

Reactionary Form, Revolutionary Content

There's an old Broadway saying that goes: "Everything changes except the avant garde theatre." Most people accept this statement as either true or false (according to their aesthetic tastes and ideological convictions), without considering the possibility that it is simultaneously both. While the tone and thrust of Jarry's drama is radically different from that of Beckett or Ionesco, they are united by what they cannot do and cannot say. The price of their heightened symbolic content is separation from the world; by bringing our shared internal universe into sharper focus, they inevitably blur and distort our equally common external reality.

Although modernist painting is slightly older than avant garde theatre (if one excludes Calderon's precocious "Life is a Dream"), the rift between it and its historical antecedents is not only similar, but more extreme. The drama will always be dependent on actors (either human or mechanical), while the possibilities open to painters (an almost infinite number of substances applied to an almost infinite number of surfaces in an almost infinite number of ways) are incomparably broader. Or so it would seem. The shocking sameness of so much post-modernist painting, however, gives one pause for thought.

Until brush and palette knife, paper and prepared canvas, are eventually replaced by implements more supple and personal than the camera, photography will continue to hold painting in thrall. While the camera is a rather cold instrument, one which denies the artist complete control over any perceived image, it does provide a dishearteningly effective way of reproducing external reality. It threatens painting on the narrative level as well, confronting the historical, allegorical, socially aware and mythological tableaux with the urban landscape, newspaper photograph, newsreel, documentary movie, avant garde film and fiction feature. On all fronts, photography has put painting on the defensive.

The return of the natural world – and most especially the human figure – to contemporary canvas is not as radical a throwback as it might seem. The late 19th century reaction against the exaggerated emphasis placed on narration by the French Academy remains strong. Exhibitions are built around the Cézanne-laid foundations of narrowness and focus. The favourite "neo" of young painters is neo-expressionism. Stress is placed on expressing the self and nothing but the self. This impulse runs parallel to the artist's university-fostered need to inform his paintings with his contextual place in the socio-political matrix.

In the grip of these conflicting demands, far too many recent paintings have flown apart at the seams. Political comment has been cropped to fit the very different requirements of abstract series format; the social concerns of Weimar Germany have been all too clumsily superimposed over the very different crises of the modern world. More important still (and this relates back to the classic put-down of the avant garde theatre), there is a sameness here that is positively appalling. The spill-your-guts, wear-your-heart-on-your-sleeve, cover-as-much-canvas-as-possible-with-bilious-sloppy-paint school of neo-expressionism can only begin from a point of turmoil (real or imagined). This presupposes that the self is always in a state of flux, that the soul is incapable of peace. This, of course, is the seemingly permanent state of 20th century society, but it is not the natural state of human-kind. By acting consciously or unconsciously as mediums, the neo-expressionists confuse the individual with the state and this confusion leads to a state of despair. Blindly following its dictates, the same images are created again and again with the tiresome industry of a white mouse on a behaviourist treadmill.

Perhaps the most important question facing contemporary artists is: how does one jump off?

Robert Linsley had already begun to wrestle with this dilemma in at least five of the six works com-

prising his previous show without finding any clear-cut answers. Peaceful children were threatened by tigers while wheels of fire rolled over mountain ranges. Symbolic challenges and threats were scrutinized by a curiously detached observer (always seen in flat, almost Egyptian profile). The subject matter was intensely personal, half psychological and half metaphysical. The tight, anxious face of the male figure in panel four is perhaps representative of the artist's frustration at trying to communicate with the outside world while still locked in a creative mode characterized by excessive inwardness. Only in the fifth painting (a large, beautifully executed mountain landscape) does self-possession overcome previously dominant self-doubt. Here, human figuration is entirely absent, the artist's presence being symbolized by a campfire burning brightly in the foreground. The majestic peaks, romantic gorges and delicate waterfalls that vein and shape this 6.5 by 9.5 foot canvas are richly detailed but curiously unrealistic. Mountains such as these have never appeared in the pages of "National Geographic"; they were shaped by a mind hungry for solitude.

The connection between the specifics of imaginary images and the social forces that forge them is made explicit in a painting known only as *Diptych*. Its two panels contrast the dream (the dreamer's need to escape) and the reality (the living nightmare which engenders this need).

