

ReAppearance

Realism in Contemporary Art

John Alexander

Richard Estes

Claudio Bravo

Janet Fish

Altoon Sultan

Paul Cadmus

Lucian Freud

Neil Welliver

Rackstraw Downes

Yvonne Jacquette

Courtesy of

DC Moore, Marlborough Gallery, Marlborough Graphics, Robert Miller, Tibor de Nagy

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Terms of Tradition: Realism and its Revisions

Understood as both an historical art movement and a style of visual representation, realism is an elastic concept further stretched by the roster of artists on view in *ReAppearance: Realism in Contemporary Art* at Brenau University Galleries. The different subjects and styles present in this collection of prints, pastels and paintings illuminates aspects of the Realist tradition established in the nineteenth century. Issues related to light, the use of new tools, painted texture and practice distinguished the so-called realist artists of then as well as now. Explorations in objectively recorded, modern content begun a century ago continue today. Although commonly perceived as a conventional art form, realism was – and is – imitative, archival and objective yet also inventive, abstract, and meaningful.

French artists Gustave Courbet and François Millet first embraced the term Realism in the 1850s as definitive of their new, purely objective responses to nature and humanity. Later in the century, artists now categorized as Impressionists or post-Impressionists, including Edgar Degas, Claude Monet and Edouard Manet, also claimed Realist goals for their paintings. Reactionary against the more idealized and emotional Romantic images of prior decades, Realist pictures embraced advancements born of the Industrial Revolution by insisting on the depiction of contemporary subjects both in and outside the rapidly developing modern city.¹ This occurred methodically, as well, via the use of photography and commercially manufactured artists' materials. Alongside the celebration of urban growth and mechanization was the portrayal of the surrounding countryside, captured on site by artists who – for the first time – participated in the new practice of *en plein air* painting. The work of lugging small canvases, easels and art materials to remote outdoors locations was intended to produce objectively recorded effects of light and weather.

Although characterized as a movement concerned with impartial approaches to content, Realism was actually comprised of individual, artistic responses to portrayed subjects. Efforts to capture light phenomena resulted in less blended, more textural manipulations

**“...tradition approves
all forms of competition.”**

– Arthur Hugh Clough
The Latest Decalogue

of paint which energized the surface and appearance of seemingly placid, straightforwardly panoramic landscapes. Scale played a narrative role, as well. Cool, detached distances established between the viewer and components of the landscape or cityscape affirmed the Realist refusal to heroicize subjects. Even though the Realist painter relied on photography for compositional and light-related assistance, additional emphasis was placed on differences between photographic and human perception. Cropped compositions, flattened volumes, blurred edges and light-saturated forms revealed an image's debt to the camera, while non-naturalistic color alluded to painterly invention based on the new, scientifically rational analysis of light. In the nineteenth century, 'the real' possessed multiple levels of truth, ranging from the individual to the optical to the mechanical.

The aforementioned Realist celebration of modern industry – conveyed in portrayals of train stations, gas-lit interiors and the urban worker – was countered by pastoral images emblematic of respite and recreation. Landscapes devoid of human intervention suggested the invincibility and divine order of nature. The stereotypical field hand employed rudimentary tools in toiling the land, evoking nostalgia for simpler lifestyles that had begun to disappear with the advent of the machine. Notions of temporality inform Realist pictures, as well: Monet's monumental haystacks populate the countryside with unlikely, ancient permanence in the momentary, flickering light.

Contemporary realist works featured in *ReAppearance* both retain and reject the methods and conventions of their historical precedents. In his longstanding series of Maine landscape views, Neil Welliver continues the tradition of *en plein air* painting.² In her early career, Altoon Sultan also painted scenery outdoors, armed with bug spray and a wide-brimmed hat.³ Yvonne Jacquette's bird's eye view depictions of cities seen from plane

windows mandated her repeated appearance on express flights between Chicago and New York (as well as special permission to photograph from secured floors of the World Trade Center), during which she would produce small sketches to be further amplified in the studio.⁴ Rackstraw Downes makes repeated visits to a chosen site partly because his compositions include an almost 180-degree scope of vision.⁵

Despite these contemporary painters' commitment to direct observation, artistic invention and necessity prevail in some cases. Welliver's site sketches (also intended for enlargement and refinement in the studio) record formal specifics yet abide by historic, tonal painting methods in the area of color. The artist claims that he 'never' documents the colors he observes, and instead uses a selective palette designed to unify the image as a distinct work of art rather than a mere record. Both Sultan and Jacquette acknowledge the necessary use of the camera for the purpose of recording that which is temporary and changeable.

