

# A Realist Resurgence: *Moment or Movement?*

However you label it, realism or naturalism, academic or representational, it's an undeniable fact that it's back in style. The embattled generation of realists that came of age during the rise of modernism has witnessed a sea change. There are a host of galleries today that specialize in realism with no shortage of artists vying to find a place in them. While critics still eschew most realists outside Lucien Freud, the market is ahead of them. Realism has returned.

A gallery hop around Manhattan on a July afternoon demonstrated the strength of the movement. The tendency of galleries to use the slow summer season to host group shows makes it a good time to glimpse a large number of artists. I saw seven group shows of realists comprising at least one hundred painters spanning three generations. I was familiar with some of the artists on view, but most were new to me. There are a lot of new faces, and many experienced artists attracting new attention. The overall quality of the paintings is striking.

I saw many impressive paintings, notably the work of Renato Meziat and Julien Landa at Hammer Galleries; Rita Natarova at Forum Gallery; Michael Klein at Arcadia; Frank Arcuri, Jura Bedic, and Richard Piloco at Eleanor Ettinger Gallery; Sharon Sprung and Eve Mansdorf at Gallery Henoch; and James Oliver and Chris Smergieff at George Billis Gallery. There is an enormous amount of talent out there. More the pity that the critics won't engage with the realist surge; we are in desperate need of some sorting and culling. Sorting that reaches beyond craft, technique, or drawing ability—which is the shallowest level of appreciation.

With so much to see, what's worth looking at? What qualities distinguish work of enduring value? When great technique is no longer a rarity, what makes a realist painter stand out?

It is easy to see various painters struggle with this problem. Gabriella Dellosso at Ettinger demonstrates a search for greater meaning in the *Persistence of Moments* and her richly painted self-portraits in various period costumes. The ambitious scale and the symbolism suggest that she is not satisfied with merely imitating nature: she has a message. Rita Natarova at Forum presents probing, thoughtful paintings with gorgeous paint. She is reaching beyond description. These two painters are engaging our minds as well as our eyes, even if a little too self-consciously. Other painters hope to captivate with a bravura alla prima technique. They often run the risk of getting flashy, superficial, and in some cases, a bit too sweet. They sometimes employ artful conventions that amount to visual clichés. Though, when a bravura painter like Richard Piloco hits it just right, you've got to love it. Another example is Malcolm Liepke at Arcadia who delivers sensual paint and subject matter (occasionally at the expense of the subject's individuality). Nevertheless, the work is an irresistible treat to the eye.

Some paintings are just visual poems. Is it fair to burden all still life or landscape with a search for deeper meaning? I saw many still lifes that are beautiful, and have integrity as art in that simple beauty. David Dornan at Coda Gallery seems to revel in his paint with his large still lifes of paint-spattered studio debris. I saw many other well painted but pointless still lifes that were just showing off a good technique. Why did the artist paint it, because it was there? To be effective as an artist, one must cultivate a selective eye. Show us something interesting, or make it interesting. Without discernment, ordinary objects remain boring, even when well painted. If you are fortunate to see a Richard Maury still life, you'll see meticulously painted common objects that manage to reflect the presence of the people that use them. His still lifes and interiors have spirit. Maury's works *Winterreise* and *Santa Maria d'el Fioré*, both of 1993, are good examples of still life that exude both life and beauty. He makes an empty room feel occupied and objects appear possessed.

The process of selection that produces a painting of note is a very fine balancing act. Accomplished artists with a long history of success don't hit it every time. Sometimes, the realist compulsion to observe can overcome the need to see, to select. At Forum Gallery I observed an interesting juxtaposition of an Alan Feltus painting *As Though By Themselves* (opposite page) hanging alongside Richard Maury's #1 (left). Both are masterfully painted. In general, I find Maury the more consistently interesting artist. Feltus sometimes becomes too stylized for my taste. However, his double portrait of two young women is compelling in a way that Maury's nude is not. I felt pulled into the world of Feltus's women, their relationship, into their mood. He had an idea to convey about these two women. The composition flows elegantly through a geometrically complex arrangement of space and form that is carefully balanced between detail and simplicity. The selective eye of the artist is clearly but not obtrusively in action. There is a reward in seeing the painting, in thinking about it, in experiencing it. It is poetry to Maury's prose. Maury's nude looks like a bored model posing for the artist. I don't think the nude always needs a convincing context; the human body will always be an intriguing subject. Yet, Maury has captured a little too much truth here. Another model posing for a painter is not that interesting, even if capturing the subtlety of the model's detached attitude toward exposing herself to scrutiny is a masterful achievement in itself.

The older generation of realists is reliably interesting. Perhaps experience has given them the fluency to be less distracted by technique and more time to focus on content. Among these veterans, Burton Silverman at Gallery Henoch exudes more humanism in his paintings than entire generations of younger painters can summon collectively. He is a master painter who has the art of balancing technique and the meaningful subject without getting lost in the specific. As much as I love his paint, I am not distracted from his subject. I am drawn in as much by what he paints as how he paints. It's no longer just delectable paint and an interesting subject; it is more than the sum of its parts. It demonstrates the ephemeral balance between perception and selection that is vital to great painting.

However, realism still has some big problems. The appreciation of distilling life into a single still image has been overwhelmed by the appeal of the moving image in the film and digital arts. If, as Peter Schjeldahl writes, "avant-gardism didn't usurp the ground of academic art; popular culture did," then realism will find its growth stunted.<sup>1</sup> A visit to a gallery is poor competition for a trip to the cineplex. Schjeldahl contends that "modern art arose to invigorate a new, self-selected class impatient with received ideas and unsated by mass fare." In other words, the artsy crowd wants the new cutting edge stuff, not realism with its conservative taint and appeal to the uninitiated.

Is it a renaissance if the culture at large doesn't notice? When art finds its audience, it is communicating and succeeding. If it can continue to find an audience, it will survive. If not, it won't.

Will realism find its audience again? Does it have any appeal to the elitist shunning mass media fare, or is it competing for an audience that is distracted by other media? The separation of the two audiences is artificial. We're all awash in an increasingly visual culture. Realists must have faith in the appreciation of quality by the discerning. If the realist movement is a moment, it is a recurring one. Among those who will continue to look at painting, a glimpse of our lives through the lens of the artist will always have interest.

#### Note

1. Peter Schjeldahl, "Going East: Napoleon at the Dahesh," *The New Yorker*, August 28, 2006.



Alan Feltus. *As Though by Themselves*,  
2003. Oil on linen, 59 1/4 x 39 1/2 in.



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