

Art and Likeness

REALISM IN THE GALLERIES

by Gail Leggio

In *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (1960), E.H. Gombrich considers the fundamental challenge of representational painting: how to translate a three-dimensional world into two dimensions. There are many ways of accomplishing this task. The flat figures of Egyptian wall painting and medieval manuscripts are as formally valid—and as culturally eloquent—as the more illusionistically rounded figures of Greco-Roman antiquity and the Italian Renaissance. Gombrich, who titles the first section of his study “The Limits of Likeness,” explores the shifting conventions that govern both artists and audiences. The current revival of representational art is built, to some extent, on efforts to restore certain art historical conventions. But, as this fall’s crop of exhibitions suggests, the new realism is still very much a work-in-progress.

According to art historical legend, the fifth-century B.C. Greek Zeuxis painted grapes so realistically that birds tried to eat them. There is a long tradition of mimesis as prestidigitation, a painterly sleight of hand where brushwork evaporates, leaving an amazing simulacrum of reality. The artist’s prowess is demonstrated, and the viewer may feel simultaneously delighted and—like the ancient Greek birds—hoodwinked. Trompe l’oeil, the most common term for the genre, has an honorable place in American art. Raphaëlle Peale (1774–1825) called a special category of his



Terese Rogers, *Watermark*, 2008

COURTESY ATLANTA ART GALLERY

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

marvelous still lifes “deceptions,” superimposing bits of trompe l’oeil paper or cloth over more conventional images. William Michael Harnett (1848–92) and John Peto (1854–1907) created rack pictures, in which letters and paper money seemed to be tucked, bulletin-board fashion, under crossed ribbons. Formally exciting, the best of these works also constituted subtle commentaries on contemporary life.

In the twentieth century, historical trompe l’oeil works were seen, in retrospect, as conceptually interesting: the illusion of depth in an essentially flat space emphasizes the primacy of the picture plane, in tension with the virtuoso rendering. The contemporary Chilean master Claudio Bravo mines this vein in his “package” paintings, such as *Homage to St. Theresa* (1969), in which a dark, featureless canvas is illusionistically wrapped in stiff white paper and tied with string. Principle Gallery in Alexandria, Virginia, opened its fall season with a trompe l’oeil exhibition (September 19–October 18, 2008). Of the three featured artists, the standout is veteran painter Jorge Alberto, a Cuban who moved to the United States in the mid-1960s and now lives in Baltimore. Alberto’s *Capricious Love* (2004) follows a classic formula. An old master painting of a Caravaggio-esque Amor, in an elaborate blue-and-gold frame, is half wrapped in beige paper, tied with string and layered with tags, notes and three playing cards (all hearts) convincingly taped to the wrapping. Alberto’s *Pas de Deux* (2007) is even more effective. A pair of pink toe shoes hangs from a support, casting shadows against a turquoise floral pattern. A chipped black-and-silver frame surrounds this tableau like a saint’s niche, and a twist of paper is pushed into the frame. The color palette has sophistication, especially in the variations of tone in the worn but luminous slippers and the sheen of the metallic frame.

The other two artists in the exhibition, both considerably younger than Alberto, play with different notions of trompe l’oeil. Joshua Suda studies with the trompe l’oeil specialist Anthony Waichulis and is currently an assistant instructor at the Waichulis Studio. Traditionally, trompe l’oeil is a still-life genre, but Suda moves beyond those parameters. *Under the Rainbow* (2007) is essentially a portrait with trompe l’oeil elements, posing a wary young woman in a frumpy sweater in front of a painted skyscape. In *Doppelgänger* (2008) a color close-up seems to be taped over a larger black-and-white image, showing the same face in profile and mimicking the tricks of photography. Adam Vinson, who also studied at the Waichulis Studio, strikes a macabre note in *Specimen* (2007). A drawing of a skeleton on stained paper is taped to a weathered grey wall, with a plastic bag containing rusty locks tacked up in front of the drawing. The illusion of the transparent plastic sagging under the weight of its contents is very skillfully done. Vinson’s 2007 *Inamorata* (cover) has remarkable verisimilitude, although it does not neatly fit the trompe l’oeil model. With a painting this lovely, however, no one should quibble with its inclusion. The painting is a shoulder-length portrait of a young woman in

profile, bare except for a necklace of warm-colored beads, with a backdrop of elegantly rumpled white cloth, tied to an easel with string. The sheen of the cloth sets off the glow of the model's skin and gives her, despite the contemporary untidiness of her glossy brown hair, the look of a Renaissance princess.