For other artists, the camera is either essential to their working processes or completely unwelcome in the studio. Richard Estes' legendary use of this tool recalls the nineteenth century preference for the neutral treatment of subject matter. While Estes does not project his photographic images directly onto the canvas, he does piece together several angled views from his photographs in order to better replicate the totality of a scene. Estes prefers the camera's reduction of space and form into patterned abstraction.⁶ Claudio Bravo's smoothly rendered still-lives suggest photographic exactitude actually observed and recorded in the studio – firmly resisting the same spacial flattening that Estes requires.⁷ Downes also eschews photography for recording his spacious views of urban encroachment on nature, claiming that it would 'bore' him. Welliver's working method for final paintings – starting at the top, progressing down from left to right and never returning to correct or adjust an already painted area – suggests an additionally mechanical, automated approach to technique.

Painterly, often linear texture present in still-life images by Janet Fish recalls the similarly crafted Impressionist renderings of fractured light on form.⁸ Schooled in the mid-twentieth century Abstract Expressionist idiom of the "honest mark" of the artist, Fish defied tradition in her own era by implementing an abstract method in the creation of representational images. The artist describes reflective surfaces of objects from both high and low cul-

ture in a spidery lacework of colored lines. Welliver's scenery, which reflects his own Abstract Expressionist history, retains the same linear brushwork. *Stump* of 2000, a woodcut executed in the Japanese ukiyo-e print method (an art form additionally influential for nineteenth century Realists) appears visually camouflaged by a woven, curvilinear pattern prevalent throughout the entire image. Jacquette also employs an energized surface in her night-time pictures of cities viewed from above. Uniquely keyed, measured color strokes describe every building and street, creating a staccato rhythm in an otherwise geometrically ordered picture.⁹ John Alexander's floral and garden scenes appear lush in vegetation as well as texture, with richly colored, thickly painted forms placed against thinner, washy grounds. Primarily self-taught figurative painter Lucian Freud takes his medium to sculptural levels, vigorously asserting the corporeality of the body in paintings or, as shown in this exhibit, etchings. The rather classical traits of Paul Cadmus' figures allude to a past beyond Degas' Realist pastels of bathers in interiors. Idealized and decontextualized, Cadmus' structural, hatched lines recall the drawings of Italian Renaissance sculptor Michelangelo, therefore conjuring the nineteenth-century Realist's stylistic springboard of Romanticism.¹⁰

Among this contemporary collective there remains the historical detachment from subject matter – if only in pictorial modes. The distant viewpoint present in works by Sultan, Jacquette, Welliver and Downes – in which forms and objects are placed in either the middleground or background away from the viewer – suggests indifference on the part of the artist. Unique elements in both the art and various artists' statements prove the contrary, however. Many *ReAppearance* works contain emotional investment in the city, country or transitions in between.

The pristine quality of Welliver's views of unspoiled nature reflects environmental concerns: the artist is vigilant about disallowing hunting or development on his Maine property. Many of his images record a stage of natural life cycles as a nostalgic icon of organic, evolutionary progress. Sultan's panoramic views of agricultural machinery *in situ* suggest a sense of environmental resignation: technology is no longer new or surprising. The artist has stated that the 'ordinary ugliness' of the equipment is beautiful, indicating her acceptance of man-made objects in the natural landscape – despite her voluntary management of recycling efforts in her small, Vermont hometown. Downes' equally panoramic scenes of intermediary zones between the city and nature focus on the artist's conception

of landscape as a 'place where people live and work.' Alexander's rich color and viscous paint renders nature a luxuriant indulgence.