On the right hand side of the canvas, a ghastly woman (in the literal sense of the word; she is dressed in funereal black, her limbs gleam with corpse-like pallor and her face is reminiscent of Munch's "The Scream") emerges from an equally ghastly office tower (all dark glass, gray stone and clinging shadow). In the left hand panel, a fire burns on a snow-splashed peak while impenetrable clouds hover grimly over a coldly austere mountain landscape. This vision of nature – as far away as possible from the claustrophobic strictures of 20th century society – would not be so extreme if the forces that gave rise to it (the ugliness, regimentation and over-crowding of the modern city) were not so severe.

The obsessive image of flame among the mountains returns in *Landscape with Fire*. Once again we are presented with a flickering pyre in the lower right hand corner of the canvas; once again we are invited to explore the arrangement of cloud, crag and escarpment painted in dark, wintry colors.

The placement of sky, mountain and fire is not the product of whim. Linsley freely admits to having been influenced by the Soochow Professional Masters of the Ming Dynasty. In particular, he is fascinated by Chou Ch'en's striking scroll, "Dreaming of Immortality in a Thatched Cottage". This early 16th century masterpiece features a Taoist scholar musing in a hut on top of a mountain on the right side of the scroll, while his spiritual body – purged of all dross and on its way to the land of the Immortals – drifts high above the peaks that gracefully rise to the left of the eponymous cottage. Chou Ch'en's colours are as delicate as Linsley's are solid and dark.

One of the more popular precepts of Taoism is: "Avoid the authorities". The Chinese scholarly ideal was to travel freely through breathtaking landscapes, conversing with friends, partaking of wine, composing poetry and painting pictures all the while. To be called back to court was (in theory, at least) a misfortune. Life could be enjoyed only in a state of unhurried timelessness, of effortless relation to nature and the universe.

In some ways Linsley accepts this ideal, and in some ways he does not. He admits the necessity of scholarship (indeed, he argues very forcefully that the artist today must be intimately aware of every aspect of his metier from the Stone Age to the present); he also sees nature as a restorative force, as a place to charge one's batteries, a de-programming station where the false societal "I" can be replaced by original consciousness. He is, however, a western artist who cannot subscribe to the arrogant elitism of the Mandarin class. His liking for the Soochow painters is partially due to their unabashed professionalism (a dirty word to a Chinese aristocrat), from their Rorschach willingness to mingle the styles and schools of different eras (just as Linsley has adapted Chou Ch'en's lower right hand

emphasis as his own). There is an element of bitter-sweet irony in this artist's imaginary retreats to the mountains; the vistas that he paints are forbidding as well as beautiful, hemmed in by foothills and clouds. While they are still places for the psyche to gather strength, that strength must be used to return to the "real" world where the individual must contend with the contradictions that he finds as ably as he can.

Both *North Arm* and *Landscape with Figure* are firmly rooted in the very specific socio-cultural soil of post-boom B.C. Far from being idealized dreamscapes, these ambitious tableaux revel in their gritty immediacy, in their co-relation to contemporary fact. Working from a series of colour slides (the subjects and locations were photographed separately), Linsley ironically subverts the propertarian assumptions that once coalesced to form the *raison d'être* of landscape painting. The human beings in these studies own nothing except themselves. Far from being visual deeds of ownership, these paintings are proofs of dispossession.

In *Landscape with Figure*, the artist situates a young Chinese woman on Vancouver's much-travelled but seldom-pondered Knight Street Bridge. Log rafts bob on polluted water to the woman's left; to her right are warehouses, wharves, piers, pilings, lumberyards. One is tempted to call this an industrial district, but in all honesty one can't. The very word "industry" implies production and B.C.'s parasitic natural resource economy has never moved in that direction. Forests are irresponsibly hewn down until the market collapses. Although 90% of the province is Crown land, powerful private interests seldom experience much difficulty in getting what they want. And yet, the rotting buildings the woman is limned against are hardly the signposts of wildcat affluence. In their seedy decrepitude they suggest a quasi-ghost town, an unstable polity left high and dry by an economic tidal system over which the ordinary citizen exercises little control.