Trompe l'oeil is a perennial genre, but for most of the twentieth century it was a backwater pursuit, well outside the mainstream art scene. Beginning in the mid-1960s, however, another kind of hyper-realism became fashionable. Photorealism was initially an off-shoot of Pop Art and carried a good deal of conceptual baggage, especially in the notion of reproducing by hand a mechanically produced image, usually a photograph. "My main objective is to translate photographic information into paint information," said Chuck Close (cited, Edward Lucie-Smith, *Movements in Art Since 1945*, 1985). Many Photorealists deliberately sought out subjects of what Lucie-Smith calls "aggressive banality," and the movement sometimes seemed stymied by the imitative fallacy, with too many uninteresting, albeit skillful, paintings of uninteresting scenes. But others found beauty in unexpected spaces. Close's epic-scale black-and-white portraits of friends weren't pretty, but they had gravitas. His more recent work, building up portraits from jeweled mosaic-pieces of paint, has a Byzantine richness.

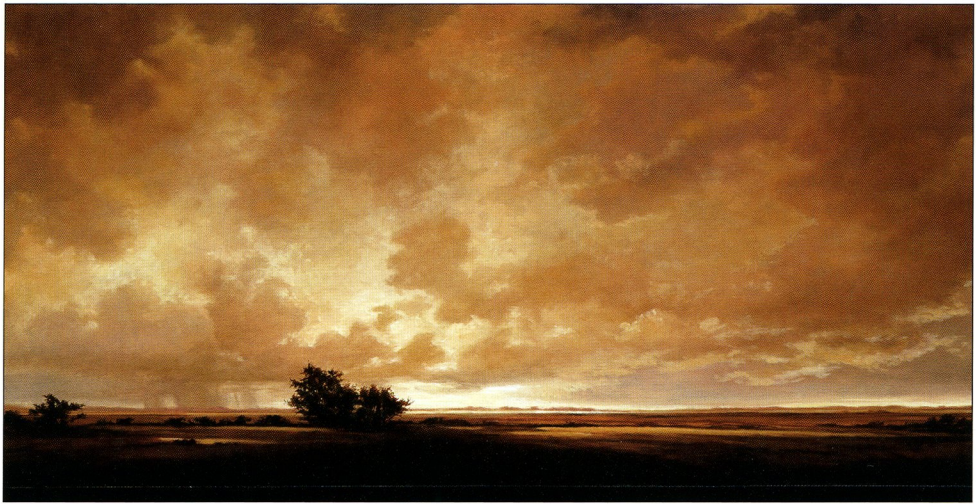
Bernarducci Meisel Gallery in New York City often shows the work of twenty-first-century Photorealists and has developed a roster of practitioners from Italy. This fall the gallery is presenting the New York solo debut of Luigi Benedicenti. The exhibition, "La Dolce Vita" (October 30–November 29, 2008), clearly demonstrates the Pop Art roots of Photorealism. Benedicenti depicts desserts, the most artificial and frivolous of foodstuffs, and gives them a high gloss. The five tarts of *Pasticcini Olimpici* (2008), neatly arranged on a white surface, are seen in an overhead shot. The scale is disorienting (the panel is 43-by-67 inches), and the hard glaze of the cherry, blueberry and kiwi toppings looks as unnatural as a Day-Glo paint box. It is easy to imagine Wayne Thiebaud tackling this subject in a different Pop idiom, using paint as thick as icing. Other Benedicenti still lifes are less geometric. *Sweet Reflection* (2008) poses a tart in a shiny red L-shaped frame with velvety shadows. *Meringue* (2007) has an epic quality, not simply because of its scale (27-by-39 inches) but because of its muted white-on-grey palette and dramatic lighting. The frail cup has the grace of an ancient column.

Meringue was also featured in Bernarducci Meisel's season opener, a group show entitled "Unforeseen Reflections" (September 4–27, 2008). The other Italian Photorealists here have had recent solos at the gallery. Roberto Bernardi's *Le Mie Cramelle* (2007) is typical of his signature high-gloss depictions of clear candy jars on reflective surfaces. Luciano Ventrone combines the sharp resolution of Photorealism with an old master feel for subject matter and light. *Il Doni della Terra* (2008) offers a cornucopia reminiscent of Caravaggio, an elongated pyramid of autumnal red and orange fruits against a black back-

ground. Other aspects of contemporary European realism were on display, notably in Spanish artist Bernardo Torrens's *Kitchen Scullion* (2006–07). Torrens achieves glossy surfaces with spray acrylic paint, but this grisaille portrait of an ordinary worker, life size at 71-by-39 inches, has a dignity in keeping with the great Spanish tradition. Gus Heinz's Photorealism is more conventional. His *57th & Madison* (2005) is a big-city Rubik's Cube of cars and office buildings, with no hint of sky. Other gallery artists work in a more traditional representational style, offering attractive views with softer contours. Kim Danby's *Across the Vineyard* (2004) bathes the Italian countryside in gold-green light, using the sloping terrain to make the composition more dynamic.