Similar to nineteenth-century Realist versions of the city as utopia, a number of contemporary realist works surpass any initial photographic aloofness. Fresh, vivid color surmounts the physical distance of Jacquette's urban images. These concrete, artificially lit worlds with sparse, Lilliputian figures appear neatly ordered and content, implying an almost benevolent point of view. Bravo's close-up paintings of fabric – substituting more conventional still-life compositions with only the fabric that typically embellishes such images – convey detachment in the use of diffused light yet appear anthropomorphic in formal arrangement. Estes' cityscapes – free of dirt, trash and people – seem nearly as pristine as Welliver's uniformly "clean" landscapes, suggesting a sort of environmentalist position imposed on an unlikely place.

An artist's neutrality towards the subject can invite negative criticism, as noted in unfavorable reviews of Fish's more "kitschy" subjects. Evoking her Modernist predecessors' critically panned illustrations of 'the vulgar,' Fish admits to portraying most of the 'forbidden subjects,' including teddy bears, children and as seen here, toys. Cadmus' historic reluctance to address the overtly homosexual content of much of his figurative work may have been one cause for his late-career exclusion from the contemporary art world.¹¹ Lucian Freud's sometimes explicit, figurative works remain extremely popular in current exhibitions but are considered too controversial to place in museum collections. Freud's graphically rendered nudes may provoke an audience in a manner similar to that of his grandfather Sigmund's protracted psychoanalysis methods: careful, almost compulsive observation yields sometimes disturbing results.

While concerned with representational imagery that is current and objective, the *ReAppearance* artists ultimately infuse their pictures with highly individualized biographies, methods and messages. Not unlike their historic counterparts, they envision their works as unconventionally traditional. Although initially standard in choice, twentieth-century subjects remain contemporary and occasionally controversial. Realism is comprised of individual experience revealed in various analyses of light effects and viewpoints; the camera is a tool to be used or comprehensively rejected. Objectivity is abstracted via textured brushstroke and inventive chromatics. However, landscapes now decisively incor-

porate or exclude the formerly new urban world of industry. Monet's monumental haystacks have been replaced by giant plastic-wrapped rolled bales. Once celebrated for their benefits to people, utopian cities are almost completely freed of the human element that created them. Figures become re-classicized or visceral in description – having become like the land or city, the body is topographical. Still life undergoes redefinition either through the reduction of established components or the abstraction of form. As seen here in *ReAppearance*, the terms of tradition involve an active dialogue with the past as well as the present. Realism continues to exist as an historically unconventional and divergent art form concerned with the here and now portrayed with "an original feeling for nature and a personal manner of execution."¹²

- 1 Linda Nochlin, *Realism*, New York: Penguin Books, 1971.
- 2 David R. Slavitt, "Neil Welliver," exh. cat., New York: Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 1999.
- 3 Altoon Sultan, "Culture/Cultivation: Thoughts on Painting the Landscape," *Art Journal*, Winter, 1998, 91-95.
- 4 Charles Hagen, "All That Jazz," *ARTnews*, Feb., 1990, 114-115.
- 5 Hayden Herrera, "Rackstraw Downes' Separated Realities," exh. cat., New York: Marlborough Gallery, 1997.
- 6 Linda Chase and Ted McBurnett, Interview with Richard Estes, "The PhotoRealists: 12 Interviews," *Art in America*, November-December, 1972, 146.
- 7 Edward J. Sullivan, "Art: Latin American Still Lives – An Exuberant Heritage of Imagery and Symbolism," *Architectural Digest*, Sept. 1994, 180-182.
- 8 Cynthia Nadelman, "Forbidden Fruit," *ARTnews*, October, 1999, 174-177.
- 9 Carl Little, Yvonne Jacquette, (review), *Art in America*, v. 79, Feb., 1991, 146-147.
- 10 Jonathan Weinberg, "Cruising with Paul Cadmus," *Art in America*, Nov. 1992, 102-108.
- 11 Richard Meyer, "Paul Cadmus," *Art Journal*, Fall, 1998, 80-84.
- 12 Théophile Thoré, nineteenth century art critic, as quoted in Nochlin, 33.