

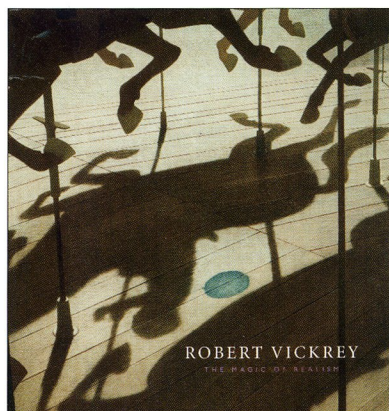
*Robert Vickrey: The Magic of Realism* by Philip Eliasoph.

Manchester and New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2008. Illustrated, 228 pages.

Review by Gail Leggio

Robert Vickrey is a crucial figure in the mid-twentieth-century renaissance of egg tempera, a demanding technique he has been exploring over six decades. After studying with Kenneth Hayes Miller and Reginald Marsh at the Art Students League, Vickrey went on to Yale, where he learned egg tempera from Lewis E. York. The rediscovery of Cennino d'Andrea Cennini's *Il Libro dell'Arte* (c. 1390–1410) was highly influential. The Brandywine River Museum's 2002 exhibition "Milk and Eggs: The American Revival of Tempera Painting, 1930–1950" chronicled the experiments of the era. Vickrey wrote his own manuals on the subject: *New Techniques in Egg Tempera* (1973), which author Eliasoph calls "an instant classic in the field of technical art books," and *Robert Vickrey: Artist at Work* (1979). Eliasoph quotes Vickrey on reinvigorating the old medium: "There are many ways to use egg tempera, not just one. And with a lot of practice and some imagination, you should be able to come up with techniques I've never thought of."

Egg tempera has a short drying time, which precludes blending. Vickrey makes changes by scraping paint with a razor, by scumbling, stippling, sponging and sandpapering. Vickrey's paintings don't have the neo-Renaissance look of many practitioners. One nice juxtaposition in the book sets Vickrey's *Lanterns* (1996) alongside George Tooker's *In the Summerhouse* (1958). Both images use colorful paper lanterns as a magical light source, but Tooker's blonde girls have the gravitas of allegorical figures, with their rhythmically arranged arms. Vickrey's little girl—who looks like a contemporary figure, in spite of her rather old-fashioned dress and hat—has a child's curiosity. Children approaching adolescence are a specialty of Vickrey's. The blonde girl in *Victoria's Mural* (c. 1978), studiously painting her parents' wall with simplified flowers and webs and suns, is an exemplar of the fledgling artist. She is also a particular individual in rumpled white shirt, blue pants and brown socks. Anyone who doubts the range of possibilities in contemporary egg tempera practice should compare Vickrey's distinctive matte, somewhat grainy surfaces with Tooker's peachier tonalities. Tooker's figures, whether lyrical lovers or angst-ridden cogs in the soulless machine of bureaucracy, move in the ritualized choreography of early Renaissance tableaux.



Eliasoph, a professor of art history at Fairfield University, based his monograph on extensive research and interviews with the painter. He does a good job in placing Vickrey's long career in the context of twentieth-century American art history. He traces a line from Ashcan Realists Robert Henri, John Sloan and William Glackens to social realists such as Reginald Marsh and the Soyer brothers, glancing at the Regionalist Thomas Hart Benton and the master of existential light, Edward Hopper. The Magical Realists are probably the group Vickrey, who is not particularly doctrinaire, found most congenial. Eliasoph focuses on the critical reception of Vickrey's work, citing much positive and insightful analysis, especially during his early success, as well as occasional dismissive comments. Vickrey, Eliasoph sums up, "is more a revolutionary than the misconceived reactionary conservative." One early critic described Vickrey as a "semi-surrealist," a convincing tag in the face of a signature work such as *Labyrinth* (1951, Whitney Museum of American Art). In this disturbing image, a nun regards her distorted reflection in a grey wall, part of a menacing maze stretching back to infinity. Nuns feature in some 400 Vickrey paintings. Members of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, they wear distinctive starched white wimples.

In *Midsummer Dream* (1984), the shape of a nun's white, wing-like head-dress is echoed by windblown pieces of pure, blank paper. This is one of Vickrey's late "wall" pieces, in which the artist reproduces a flattened version of a famous painting on the backdrop wall. Here, the image is a shadowy version of Bruegel's sixteenth-century painting *The Hunters in the Snow*. A black-and-white dog in the nun's three-dimensional space is echoed by a silhouette on the two-dimensional wall, calling attention to the flatness of Vickrey's own painting, despite its illusionism. *Midsummer Dream* is a conceptual puzzle-piece, a painting about painting in a modern idiom that reminds us what a slippery thing representation actually is. *After the Festivities* (1989) is a particularly lighthearted entry in this group, with two nuns walking in front of a swirl of Bouguereau nymphs. Even better is a chalk-on-sidewalk variation, *Four Graces* (1993), with a street artist (a fourth Grace) drawing a replica of Botticelli's famous trio.

Vickrey's long career encompasses a phase when he seems to be running alongside the photorealists or anticipating them. Eliasoph juxtaposes Vickrey's *The Flower* (1951), with its mysterious layers of reflection, and Richard Estes's harder-edged *Nedrick's* (1970). During a period when he was living on Cape Cod, his coastscapes and lonely figures in interiors are reminiscent of Andrew Wyeth's work. Yet Vickrey's *In the Boathouse* (1972), an overhead view of a boy and two cats caught in an elaborate pattern of sunlight and shadow, has a warmth that makes Wyeth's touch seem dry. Vickrey retreated to Cape Cod after a lucrative decade painting portraits for *Time* magazine covers. Eliasoph devotes a chapter, titled "Time Out," to the period, 1957–68, complete with a fold-out sampler of cover images. Skillful as they are, the reader gets the



impression—reinforced by the chapter title—that this was a digression in the career.

