Art developed into an impasse, many younger artists saw in them an indication of one possible way forward. As both artists developed increasingly complex attitudes towards the representation of reality, they began to reduce painting to a number of constituent parts, using, in an almost schematic way, the devices of figurative representation, and increasingly both did so in conjunction with a deliberately social production. Jenney has long described his work as Realist, and long laid claim to the cultural and political implications of that label. In the meantime Hurson has quietly turned to portraiture, making his subject the conventions of appearances as they are understood not only in aesthetic

terms, but in social usage.

The selection of work for this show is to be understood as an introduction to a London audience of newer work being done in New York which continues this discourse on the mythology of cultural representation with this essay as a collection of signposts indicating key points in an argument which has yet to be fully articulated, far less brought to a conclusion. On this occasion there is a concentration on work which has something to do with painting, some of it frankly antagonistic to that whole tradition, but most displaying a more complex ambivalence to its value, choosing to masquerade as painting in order to address the problem at its very centre.

Because the pictures are figurative they contain the suggestion of a story, a moment isolated from a larger tale. Does that mean they are narrative paintings? The answer rests within our definition of narrative.

A narrative can be described as a string of incidents and elements following one another, building up a tension between difference and resemblance. It is a tension mediated by repetition, leading to a promised coherence; a metaphor reached through a chain of metonymies. The passion which animates such a narrative is the passion of meaning, which is the desire for an end. This is the satisfaction we seek in fiction, a metaphorical knowledge of death, a knowledge that is denied us in the contiguous, one-thing-after-another unfolding of our daily lives. But there is more to a story than its ending, it also has a beginning. And while we may always want to get started, actually making a move is usually difficult. A trick is needed, an expedient subterfuge, and since we have already been thinking of passion and desire, the trick to be turned is obvious. Indeed writers from Rousseau to Genet have described the deliberate stimulation needed to begin a story as analogous to a masturbatory reverie and its necessary fictions. A certain level of



excitement is triggered and then maintained, the eagerly sought consummation postponed as long as possible. A good story is evasive, it is a detour, an arbitrary, transgressive, gratuitous deviation from the shortest way to a fitting conclusion. The fictive space is a dynamic one, one which involves both producer and consumer in a struggle between ends and beginnings, fought out in a frenzy of repetitions. (The most precise diagramming of this deadly erotic of narration is to be found in *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, Duchamp's masterly 'delay in glass.'

Repetition is the essence of narrative, and must be seen as an assertion of control over what remains inevitable. It is an attempt to return, to double back, making connections while denying conclusions. The story rushes us forward, but at the same time it suspends that forward rush, enabling us, bye-the-bye, to establish meaning in terms of similarity and substitution rather than mere contiguity. Such is the magic and the curse of reproduction and representation. While the repetitive tropes allow an acknowledgement of finality, they also operate on a subversive level in that they project beyond the end in their endless returns; they make a re-reading possible, and so deny the absoluteness of the end. Meaning is rendered provisional.

Any painting is fictional in this sense, the record of an absurd action undertaken to kill time while getting from the original stimulus to the final, deathly product. But a painting which is a masquerade, a representation of an already existing representation, a rendering of something else, undermines any simple sensualism with its thoughtless acceptance of a 'natural' order, and injects a note of scepticism. The inauthentic, made-up character of the whole enterprise is revealed.

From that more politicised point of view any picture is suspect, since it is bound to be caught up in a series of social relations which not only give it meaning but ensures that that meaning is well understood and quite specific.

In the process the relationship between the producer and the consumer is established. A picture may or may not tell a story, but it must certainly be framed within one if it is to be visible, and that story is one of manipulation and dominance.

The most important new art being produced today is art which addresses this issue. It is an art which disrupts and displaces our routine ways of seeing and talking about the pictures which inform our lives, and which dominate us from the mass media and from the more respectable, but equally domineering agents of high culture. An art which raises questions which reveal that the methods of production and reproduction of these all-powerful images, be they mechanical or manual, and the discourses that surround them, are profoundly ideological and riddled with promises that cannot be kept. An art which recognises that our lives are ordered within systems of representation which impose their own endings; that we all live within complex and unyielding fictions. Art which acknowledges that we are trapped within stories that we already know, and from which we have no escape, except through the subversively delaying tactics of repeating our past mistakes, living in a present which accepts the past, but denies the inevitability of the future.

