

Realism, Past and Present

by Gail Leggio

Most of the painters working today who are covered regularly in the pages of *American Arts Quarterly* identify themselves as contemporary realists. Their chosen mode is representational or figurative, rather than abstract, and they use more-or-less traditional means to achieve illusionistic depictions of the world around them. For the most part, they cite the old masters as their heroes, arguing—like their colleagues in sculpture, architecture and literature—for a return to the standards set by the great works of the Western canon. In practice, however, these artists often find themselves rehearsing nineteenth-century debates between the academic establishment and a series of avant-garde movements, with the difference that today's traditionalists have cast themselves in the outsider role.

A burgeoning network of ateliers based on the rigorous teaching methods of the Academy has proved vital to this enterprise. The website for the Grand Central Academy of Art, led by Jacob Collins, a first-rate painter and influential mentor, offers a succinct mission statement: "The program is based on the skills and ideas that have come from the classical world, the Italian Renaissance and through to the Beaux-Arts tradition of the nineteenth century." The website also notes that students have access to the Institute of Classical Architecture and Classical America collection of 200 nineteenth-century casts of antique and Renaissance sculpture, donated by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Grand Central Academy of Art and similar ateliers are doing fine work fostering traditional skills, but they have not, for the most part, attempted to tackle the subject matter—historical, mythological, religious—that was the *raison d'être* for all that expertise. That reluctance is understandable, given the general decline in cultural literacy, and it may take generations of re-education to recover the legacy. There are a number of artists who work in the academic vein, often identifying themselves as classical realists, including Stephen Gjertsen, Martha Mayer Erlebacher, Graydon Parrish and David Ligare. The reach of these ambitious artists often exceeds their grasp, but they frequently touch beauty, as in Ligare's splendid series of luminous Platonic still lifes, which he calls "aparchai," drawing on the notion of ancient harvest ritual offerings.

For many twenty-first-century traditionalists, however, the idealized forms and slick surfaces of the academic style have limited appeal. They use the term *realist* cognizant of its importance to the nineteenth century's avant-garde. Realism was an elastic phenomenon. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood—often, rightly, associated with an intense strain of Romantic medievalism—was founded on the principle of truth to nature, as well as a distaste for clas-

sicizing visual rhetoric as practiced from Raphael to Sir Joshua Reynolds. The American landscape painter Asher B. Durand was as taut an observer of woodland undergrowth and rock as John Ruskin. But the flagbearer of Realism as a radical social and aesthetic movement was Gustave Courbet (1819–77). In 1863, the avant-garde art critic Jules Antoine Castagnary distinguished three schools of artists, rejecting classicism, which, he claimed, “under the pretext of purifying and idealizing reality...weakens and deforms it” and, to a lesser extent, the Romantics, whose work is sometimes marred by “the whims of imagination.” He saves his praise for artists he terms “naturalists,” who see “truth in equilibrium with science,” and cites Velázquez, Zurbarán and Ribera as the “great naturalists” among the old masters.¹

A remarkable 2003 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Manet/Velázquez: The French Taste for Spanish Painting,” demonstrated the lineage of a revolution in taste. The realists, or naturalists, campaigned for new subjects in art and new ways of handling paint, drawing on the imprimatur of the Spanish tradition. What was the impetus for the Realist revolt? Linda Nochlin writes that “Courbet felt the need of a new kind of contentious visual language with which to state his opposition to the dominant code of representation of his time.”² Courbet flaunted decorum by presenting scenes of working-class and provincial life, not as genre anecdotes but on a scale usually reserved for history painting. Sarah Faunce points out that contemporary Salon critics bristled at what they considered the ugliness of the men and women Courbet painted, at the lack of “poetry, the ideal, nobility of feeling....”³ It is easier now to see the aesthetic power of Courbet’s work, not only the vigor of his paint-handling but even the sensuous allure of his nudes and brooding landscapes. Not all beauty is Parnassian.

There is certainly nothing Parnassian about the paintings of the veteran contemporary realist Burton Silverman (b. 1928), whose long career was celebrated recently in “Realism Recovered: The Art of Burton Silverman” (July 8–September 1, 2010) at the Sherwin Miller Museum of Jewish Art in Tulsa, Oklahoma.⁴ Silverman gravitates toward people with imperfect bodies and lived-in faces. He doesn’t make narrative paintings, but his subjects carry a good deal of implicit backstory. “Very early in life,” he remarks, “I fell in love with the landscape of the human face, where all the emotional states of life are to be found, and the love affair has not faltered.” Preferring the reality of the individuals he encounters to any idealization, Silverman aligns himself with Courbet against the quest for pure, transcendent beauty. The nineteenth-century academicians produced some marvelous work, but there was also a heavy weight of overly praised mediocrity and a lurking feeling that devotion to the ideal was yielding diminishing returns.

