

Painting the Real?

With recent work by Daryl Austin, currently on display as part of the Samstag's *Uneasy* exhibition, displaying the distinctive characteristics of Superrealism, it seems pertinent to very briefly discuss this genre, in order to examine both its continued use and its essential point of difference from traditional, or 'tonal', realism.

According to Edward Lucie-Smith, Superrealism,¹ which emerged from the Pop movement of the 1960s, creates works that are produced in, 'a spirit of total detachment from the images and their possible significance'.² However, despite Superrealism's overt concentration on detail, many would disagree with this, believing that Superrealism tells us a lot about painting, reality, and the relationship between the two. The use of painting as a medium in these works is intriguing, because, as the evidence of actual technique is so subsumed in the photographic aspect, it forces us to ask the interesting question, what is the *point* of using paint here?

What is Realism?

In general, realism rejects the idealistic approach favoured by the Romantics and instead aims to create sober, detailed, and, apparently objective representations. As such, Linda Nochlin has suggested that realism's aim was to 'give a truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world'.³ Nochlin's general notion is that realism presents the world 'as it is', but there is a basic problem with this, which she refers to here: 'the confusion bedevilling the notion of Realism is its ambiguous relationship to the highly problematic concept of reality'.⁴ This is our first key point. i.e. one person's version of reality is not necessarily the same as another's!

Historically, the middle of the 19th century saw the development of realism as a distinct genre in the works of Courbet, Caillebotte, Manet, and others, and the 20th saw a refinement of its ideals. Post-Impressionism and its various abstractions had left tonal realism floating, but it reconnected later within the American Realist tradition, the torch perhaps passing directly from Courbet to Whistler and then to Edward Hopper. Following Hopper, this expression of emptiness and isolation was taken to extremes in the Superrealism of the 1970s, especially in the works of Richard Estes and Ralph Goings, where the human figure is usually absent. This, as Christine Lindey has noted, is not necessarily negative, as Estes is trying to 'wrest harmonious beauty from the disorder of the real world'.⁵

Much of all realist work is based upon traditional notions of pictorial order and balance, and this harmony, whether seen in Millet, Hopper, the minimalist aesthetic of Estes, or indeed contemporary works displayed at ACSA, remains a central tenet of realism as a whole. In brief, realism and super realism, in their varied forms, seem to share the same intention.

What is Reality?

Having thought about what realism might

constitute in art, I will now examine its philosophical relevance, by questioning the 'reality' that it supposedly depicts. However, as was implied by Nochlin earlier, the concept of reality is a difficult one to define. The philosopher Simon Blackburn defines it as 'That which there is'.⁶ Succinct perhaps, but not necessarily helpful. Immanuel Kant and Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposed phenomenological approaches where reality is constituted of (and dependent upon) our corporeal interactions with the world. In 1781's *The Critique of Pure Reason*, one of Kant's first concerns was to examine the whole question of 'objective' knowledge. Dissatisfied with Descartes' 'cogito', Kant asked whether we could ever have knowledge of the world which is not just knowledge of our *own* point of view. He 'solved' the problem by suggesting that neither reason nor experience alone could provide objective knowledge because the first provides content without form, the second form without content, saying that 'Only in their synthesis is knowledge possible'.⁷ Kant's explanation of 'normal', dualist consciousness, where we examine the world through a filter or a 'screen' of perception, is a standard starting point. Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes phenomenology's more 'factual' alternative as 'an account of space, time and the world as we 'live' them'.⁸

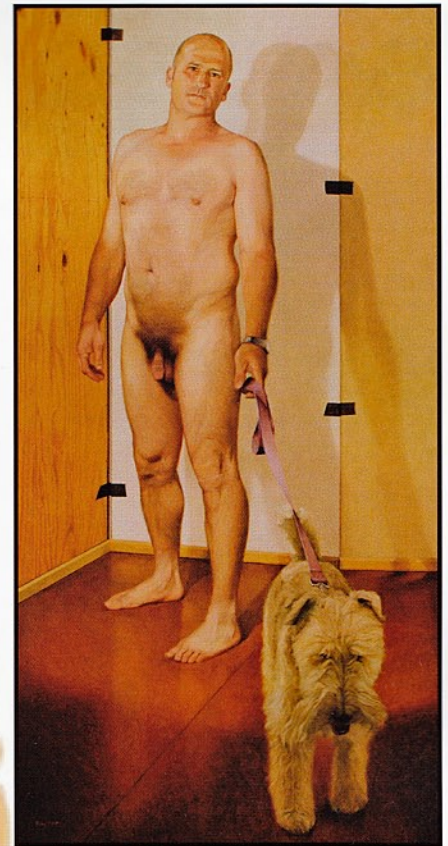
But reality, it seems, still remains a troubling philosophical and cultural category. It is entirely subjective, with crude and largely inadequate distinctions often being drawn between an 'independent' *a priori* reality and our own individual mind's 'concept' of an everyday reality. This difference is perhaps illustrated by tonal and super realist painting though, in that tonal realism depicts one particular individual's (i.e. the artist's) perception of reality, whilst super realism aims to depict a generic reality as observed by all.