Into this intensely British Columbian landscape, Linsley injects a few ironically romantic elements.

A smokestack rising in the background might well be the belltower of some medieval Tuscan town; a hulking, hazy pulp mill evinces most of the characteristics of a ruined English abbey seen from afar. These throwbacks to a vanished European culture remind us not only of B.C.'s utter dependence on foreign markets (the United States, Japan), but also of the province's superimposition (a fault it shares with every country on both American continents, alas) of alien ways of doing things on an indigenous civilization (the West Coast Indians). The gods of Europe continue to speak to us, while the spirits of the rainforest remain invisible.

The young woman positioned against this wasteland is the bruised inheritor of Vancouver's rather rocky first century. Black-haired and dressed in sombre colours, her posture is dignified-poised; her right arm is slightly extended while her left curves gracefully across the front of her body. In her almost imperial features and proud stance one reads a bittersweet triumph; this woman has transcended the historic racism of her city (Oriental British Columbians were only granted the vote in 1948), as well as the sexually submissive and economically dependent roles once imposed on the "other half of the sky" by Anglo Saxon and Chinese cultures. There are no friends and relatives in this painting, no husbands or lovers, no children. This is clearly a woman of some attainment and refinement, someone who has made it on her own.

Nevertheless, she is also in pain. There is a tightness about the shoulders that smacks unmistakably of tension. Interwoven with her dignity is a certain hauteur which, from certain angles, can be offputting. Her mouth is both challenging and swollen; sexual and wounded. Her neck is strong like a fighter's, while her cheeks give evidence of a warmth and tenderness that have never found their proper outlet. The most complicated organs of all, of course, are her eyes, brimming with sorrow and determination.

Which is not to imply that Linsley has painted a victim. We are obviously looking at one of life's winners, but a winner who is unsteady on her feet

(like most British Columbians) in Vancouver's volatile present.

The feelings of historical unease raised here are developed further in *North Arm*, the most provocative and complex of all the artist's tableaux. Once again working from composite slides (the fringe setting this time is Vancouver's Arthur Laing Bridge, facing West), Linsley draws a potentially explosive dialectic between figures and landscape.

The proportions of *North Arm* are simultaneously familiar and unusual. At 53.5" x 143", the image produced is almost identical to the 1:2.65 Cinemascope ratio. By presenting us with a canvas in some respects indistinguishable from a frozen frame of 35mm celluloid, Linsley does a number of things. First, by emphasizing the paramountcy of the moving visual image in our culture, he reduces photography to the level of painting in terms of sociological memory (i.e. both are inferior to the motion picture). Then he exalts his metier by incorporating so much background and foreground detail into his schema, the ability of any purely mechanical recording instrument to match such historical layering becomes extremely problematic.

On the left side of the canvas stands a man in a bright red sweater; to his right is a little girl in a dull blue ski jacket. The metallic river between them separates green marsh on one bank from arthropodic pulp machinery on the other. Sawdust barges bob listlessly on the water, antiquated engines belch steam, stacked planks wait endlessly for buyers, while the horizon is closed off first by a line of smudged green trees, then by a wall of hazy mountains. The man is staring into the smooth gray water (a tone and texture almost indistinguishable from bridge railing and sky); his features are completely unreadable, the only clues to his emotional state being provided by the muscles bunched in his back and his wind-blown hair. The little girl staring at him in profile is both curious and knowing, unsure of herself and charged with confidence. It is the man who is the enigma, not her.

The figures in this study – though painted from slides – were also lifted from Manet's painful social

critique of the 19th century, "The Gare St.Lazare". The roles of both characters – and the sex of one – have been changed. Instead of looking through iron bars at puffing locomotives, Linsley's omen of the future ignores the waning resource economy icons around her and stares intently at a man who seems miles away from her (the Cinemascope ratio is great for creating an impression of distance), clearly looking for guidance. Is this man (playing present to her future) the little girl's friend, older brother, father? Or is she so deprived of human contact, she seeks it in the face of every stranger? We simply do not know. The man seems to be strong, there is no hint of defeat in his posture; his red sweater makes us think that he's a worker – perhaps in one of the antiquated lumberyards on the right bank of the river. But, if that is the case, why is he idling when it's clearly business as usual in his (alleged) place of employment? Does he belong to B.C.'s legion of jobless? Is he a nascent revolutionary, quietly nursing his grievances until the times grow propitious for violent action? If the little girl's mother in "The Gare St. Lazare" was meant to be an open (if somewhat depressing) book (like the open volume resting on her lap), the man in *North Arm* is decidedly closed. Circumstance has rendered him opaque.