The relationship between fine and commercial art projects is a fraught subject. Winslow Homer's vivacious illustrations for *Harper's Weekly* were part of his learning process and strong explorations of graphic possibilities. Contemporary graphic designer Milton Glaser brings a powerful visual intellect to the commercial field, his principal arena for aesthetic experimentation. At the turn of the twentieth century, Maxfield Parrish found a profitable outlet for his crepuscular idylls in advertising the new technology of Edison Mazda, although his flushed twilights have little resemblance to the harsh glare of the early lightbulb. Norman Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* covers have the one-note punch of an O. Henry short story, mixing satire and sentiment in clever, palatable images. Vickrey's situation is different. He started fast in the art world, winning critical praise for both his innovative technique and complex content. The ninety portraits he made for *Time* magazine gave him wider recognition, but they seemed like a step back. Vickrey remarks: "I could not evade some critics thinking I had become an illustrator."

By the time Vickrey emerged from his commercial phase, the art scene had moved on. With the spectacular success of Abstract Expressionism and then Pop Art, we sometimes lose sight of the fact that realism had been a viable component of the American mainstream for fully half of the twentieth century. When Vickrey returned to his own painting full-time, he had become a more peripheral figure, but he did not fade away. Throughout the book, Eliasoph acknowledges how patrons, gallery owners and curators fostered Vickrey's career. Lincoln Kirstein picked Vickrey out of York's tempera class at Yale, choosing the young artist's *The Doorway* for "Symbolic Realism," a 1950 show at Edwin Hewitt Gallery in New York City. The exhibition, as "American Symbolic Realists," went on to London the same year. Vickrey found himself in heady company, showing alongside Ben Shahn, George Tooker, Paul Cadmus and Isabel Bishop. Vickrey's first solo exhibition in 1951 drew laudatory reviews. A *New York Times* critic wrote that the artist "lets a meticulous technique and a realistic style serve a fantastic imagination." In 1952, curator Juliana Force selected Vickrey's *Labyrinth* for the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Museum director Lloyd Goodrich included Vickrey's work in nine Whitney Annuals and, in a 1954 *Art in America* essay, praised his "remarkable draftsmanship" and the way he exploited "perspective and deep space...in a highly ingenious and brilliant fashion." From 1953 to 1976, Vickrey was affiliated with Midtown Galleries on 57th Street, which also represented Isaac Soyer, Isabel Bishop and Paul Cadmus. Vickrey credited Midtown owner Adam Gruskin with making his career. Gruskin's first press release for Vickrey reveals a knowledgeable supporter, who has noticed how "the tendency of egg yolk to set somewhat like gelatin" allows for the creation of "unbelievably intricate textures." Vickrey would lose

much of that support as fashions in art changed, but praise sometimes came from unexpected sources. In the mid-1980s, *New York Times* critic Michael Brenson responded warmly to the playful mystery of *Midsummer Dream*. Recently, Vickrey has found a new home at the Harmon-Meek Gallery, based in Naples, Florida. Dealer-agent J. William Meek III has staged a number of national shows promoting the work of realist artists, including a forty-five-year Vickrey retrospective.

It is fair to ask, however, how Vickrey fits into the story of twentieth- and twenty-first-century realism. An acknowledged master of a traditional medium, he uses egg tempera in original and idiosyncratic ways. As Eliasoph notes, Vickrey is “armed with remarkably precise brushwork and rendering skills,” but his iconography and aesthetic philosophy hardly adhere to the principles advocated by many orthodox neo-realists today. Take, for example, *Under the Swings* (c. 1966), a disorienting, horizon-less playground image, where the shadows are as real—or unreal—as the swings, bikes and children they mirror. There is no sense of spatial recession; the image is as flat as any modernist work. The artist’s choice of a warm beige grisaille also adds to the feeling of unreality. *Under the Swings* is related to *Playground*, one of seven short films Vickrey experimented with in the 1950s. A self-described “cinema addict,” he drew on the visual style of favorite directors—Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, Jules Dassin and the French New Wave—as a source both for vaguely sinister moods and for dynamic examples of light-and-shadow monochrome. In a short but intriguing chapter, “Splicing Reality: Art & Cinema,” Eliasoph quotes Vickrey (who spent his honeymoon at the Cannes Film Festival): “I might have become a cinematographer, but I just liked painting more.” It’s another strand in this complex artist’s makeup, giving him more depth than the title of his collected essays, *The Affable Curmudgeon* (1987), might suggest. Vickrey may occasionally adopt the pose of the recalcitrant realist, but he knows well how central visual ambiguity is to his oeuvre: “I am not attempting to counterfeit reality through high-fidelity realism—these paintings are never a truthful lens.” Eliasoph calls attention to the artist’s “hallucinatory, optically undulating patterns of distorted, reflected and refracted glass surfaces.” The doubling of forms is particularly effective in paintings such as *Shadows and Sean* (1968), featuring another of Vickrey’s trademark motifs, the bicycle. Throughout the book, paintings are shown alongside the artist’s own photographs, which function like preliminary sketches.

This well-researched book should become an essential resource for anyone interested in Vickrey. There are aspects of the career that would benefit from more in-depth analysis. Paragraphs sometimes seem short-winded, and Eliasoph occasionally falls back on clichés (“a chorus of art critics changed their tune”), but this study has essential virtues: a wealth of information and critical insight.