

Classical Realism: Antidote to 'Novelty Art'

By ROGER KIMBALL
May 29, 2008; Page D9

New York

In 1959, the critic Clement Greenberg wrote that "the very best painting, the major painting, of our age is almost exclusively abstract." It was a tune Greenberg sang early and often. He said similar things throughout the 1940s, and as late as 1967 insisted that "the very best art of this time continues to be abstract."



SEE A PHOTO SLIDESHOW ▶
Hirschl & Adler Modern
Cloud Study (Perspective), 2007 Oil on panel, 4
1/4 x 11 in.

Let's leave the fraught question of whether Greenberg was correct to one side. What we *can* say with confidence is that the focus of much artistic energy at the time was centered around abstract art.

This has obviously not been the case for some decades. What happened? Several things. On the one hand, there was a powerful upsurge of what Greenberg elsewhere called "novelty art," the 57 varieties of pop, op, minimalism, and neo-Dada performance art that have infested the art world like a gigantic flea market. On

the other hand, there was a quieter but no less powerful return to older artistic sources and traditions -- a return, that is to say, to the figure.

It is a curious irony that Andy Warhol -- one of the chief perpetrators of novelty art, the man who once said "art is what you can get away with" -- should also have had a hand in fomenting the counter-revolution that is now returning artists to a serious concern with traditional figurative techniques. Twenty-five years ago, Warhol helped start The New York Academy of Art, an institution "dedicated to the advancement of figurative painting, sculpture and drawing."

Who knows? Perhaps Warhol somehow sensed that an art world in which everyone would have his 15 minutes of fame would itself be subject to that 15-minute rule, eventually returning art to the more deliberate rhythms required by technical mastery.

In any event, if large precincts of the art world are still in thrall to "novelty art," there is also a vital and increasingly prominent current of artistic practice seeking the rehabilitation of aesthetic canons and plastic techniques that were pioneered in the Renaissance and promulgated in the studios of the Beaux Arts.

"Classical Realism" is one name many of the more ambitious new figurative artists embrace. The movement has its home in institutions like The Florence Academy of Art, founded in 1991 by Daniel Graves, which seeks "to provide the highest level of

instruction in classical drawing, painting and sculpture." The Florence Academy has been a fertile source for many other initiatives, including The Harlem Studio of Art in New York, a small but vibrant atelier school presided over by the artist Judy Pond Kudlow. Founded in 2002, it offers rigorous training in modeling, one-point perspective, cast drawing, and all the other technical aspects of art that one used to assume would be part of an artist's training.

Is technical mastery sufficient by itself to guarantee high artistic accomplishment? The art world has been shouting "No" for decades. That judgment is correct -- ultimately -- but it leaves out the important codicil that an artist who lacks technical command also lacks competence.

One sign that Classical Realism has arrived is the conspicuous interest of major galleries in its products. As I write, Hirschl & Adler Modern in New York is featuring "Rediscovering the American Landscape: The Eastholm Project," an exhibition by Jacob Collins, one of the leading proponents of Classical Realism. Now in his mid-40s, Mr. Collins is a cynosure of the new figurative art, a sought-after teacher and an increasingly prominent artist. This is his fourth solo exhibition at the distinguished East Side gallery in as many years, and it is a captivating reminder that the bravura technical mastery of the Hudson River School is not only alive and well but still capable of producing works of keen aesthetic expressiveness. The exhibition (on view until June 13) revolves around "The Hen Islands From Eastholm," a meticulously observed 4-by-10-foot oil landscape of a view from the island of Vinalhaven, Maine.

"The Hen Islands" is a quiet masterpiece. But in many ways it is merely the pretext for the exhibition. Commissioned by one of Mr. Collins's regular patrons (and not, incidentally, for sale), it is surrounded by 50-odd studies for the huge painting. Some are quick plein-air sketches, visual memoranda of sky, woods, water. Some are highly finished studio details that grapple with the particulars of foliage, clouds, the infinite intricacies of light reflected off calm shallows. Together, these works provide a glimpse into the engine-room of Mr. Collins's art. More than visual cues, they are systematic transcriptions of observable reality.

Mr. Collins spent innumerable hours poring over topographical and nautical charts, local geological studies, and taxonomies of clouds in order to educate the eye that would guide his hand. "Those who fall in love with practice without science," Leonardo observed, "are like a sailor who enters a ship without a helm or compass, and who never can be certain whither he is going." Mr. Collins's practice underscores the animating strength of that admonition.

Of course, every species of art must conjure with its characteristic occupational deformations. For much contemporary art, deformation by politics or some other extra-aesthetic passion is the defining temptation. For much contemporary figurative painting -- especially, perhaps, for movements like Classical Realism -- the governing temptation is kitsch -- art that may be technically proficient but is nevertheless soulless, histrionic, or cloyingly sentimental.

Although there are patches of melodrama in some of Mr. Collins's earlier painting, his art has grown steadily in seriousness, conviction and existential traction. This is art that requires no excuses, no alibis, no apologies. It is art that is confident, accomplished and traditional, understanding that last word in a positive, enabling sense, not as a term of diminishment.

In one of his gnomic apothegms, the Greek sage Heraclitus said that the way forward is the way back. Mr. Collins is an artistic pioneer. But as this splendid exhibition demonstrates, he has the wit to know that the most demanding mysteries are those that are inseparable from our fragile, human nature. The newest realities are also the oldest, the freshest art the most perennial.

Jacob Collins is the real thing. Criticism isn't prophecy, but I will end with a prediction: You'll be hearing more, a lot more, about him and about the kind of art he practices in the years to come.

Mr. Kimball, co-editor of the New Criterion, is the author of "The Rape of the Masters: How Political Correctness Sabotages Art."