Linsley's borrowings from Manet are anything but simple-minded or slavish. He is very sensitive to the specific subliminalities of his native place. Manet's figures were stiff and uncomfortable in their formal, starched clothes; Linsley's subjects are much more at ease in their lived-in West Coast grubbies. Manet's secretly unhappy Parisians always stood in the closest possible physical proximity to one another (while remaining, emotionally, on different planets); Linsley's characters, on the other hand, embody the English tradition in Vancouver-style social relations, maintaining physical as well as emotional distance.

If "Manet belonged to society and believed his art to be about society – not politically, but in a human and richly contemporary sense..."¹ Linsley's relationship to his environment is somewhat more

complex. The repressive regime of Napoleon III followed by the conservative Catholic reaction to the spectre of the Commune caused Manet to sublimate his social criticism to the point where it barely showed. His spirit of rebellion was expressed more fully in the form of under-drawn hands, unnaturally cocked heads and anatomically impossible legs. The incredibly deep worry lines that crease the forehead of the 19th century artist in period photographs might well have been caused by his life-long struggle with the defenders of "comme il faut."

Linsley, on the other hand, while more explicit in his political commentary, expresses defiance for the canons of the new Academy by abandoning his sometimes slapdash spontaneity and turning increasingly towards restraint, intelligence, distance and control. The narrative impulse here is entirely self-contained and self-referential; it is objectivity informed at every level by the subjective, rather than the other way around.

Linsley no longer believes that a contemporary artist can afford to be ignorant or naive. In the 1980's, the young painter is so saturated with art history – neo-this and neo-that – he must choose with extreme caution those traditional influences that touch most directly on his personal experience. Linsley's pronounced interest in the Soochow Professional Masters stems partially from their triumph over very similar aesthetic problems. "From the beginning of the sixteenth century, Nanking was gradually replaced by Soochow as the city in which the most fruitful intercourse of artists, patrons, and collectors took place... Soochow's long-established tradition of literati painting interacted with the professional tradition in mutually beneficial ways..."²

Like them, Linsley is trying to make new what at times can seem like a stiflingly ancient tradition. His closest local affinities are not with fellow painters, but with such socially aware photographers as Ian Wallace and Jeff Wall. Their critical attitude towards the urban landscape is their most important unifying factor.

It would be a big mistake, however, to conclude from this that Linsley has become a realist. Dreams still impinge on his canvases, but these dreams are connected to concrete dreamers. Certain details in his otherwise minutely observed paintings are left deliberately hazy in the name of subliminal correlation. The challenge of photography is confronted in every composition, and ways around the medium's frightening objectivity are continually sought.

Despite their sometimes conservative form (and if one looks, closely, one will notice sly subversions of formal technique scattered here and there), Linsley's paintings are never reactionary. The alpine fire imagery (will the flames spread or will they wink out?) are passionate manifestations of the breathtakingly vulnerable human soul. From this point of subjectivity, the canvas expands to encompass other individuals and the background to which they belong. An either/or situation between self and other is thereby not permitted to develop.

If Linsley's art has lost much of its previous delight in visual play, it has gained immensely in its love of craftsmanship. A craftsmanship which, fortunately, is never used solely for its own sake. Linsley has taken Samuel Beckett's dictum to heart and agreed that the only way to go is in the direction of depth. When the gate narrows, the corridor must grow long.

Mark Harris

Footnotes

1. Nicholas Wadley, *Manet*, Paul Hamlyn, London, 1967.
2. James Francis Cahill, *Parting at the Shore*, John Weatherhill Inc., Tokyo, 1978.