For Silverman, however, defining his style means distinguishing himself not from academic painters but from the photorealists. On his website, he speaks of a “requirement that the image be about something more than simple

Burton Silverman
The Stonebreaker, 2009

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verisimilitude—of just making the subject appear lifelike. I believe there is a difference between an image that is photographically correct and one that is ‘alive.’” One way to get beneath the surface appearance of the subject is to forego the legerdmain of an immaculate illusionism. Gestural paint-handling calls attention to the artist’s feelings as well as to the dynamic aspect of his technique. For half a century (he has been exhibiting since the early 1960s), Silverman has stayed true to his creed. The thirty-one paintings in the Sherwin Miller Museum exhibition, dated from 1998 to 2010, reveal a mature artist still at the top of his game.

In *The Stonebreaker* (2009), Silverman finds a typical realist subject in an older man, shirtless and squinting into the sun, doing yard work. There is nothing heroic about the slightly paunchy figure, although the way he leans on

the upright shovel has strength and dignity. The shovel provides both compositional scaffolding and, iconographically, an attribute of the job. Silverman doesn't have the explicit social agenda of the nineteenth-century Realists, whose figures sometimes fall into rhetorical poses. In Ford Madox Brown's *Work* (1852–65, City Art Galleries, Manchester), the members of a road crew on a London street strike attitudes of Renaissance nobility. Closer in spirit to Silverman's painting is Courbet's *The Stonebreakers* (1850, formerly Dresden, now destroyed), an affinity underlined by similar titles. Courbet shows two road workers, an older man and an adolescent, breaking rock with a hammer and carting the rubble away. The French radical Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–65) used Courbet's *The Stonebreakers* as a visual text for a sermon decrying the conditions of the working classes: "that deplorable boy who carries the stones will never be acquainted with any of the joys of life; chained before his time to day labor, he is already falling apart.... Thus modern servitude devours the generations in their growth; here is the proletariat."⁵ Courbet's painting is more matter-of-fact than Prudhon's strident peroration would suggest and more effective for being quietly respectful of the workers, who turn their faces away from the viewer. But Courbet's stonebreakers are representatives of a class and a social problem; Silverman's stonebreaker is an individual with an implicit personal story. Silverman has found a way of working with art history's past without becoming controlled by it. He writes: "I think my painting alters all the assumptions about influences, since, if one is a serious painter, they are only sources of historic 'reassurance' rather than actual determinants of what and how I paint."⁶

Silverman has long been a successful portrait painter, a practical career path for a realist navigating the volatile art scene in the second half of the twentieth century. But he clearly relishes the opportunity to explore the endless fascinations of human nature and facture, the laying on of paint. A pair of three-quarter-length figures of young women demonstrate his insight and skill. *Winter Hat* (2008) is, among other things, a spirited exercise in capturing the play of light, illuminating the planes of the model's rather wary face, luxuriant golden brown hair and lilac scarf. A pale green mottled background sets off her dark coat. She seems thoroughly contemporary but a little diffident, with her hands shoved in her coat pockets. The girl in *Unknown Flag* (2003) is, in comparison, a Romantic revolutionary, grasping her standard—with its red, orange and aqua stripes—with confidence and gazing down at us with cool, no-nonsense bravura. Silverman is a master of body language, and his use of hands in the three works discussed here communicates character effectively. The facture in *Unknown Flag* is striking, in the sketchy dark hair, wrapped with a yellow-orange headband, in the flying white of her tank top and, especially, in the stormy blue of the roiling sky against which the figure is posed. Strong drawing gives the exuberant paint-handling powerful architectural support.

These are other, younger artists working in the tradition of nineteenth-century Realism, notably Carl Dobsky (b. 1972), whose spring 2010 exhibition at John Pence Gallery in San Francisco featured a number of closely observed and tough-minded images. Dobsky's paintings might be described as naturalistic, especially his gritty portraits of the homeless and revelers at the annual Dia de los Muertos parade in San Francisco's Mission District. The terms *realism* and *naturalism* are frequently used interchangeably, but naturalism is more closely associated with literary and philosophical theory. The most influential exponents of naturalism were the thinker Hippolyte Taine, a professor at the École des Beaux-Arts from 1864 to 1884, and the novelists Émile Zola and Gustave Flaubert. Their goals were objectivity and clear-eyed observation of facts, set within a deterministic view of human fate. In the hands of a great writer, of course, what sounds like a recipe for a sociological treatise can become a deeply moving narrative. If Zola's *Germinal* is a bleak exposé of the mining industry, *Thérèse Raquin* presents indelible characters struggling with



Carl Dobsky
*Women at the Dia de los
 Muertos Parade, 2009*

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desire and remorse, and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is a masterpiece, with a foolish yet vibrant central character who continues to resonate with readers a century and a half later.