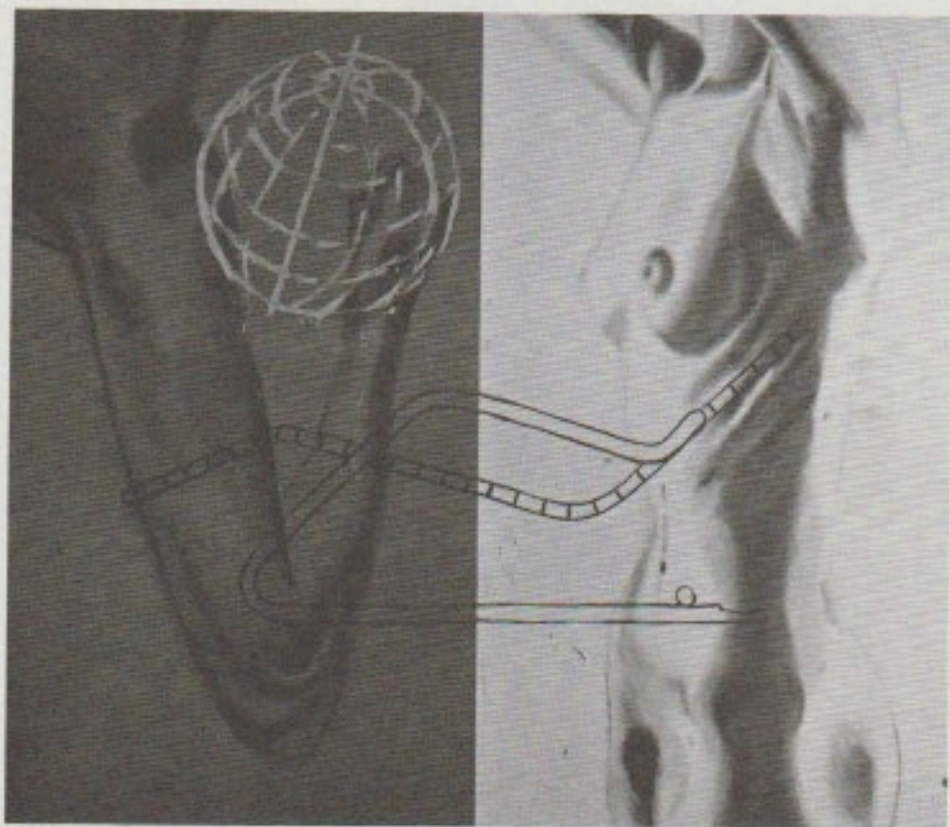
This work takes its cue from the observation that all cultural production is necessarily fictive, and looks long and hard at the ideological myths embedded in that structure. It is a perverse provocation, one calculated to unsettle purists of all sorts. These paintings use formal and expressive devices, but are neither formal nor expressive. They use recognisable imagery, imagery with identifiable social meanings, but reproduce them from memory or from photographs so as to throw these meanings into confusion. They seem to present stories, there is a suggestion of fantasy, the whiff of allegory, but nothing quite coalesces as it should, for they lack sufficient clues, or are overloaded with too many of them. They lack beginnings

and ends. They are deceitful and insincere, faithless in their sport with a medium which requires belief if it is to work successfully as the near-transparent tool of a repressive ideology. Fake concoctions, they appear to be acceptable, but are treacherous in their relentless exposure of the timeless sanctity of representation as just another story.





Gerry Morehead: *Battle and Flow*



David Salle: *The Power that Distributes*, 1981. Courtesy Mary Boone.





Thomas Lawson: *Don't hit her again*, 1981. Courtesy Metro Pictures.



Eric Fischl: *Help*, 1981. Courtesy Ed Thorp.





Walter Pitzroren: *Killer*, 1981. Courtesy Metro Pictures.



Sherrie Levine: *After Franz Marc*, 1981. Courtesy Metro Pictures.



Richard Braaman: *Death of a Gambler*, 1981. Courtesy Brooks Alexander.