Landscape offers a different kind of illusionism, the breathing space of deep recession and aerial perspective. Hyper-realist images, with their shallow depths and tight rendering, can seem claustrophobic. For many landscape painters, the air itself becomes a principal subject. This is certainly true for Victoria Adams, who is having her first solo exhibition with Arden Gallery in Boston in November, 2008. Adams lives and paints on Vashon Island, an isolated spot accessible only by ferry from Seattle, Washington. She works from photographs and from the immediate Pacific Northwest topography and weather, but her flat countryside under billowing skies has a timeless look. Excluding the manmade, she looks back to the edens of nineteenth-century American artists in the Hudson River School and the Luminist movement. She characteristically pushes a narrow strip of land to the bottom of the image and fills the rest of the composition with light and clouds. The few vertical elements, mostly trees, are kept at a distance, and the solidity of the ground is further undercut by light-reflecting stretches of water. The combination of low-lying terrain and lyrical light effects suggests old master Dutch art. *Aerie* (2007, 36-by-40 inches) dissolves a distant river and low clumps of trees in aerial mist, while peach-tinged clouds fill an immense sky. In the 24-inch-square *Lowlands # 86* (2008), beams of light break through the clouds over a placid stretch of river and trees. The effect balances naturalism with the traditional visual language of the physically and spiritually illuminated landscape. Occasionally, Adams plays with the technicolor atmosphere of Frederic Church, as in the vibrant orange skies of *Red Weather* (2008), but her serene views usually seem temperamentally closer to Claude. Adams will be the subject of a mid-career retrospective at the Tacoma Art Museum in 2010.

A number of contemporary artists are getting back to the roots of American landscape, a trend exemplified by Jacob Collins's Hudson River School for Landscape and his early summer show "The Eastholm Project," at Hirschl & Adler Modern in New York City. Jane Bloodgood-Abrams paints where she lives, in the Hudson River Valley, but her soft-focus, diffused-light images are largely unconcerned with topographical accuracy. Her work, she remarks, has "progressively become less about a particular place and more about expressing a personal experience." New paintings by Bloodgood-Abrams



Victoria Adams, *Red Weather*, 2008 COURTESY ARDEN GALLERY, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

were on view at DFN Gallery in New York City September 4–27. They have a dreamy melancholy reminiscent of late-nineteenth century Americans such as George Inness and the Tonalists. *Sunset Over the Fields* (2007) blurs the outlines of the trees that are the principal features of a darkling stretch of landscape, suffused by an orange-red sky with undertones of mauve. If *Sunset* shows the influence of Inness, Bloodgood-Abrams comes close to James McNeill Whistler's half-light meditations with her *Nocturne* (2008). Her view is country, not city, of course, but the haloed moon and its reflection effectively soften the darkness of the tree-framed water. Bloodgood-Abrams's titles have a transcendentalist aura. *Between* (2008) offers a glimpse of a serpentine stream and distant hills through a V-shaped frame of foliage. A similar stream is closer in *Transmigration* (2008), with a mass of dark bronze trees on the right and a sky full of warm peach clouds rising into a cool blue sky. *Rise* (2008) spreads cerulean sky and foaming pink-tinged clouds, over a base line of low hills, across a triptych.

