

THE URGENCY OF HISTORY PAINTING

Michael Ned Holte

Dear Michael,

I have started this so many times I no longer know where to begin. Well, no, I should begin with an apology, for I've promised you a piece of writing for a very long time, and the number of deferrals and delays is (mostly) uncharacteristic but also (totally) unacceptable. Rarely have I stumbled through so many false starts in attempting to write about an artist's work. I should say that this does not point to any deficiency in your work or lack of interest on my part. Rather, I suspect, it points to the difficulty of apprehending your work from this considerable distance of time and space. Few works of art fare well as reproductions in books or JPEG files viewed on the internet, as I always remind my art history students and anyone else who will listen, but there is something particularly elusive about your works, given the constellation of specific but often unexpected materials that comprise them: blackboard paint, magnetic tape, black beeswax, chalk with verdigris, copper, cellophane, Lego-brand building blocks, images clipped from books, and—perhaps most elusively—etched mirror. Which is also to say your work is slippery when viewed up close, in real life, as well. Beyond that, there is my own shifting relation to the work, and what I understand as your larger project—an understanding that has been incremental and marked as much by misapprehension as by fixity.

This letter is an apologia, but it is also a confession: When I first encountered your work, some eight years ago, I was not entirely ensnared by what I saw. There in the backroom of a gallery in the Chinatown neighborhood of Los Angeles, I was shown an example, or perhaps several, from the body of work that first brought you notoriety: mirrors incorporating images of monkeys dressed in anthropomorphic drag, sitting on the toilet or toiling away at some dreary manual task—images claimed from vintage posters. (I remember first seeing these gussied up primates as a child in the 1970s, in bars or basements or both.) Perhaps my first mistake was assuming the subject of these images was the monkeys, rather than the charged peculiarity of their coexistence with the mirror—and, of course, the inevitable reflection of the viewer, of “you.” At first I assumed the monkeys had been

affixed or printed atop the mirror, but no. Closer scrutiny revealed the posters were mounted behind the mirror, and the mirror has been painstakingly excised of silver in the silhouette of the monkey and a few key props. A mirror is all surface, but at the same time nothing really exists there—at least not for long.

Your next body of work, circa 2006, also employed etched mirrors, but this series took me by surprise and won me over. Here, the noisy monkeys gave way to sedate brick walls—walls either under construction or falling into ruin, with some of the mirrored and back-painted surfaces punctuated with plastic plants. For me, this deadpan approach recalled the pop shorthand techniques of Artschwager and Lichtenstein without repeating either. The most explicit reference was Pistoletto, whose own mirrored brick wall (*Muro di Mattoni*, 1967) prefigured your own, though as you later demonstrated, the wall belongs to no individual artist but rather to a long artistic lineage that includes Piero and Vermeer—not to mention Pink Floyd. The wall is, of course, allegorical. Always devoid of at least one brick, your walls hint at structural compromise if not outright collapse: A missing brick is surely the first sign of ruin. In “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism” (1980), Craig Owens notes that, “Allegory is consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete—an affinity which finds its most comprehensive expression in the ruin, which Benjamin identified as the allegorical emblem par excellence.” The ruinous wall—your wall—exemplifies time but is simultaneously situated outside of time.

I should not have been surprised when your work resurfaced again in yet another new guise. Or perhaps I should say, a *seemingly* new guise: namely, objects with unmistakably political connotations. (The occasional appearance of a Lego-block wall, in black or white, clearly echoes approaches from your not-so-distant past.) In explicitly addressing the events of May '68 and the Paris Commune of 1871, or at least the mediation of these very mediated events, this work led me to consider the contemporary relevance of history painting, a genre which, like allegory, largely died with modernism, finding its terminus in a few canvases by Courbet and Manet. Modernism looked to the past, but staked its claim on the future.

Rereading T.J. Clark’s book on Courbet, *Image of the People* (as I seem to do whenever I teach modernism), I was struck by something he writes about *After Dinner at Ormans* and how it relates to your larger project: “This is not a picture in which a young painter borrows forms and experiments with styles; it is a picture which absorbs past examples and puts them to new use.” Your recent objects—paintings and sculptures, or, perhaps, constructions that

anxiously oscillate between such categories—call forth the past through explicit photographic references: May '68, the Paris Commune, the Angry Brigade, bombed-flattened Dresden—the last of these repurposed by Malcolm McLaren and Vivien Westwood for *Seditionaries*, their punk boutique, before entering your fold. (Inevitably, these images of social unrest also reflect the recent past of the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring.) These isolated references are integrated into works that assemble a diverse and unlikely set of materials (paint on canvas, yes, but also beeswax, verdigris, clothing, toy building blocks, recording materials such as records and magnetic tape) as well as art historical precedents, often blatantly: I'm thinking here of Jasper Johns (objects affixed to canvases—not that he was the first...or last to do so), Joseph Beuys (a vitrine, copper, blackboard paint), Gerhard Richter (large gestural swipes of red paint, the *Baader-Meinhof* cycle), Andy Warhol (the *Race Riot* series in particular, and serialization more generally), and others. Significantly, these complex constellations “[absorb] past examples and [put] them to new use”—but it should be stated that the references hardly stabilize for long. Rather, they do the opposite, provoking unexpected connections—and incompatibilities—between identifiable art historical gestures (or “signatures”), between historical moments, and, most strangely, between art history and the broader category of social history.

“Photography is not the reflection of reality,” intones the narrator in Jean-Luc Godard's film *British Sounds*. “It is the reality of that reflection.” Reflection is deflection—a spatial dislocation—but also deferral—a temporal disturbance. If the mirror remains a constant, the use of blackboard paint emerges in this new work as a useful foil, if not (yet?) as a dialectical equal. I am reminded that Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, working collaboratively as the Dziga Vertov Group in the immediate wake of May '68, claimed to use film as a blackboard. They desired to approach film didactically—directly addressing the audience, clearly stating the interests of the filmmakers—but one must also bear in mind that whatever is written on a blackboard might just as easily be erased. The blackboard represents, then, a “zero degree” to which one might return, over and over: “Back to the drawing board” becomes a mantra-like sign of allegorical repetition.

Gradually, I've come to understand your project as one that is about time, or perhaps more accurately, the relationship of time to history. Of course time and history are two different things, the latter a way of giving order to or making sense of the former, through narrative or other structural means. The relationship of time to history is unstable,

potentially ruinous—an image clipped from a book or momentarily reflected in the mirror; an idea recorded on the blackboard or magnetic tape, but just as easily erased.

My initial mistake in judging your work was assuming it was a fast read: I mistook those monkeys for banana peel gags, slapstick comedy. In fact, your work is incredibly slow, and more serious than I first apprehended. It's slow, but urgent in its accumulation of so much allegorical evidence. The title I had imagined for the essay that gradually mutated into this letter was "The Urgency of History Painting." And, speaking of the epistolary form, I hope this direct address, of a "you" by an "I," is not a cheap gimmick, but rather the opposite: a more transparent approach, where I can state my conclusions plainly. I imagine this as a kind of corollary to the way you think of your paintings as devices, like blackboards and mirrors. Or, like a loose brick: a potential weapon that is also the first sign of collapse.

I wonder if, by the time you're reading this, you're already back to the drawing board.

Yours truly,

Michael