Dobsky's *Fallen Hero* (2010) is a naturalistic painting. The physical situation and social plight of the old man—sitting forlornly on cardboard in a doorway, surrounded by paper cups, bottles and plastic bags—is efficiently illustrated. He is bare-chested, like Silverman's stonebreaker, but his slumping posture and the accumulation of objects around him tell the story of a class as well as an individual. Dobsky's title alerts us to the artist's sympathy, but, even without it, the viewer senses the loving attention he pays to the bedraggled figure. The painter's willingness to look, to see and to carefully record lifts the image far above the merely polemical. In *Women at the Día de los Muertos Parade* (2009), Dobsky takes on the bizarre and ultimately joyous holiday celebrating the dead. The women—colorfully dressed in ruffles and mantillas, their faces painted to suggest coquettish skulls—are defiant in their celebration of life and death. Dobsky captures this sensibility, too, in his remarkable two-sided portraits, backing a straightforward portrait head with an image of a skull. *Portrait of James* and its reverse, *Skull with Earbuds* (2009), has the sharp wit of a Spanish memento mori.

Like many of today's best young realists, Dobsky studied at Jacob Collins's Water Street Atelier. So did Sarah Lamb (b. 1971), who also teaches at Collins's Grand Central Academy of Art. Dobsky has moved in the direction of naturalism. Lamb has found her own accommodation between neo-academic art and realism, between reverence for the old masters and appreciation for the



Sarah Lamb
Hydrangeas in Silver
2010

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brushwork of some avant-garde nineteenth-century painters. An exhibition of Lamb's recent work at John Pence Gallery (September 10–October 9, 2010) demonstrated her skill, especially in still life. The question of narrative context recedes, to a large extent, when we shift from the figure to the still life, although the choice of objects depicted can carry a subtle message. The most interesting still life in Dobsky's show, for example, was *Shop Fan* (2009). The industrial contraption, electrical wires dangling, in a rough space, confronted the viewer with a certain proletarian bravado. But Lamb's subjects are classic, handsomely executed in the manner of the Spanish old masters and their nineteenth-century admirers, such as the American William Merritt Chase, in his brown-shadow and silver-reflection period.

Lamb's *Hydrangeas in Silver* (2010) is very much in the style of Chase. She builds up the clusters of blossoms with deft strokes, and the range of tones in the greenish-white petals is extraordinary. The curvy silver vase plays convex-mirror tricks, a favorite painter's stunt for centuries, reflecting the otherwise unseen room in warmer, blurred color. The simplest of the compositions, *Olives* (2010), lays out a row against a neutral white-grey field that shows off the artist's brushwork. Two more ambitious pictures focus on American folk art objects and treat them in old master style. *Dusty Bottle and Barn Door* (2010) takes a rustic subject and gives it an elegant polish, with loving attention paid to the window reflection in the bulbous bottle, covered in a film of dust, and the rough texture of a wood table. The most dramatic painting on display was *Old Ironsides Sloop 40* (2010). The richly detailed ship's model is silhouetted against a backdrop of grey paneled wall. The polished wood of the model and its stiff, tan sails are sharply illuminated in the mostly shadowy space. There is a hint of Caravaggio in illusionism this hypnotically convincing, raising the prospect of yet another kind of realism.

In a fine 1971 anthology considering a re-evaluation of the academic aesthetic, Thomas Hess suggested: "Art can be said to exist in a dialectical tension between the messy and the neat. The Academy...tries to eliminate all mess....the flight from chaos has led many into a desert of neatness."⁷ The current realism revival continues the dialogue between the messy and the neat, categories that may encompass not only ways of handling paint but also ways of looking at life. The Sherwin Miller Museum of Jewish Art, 2021 East 71st Street, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74136. Telephone (918) 492-1818. John Pence Gallery, 750 Post Road, San Francisco, California 94109. Telephone (415) 441-1138. On the web at www.johnpence.com

NOTES

1. Linda Nochlin, ed., *Realism and Tradition in Art 1848–1900: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), pp. 65, 67.
2. Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 21.

3. Sarah Faunce and Linda Nochlin, *Courbet Reconsidered* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 1988), p. 4.
4. Another retrospective of Silverman's work is scheduled for September 2011, at Hofstra Museum in Hempsted, New York.
5. *Realism and Tradition*, p. 52.
6. Email to author, July 16, 2010.
7. "Some Academic Questions," *Academic Art*, ed., Thomas B. Hess and John Ashbery (New York: Collier Books, 1971), p. 14.