John Morrell, who grew up in the Adirondacks, takes a more literal approach to the Hudson River School tradition. What he calls his "return to the source of the uniqueness of American landscape art, the 'wilderness,'" is predicated on documenting sites favored by nineteenth-century American masters. "Landscape Drawing from Tradition," his show at Sherry French Gallery in New York City (October 29–November 22), includes images of Lake George, Niagara, Newport, Rhode Island, and Bash Bish Falls in Massachusetts. Morrell's *Bash Bish Falls* (2007) is the most successful drawing on display. The use of maroon paper gives the rock formations and overhanging foliage, crisply outlined in blue pencil, a satisfying solidity and depth, while the white heightening for the cascade and, more softly, for glimpses of sky adds a vivacious

touch. Morrell more often works on blue or grey paper, which has a cool monochromatic quality. This works best in *Niagara Mist* (2007), in blue and umber pencil, with white heightening used to show the turbulence of the water. The composition is a clever one, with a rocky mass obstructing most of our view of the falls, and the white mist as mysterious as the aurora borealis. In other images, such as *Tidal Pool Newport* (2007), the chill of blue pencil on blue paper seems to flatten out the light. Morrell particularly admires John Frederick Kensett (1816–72), and his revisiting of his hero's favorite sites is a worthwhile endeavor.

Sherry French Gallery opened the season with a September “Mainly Maine” exhibition featuring gallery regulars. The most interesting work was by egg tempera painter Phil Schirmer, who teaches at the Farnsworth Museum. Schirmer is a connoisseur of stone, juxtaposing ledges of grey-brown rock, often smoothed by the seaside erosion of wind and wave, against enameled skies. *Black and Blue* (2008) uses his signature topography as a stage set for a flock of ungainly cormorants, birds he describes as “dour church deacons dressed in black robes.” Most landscape artists savor the expansive. Schirmer likes the tight shot, and in his austerity banishes the vegetation that proliferates in wild vitality around the stony details of Asher B. Durand's landscapes. Schirmer finds beauty in raking light and hard surfaces. The conventions of verisimilitude in this genre are particularly elastic. Many viewers are willing to see luxuriant vegetation not only in the detailed naturalism of the Pre-Raphaelites but also in the abstract filigree of Jackson Pollock, to see sublime expanses in both the Romantic panoramas of J.M.W. Turner and Helen Frankenthaler's stained canvases.

A number of galleries and museums regularly host invitational and/or juried surveys of realism. Inevitably, the artists gathered together are largely familiar to their primary audience. Still, these events are useful in assessing the state of this loose movement and sparking discussion about “the limits of likeness” in contemporary art. “Contemporary American Realism: 2008 Biennial,” at the Fort Wayne Museum of Art, presented a hundred artists (through November 2, 2008). The exhibition catalogue includes essays by Donald Kuspit and Annette Blaugrund, former Director of the National Academy of Design. Many of the artists featured will be known quantities to readers of these pages, but there are some surprises. While too many of the portrait painters seem content to get a likeness without taking up the formal challenges of the genre, Karen Kaapcke captures a strong personality in *Destiny* (2005), showing only the back of a shaved head with multiple piercings. The rich color of the dark skin is particularly striking.

Still life continues to dominate, with mixed results. Connie Netherton's *Orange Marmalade* (2006) aims for old master glamour, with opulent fruit and an ornate silver-and-glass canister, but everything seems too bright and hard-edged. Sydney Bella Sparrow's *Pera Familia* (2007) is better. The five tawny

green pears on a simple wooden box have gravitas and are nicely set off by the dark background. Best of all is *The Red Box* (2007) by Braldt Braldis, a Dutch artist now based in Santa Fe. There is a submerged element of narrative in the tightly focused rendering of a red cardboard box filled with shells and a rough stone heart, something of a leitmotif with this painter. A row of tiny shells, a broken fork and a key arranged along the supporting shelf add to the enigmatic iconography, and the colors have a gem-like clarity.

Many of the artists seem to be trying out various art historical idioms, suggesting how diverse—and perhaps tentative—the new realism is. David Dewey's *Winter Thaw* (2004) could be an exercise in neo-regionalism, with its simple, blocky buildings and old-fashioned American landscape. A dusty pink light unifies the composition, and solid understanding of color and shape makes the picture formally satisfying. Susan Sykes's *Chambers Street Ferry, NYC, 1936* (2007) looks like a period illustration, and it lacks the fresh re-thinking that would move that style into the twenty-first century. A couple of artists indulge in postmodern irony. Katie Miller's *Two Little Girls in a Room* (2007) is graceless and crude, dominated by a lamp in primary colors that devolve into garish smears. But Jean Wilkey's *Iterations* (2007) has an in-your-face wit. A sullen adult lies curled up in bunny-patterned hooded pajamas, surrounded by plush toys and even a couple of chocolate versions of rabbits. The color palette—reminiscent of acid-toned Easter eggs—is attractive, in a free-wheeling Franz Kupka way.