What is Superrealism?

Informed now by realism *and* reality, we can examine the 'super' real. How do the two combine here, and to what ends?

Before the advent of photography, realism was employed as a tool to depict the everyday. Since photography, its role has changed to primarily one of commenting *on* the everyday, as photography became, according to Julian Bell, the more 'trustworthy' medium.⁹ Superrealist paintings today then, can be interpreted in two contrasting ways. The first is to see them in a positive way, as virtuoso displays of skill in painting. The other approach might be to say that these works are devoid of real meaning; heartless exercises showing that expression in art is dead. i.e. they are merely 'craft' and not 'art'.

However, if the *latter* is true, then what do we make of the use of the technique by an artist of such stature as Gerhard Richter? Richter often works directly from photographs in order to reproduce certain aesthetic effects that photography imposes upon reality, stating that his work is a comment on this interaction. Perhaps we could suggest from this that his most salient observation is that Superrealism depicts the object



Daryl Austin, *Michael & Keith*, 2008, oil on linen, 240x122cm

encapsulated; that the semiotic message in the work is one of the *whole* environment, its identity being the sum of its visual images and our interaction with them, without the obvious mediation of the artist. Perhaps the strength of a Superrealist approach is in capturing the undiluted *totality* of the scene. Viewed in this way, the lack of allegorical or metaphorical impulses, and the absence of any overt artistic expression, is what gives super realism its undiluted strength.

We can therefore understand how Superrealism is not a genre which really *uses* reality deliberately, as a subject matter that is, but rather one that replicates the technical aspect of observing reality. It works by demonstrating Merleau-Ponty's sense of immediacy, i.e. it is *just* a recorded perception of something; a demonstration of our internal systems of visual assimilation. This precise state, ¹⁰ this 'direct and primitive contact with the world' (what Kant called the 'unconditioned') forms the basis of what we usually understand as 'reality' and is what Superrealism is therefore trying to represent.

Therefore, and again in summary, those viewers who look at Superrealist works and ask, 'What is the point?' have already gone *past* the point. Superrealism is simply a distillation in pictorial form of things 'in themselves'. It is a form of visual representation that *precedes* any comments about visual representation. This is its power.

Manet and Close: The 'real' stare.

To directly compare a realist and a Superrealist

portrait now, Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere* is a seminal realist painting, interesting primarily because of the subject's very particular facial expression; a blank stare that has been read by TJ Clark as a symptom of the existentialist ennui of an emerging modernity.¹¹ His interpretation enables a connection to Superrealism, as he cites this facial expression's 'lack of depth' and, 'resistance to interpretation'.¹² His analysis of the picture's undoubted 'flatness' also alludes to postmodernity's more mercenary use of the reproducible image, and, in addition, Clark's view of the stare also correlates with Jean Baudrillard's thoughts on the 'hyperreal'.¹³

In comparing this work with Chuck Close's *Leslie*, the 'everyday' quality of Close's characters initially engender a sense of familiarity, in that these could be 'regular' people. Yet, Close is apparently less interested in a personal exploration of his subjects but instead displays an, 'omniscient indifference',¹⁴ invoking a further 'flatness' by working from photographs rather than the subjects themselves. As he has said: 'I wanted to make (...) something that was impersonal (...) showing no display of the artist's hand'.¹⁵ The result being that the exact same self-containment or emptiness of expression of the woman in *A Bar...* is replicated in *Leslie*. Directly comparing these two paintings then, and hence directly comparing realism with super realism, we can still see no vast difference in artistic intent or modes of representation. They both aim for a sense of visual and philosophical harmony.

In conclusion, Superrealism is in some ways a simple extrapolation of tonal realism; perhaps just a more extreme version. However, one main difference is that the techniques and processes employed by Superrealism lift the final works out of the realm of 'fine' art and allow them to exist concurrently within the contemporary, image-saturated world of postmodernity as a whole. Their creators thus deliberately deny these works a comfortable and logical position within the

classification systems that are prevalent, for better or worse, in art. This indefinability is perhaps what draws the most criticism of the genre but also ironically what gives it its autonomy.

In addressing our original question, the relationship between our perception of painting and our perception of reality is highlighted by Superrealism. And yet, because the works are *painted*, we retain the *conventions* and 'respect' associated with the viewing of a painting, rather than adopting the more dismissive attitude with which we often view photography or digital imaging. Therefore, because they challenge our deepest preconceptions about the way we see, we are almost 'forced' to engage, and in a highly productive way.

The politics of Superrealism, we might say, have nothing to do with painting or even pictorial representation, there is a more *instinctual* element at play here. They are more about our relationship to ways of seeing, and by consciously adopting Superrealism as an approach, viewers are drawn in instinctively, in an intense and unquestionably dynamic way.

Tony Duggan

Tony Duggan holds a BA in Art History from Goldsmith's, University of London, and an MA in Cultural Studies from the University of Leeds.

1. The terms 'Hyperrealism', 'Superrealism', 'Photorealism' etc. are also used.
2. Edward Lucie-Smith, *Art Today*, Phaidon, London, 1999, p.312
3. Linda Nochlin, *Realism*, Pelican, London, 1985, p.13
4. Linda Nochlin, *Ibid*, p.13
5. Christine Lindey, *Superrealist Painting and Sculpture*, Orbis, London, 1980, p.65
6. Simon Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p.320
7. Roger Scruton, P. Singer, et al, *German Philosophers*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, p.24
8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, London, 1989, p.vii
9. Julian Bell, *What is Painting? Representation & Modern Art*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2002, p.57
10. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.vii
11. TJ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1985, p.214 & 239
12. TJ Clark, *Ibid*, p.248
13. Jean Baudrillard, 'The Hyper-realism of Simulation', reprinted in Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, (eds.) *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, p.1018
14. Robert Storr, *Chuck Close*, Hayward Gallery, London 1999, p.21
15. Chuck Close, quoted in *Ibid*, p.89

continued from page 1

and very fine measurements; clearly, this attention to detail has not limited his style and creativity.

The second Master Class, held in November, was run at the inner London studio of the tutor, Etienne Millner FRBS. Etienne trained at Goldsmiths College in London, where one of his teachers was Ivor Roberts-Jones, best known for his sculpture of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square. The shelves of his studio, a converted squash court at the back of his house, are filled with copies of portraits he has made, including many children of aristocratic families. Etienne told us that while, typically, the aristocracy commission paintings of their daughters, they favour portrait sculptures when it comes to their sons and heirs!

Like Brian Taylor, Etienne emphasised the importance of accurate measurement. However, for him, observation is paramount, and he urged us to seize every opportunity to "just look".

For this second Master Class, we had to build our own armatures, according to a detailed design with precise measurements provided by the tutor. This was no easy task. Luckily, I was working as a "techie" in a high school, and so had access to a workshop and power tools. Unluckily, I had to cart this great big armature in its black plastic bag to London on the train, and around London on the tube, along with all our luggage. One of the other Master Class students had to bring hers in a packing case, all the way from Dubai.

Participating in these Master Classes has been of great value. As you might expect, I've developed new perspectives on my own work, and have learned to look at it afresh. I've also been exposed to the work of other talented sculptors, and have got to see first-hand just how it is they work.

James Martin

James Martin is a former Head of Sculpture at Adelaide Central School of Art – his commissions include the Vietnam War Memorial in the Torrens Parade Ground in Adelaide, Merlion Tower in Singapore, the Bull and Bear in the King William Street Ale House and the Big Prawn at Ballina, NSW. He has been exhibiting his work since the mid-1980s, represented in 39 exhibitions throughout the state and most recently at Oxford Artweeks in England. He has been a highly respected teacher of his sculptural art since 1993. James will be conducting a 3 days Masterclass at Adelaide Central School of Art on September 24, 25 and 26. If you would like to be a participant, please register your interest by telephoning Jo on 83645075...Ed.

Central Artist Supplies

quality artist materials
 canvases stretched
 Gift ideas
 easy parking
 Open Mon. - Fri. 9 to 5
 Saturdays 9 - 12.30
 45 Osmond Tce.
 Norwood
 Ph/fax 8364 2088



3 day Masterclass Portrait Sculpture with James Martin September 24,25,26

Inspired by his recent participation in two masterclass in London, James will be running a masterclass in Portrait Sculpture at ACSA based on his observations of how the British Master Sculptors teach.

Register your interest with Jo on 8364 5075 NOW so you don't miss out.