The Atlanta Art Gallery's "Realism Invitational" (through October 5, 2008) took a narrower view. Many of the works are in the charcoal medium, handled with varying degrees of skill. Soft-focus works well for Justin Balliet in *Out of the Shadows*, a portrait head of a girl with closed eyes and curly hair demurely pulled back; her serenity suggests a Virgin Annunciate. In contrast, Kate Sammons's *Self-Portrait with Hermes* doesn't make enough textural distinction between flesh and marble. Terese Rogers's *Watermark* (2008) is a fine example of straightforward realism, a simple still life of a bouquet of flowers, a pair of scissors and a splash of water on a table. She subtly notes the various kinds of sheen in the metal scissors, the water and the Bell jar vase, and the way the bouquet is cropped by the top edge of the sheet makes for a strong composition. Omar Rodriguez uses charcoal in a trompe l'oeil design, *Signal Fire* (2007). The centerpiece is an old photograph of children riding a pony, surrounded by a jar, marbles and jacks. With so much monochrome, another trompe l'oeil image, Anthony Waichulis's *En Route* (2007), stands out. A torn-paper image of an old-fashioned black delivery truck with red wheels is combined with simulacra of stamps, tape and pencil scrawls. The jokey side of the current realism revival is represented by Michael Hockenbury's oil *Tempting* (2008), which depicts a hammer head suspended by an unnervingly flimsy string above a pink piggy bank.

Many contemporary realists seem to scale back their ambitions, partly in



Brian O'Connor, *Petroglyph Park*, 2008

COURTESY KLAUDIA MARR GALLERY, SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

acknowledgment of the burden of the past and always aware of the difficulties of rebuilding a craft. But surely it's time to take some chances. The Fifteenth Annual Realism Invitational (October 17–November 20, 2008) at Klaudia Marr Gallery in Santa Fe brings together forty artists and includes some bold works. Emilia Faro's watercolors of young women are deceptively simple, mostly head-shots composed of stylized ovals, suggesting the gentler side of Egon Schiele. *Cupide* (2008) is nearly monochromatic, brightened only by rose pink lips and pink-rimmed, grey-green eyes. The paper itself takes on the translucency of skin, and the wet-into-wet treatment of the hair is effective. Brian O'Connor's *Petroglyph Park* (2008) is a big oil (66-by-109 inches) that tries for the perverse moralizing of Hieronymus Bosch. In this nightmare landscape, under sulfurous clouds, perched on the edge of a hellish abyss, dogs walk on stilts while tiny winged human figures wrestle with contraptions rigged with ragged sails. It reminds us that one of the uses of realism, over the course of art history, has been to picture the life of the mind and even give form to the freakier manifestations of the imagination. Margaret Bowland, too, emphasizes the fictionality of realism. In her artist's statement, she begins by citing Plato and then stakes out her territory: "by the art of painting we make another house, a sort of man-made dream product for those who are awake.' I believe in those houses, that in this illusory space our stories unfold." Bowland believes in Beauty but questions conventional notions of "blank screen" beauty. One of her favorite models, used in her "Olympia" series to pay homage to both Velázquez and Manet, is a dwarf. *Murakami Wedding* (2008) uses the anime

patterns of the fashionable contemporary Japanese artist as décor for a study of a dark-skinned bride and two little flower girls, all dressed in traditional Euro-style finery. The bride wears kabuki-white makeup, adding to the complex cultural interplay. The flatness of pattern is balanced against rounded figures, for a picture that combines tough thinking with commitment to the mysteries of the painted world.

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Atlanta Art Gallery, 2005 Peachtree Road, NE, Atlanta, Georgia 30305. Telephone (404) 316-7322. On the web at www.atlantaartgallery.com

Bernarducci Meisel Gallery, 27 West 57th Street, New York, New York 10019. Telephone (212) 593-3757. On the web at www.bernarduccimeisel.com

DFN Gallery, 210 Eleventh Avenue, New York, New York 10001. Telephone (212) 334-3400. On the web at www.dfngallery.com

Fort Wayne Museum of Art, 311 East Main Street, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46802. Telephone (260) 422-6467. On the web at www.fwmoa.org

Sherry French Gallery, 601 West 26th Street, New York, New York 10001. Telephone (212) 647-8867. On the web at www.sherryfrenchgallery.com

Klaudia Marr Gallery, 668 Canyon Road, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501. Telephone (505) 988-2100. On the web at www.klaudiamarrgallery.com

Principle Gallery, 208 King Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314. Telephone (703) 739-9326. On the web at www.principlegallery.com

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