

Mark Grady

The Small Museum: Part I

**Contemporary Art Gallery Vancouver
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The Interrogation of Painting - The Artist as Rhetor: Mark Grady's Small Museum

Mark Grady creates paintings that are distinguished by their subject matter, monochrome tonality, framing, and relation to the issues of appropriation and the use and re-use of historical material. In each of these instances the works from 'The Small Museum' pierce not only the history of painting's conversation with these matters, but also the assumptions surrounding the ways that art historical influence and reproduction photography interact. It is the purpose of this brief note to describe these works, offer some interpretation of their programme, and probe some of the possible rationales behind such a methodological strategy.

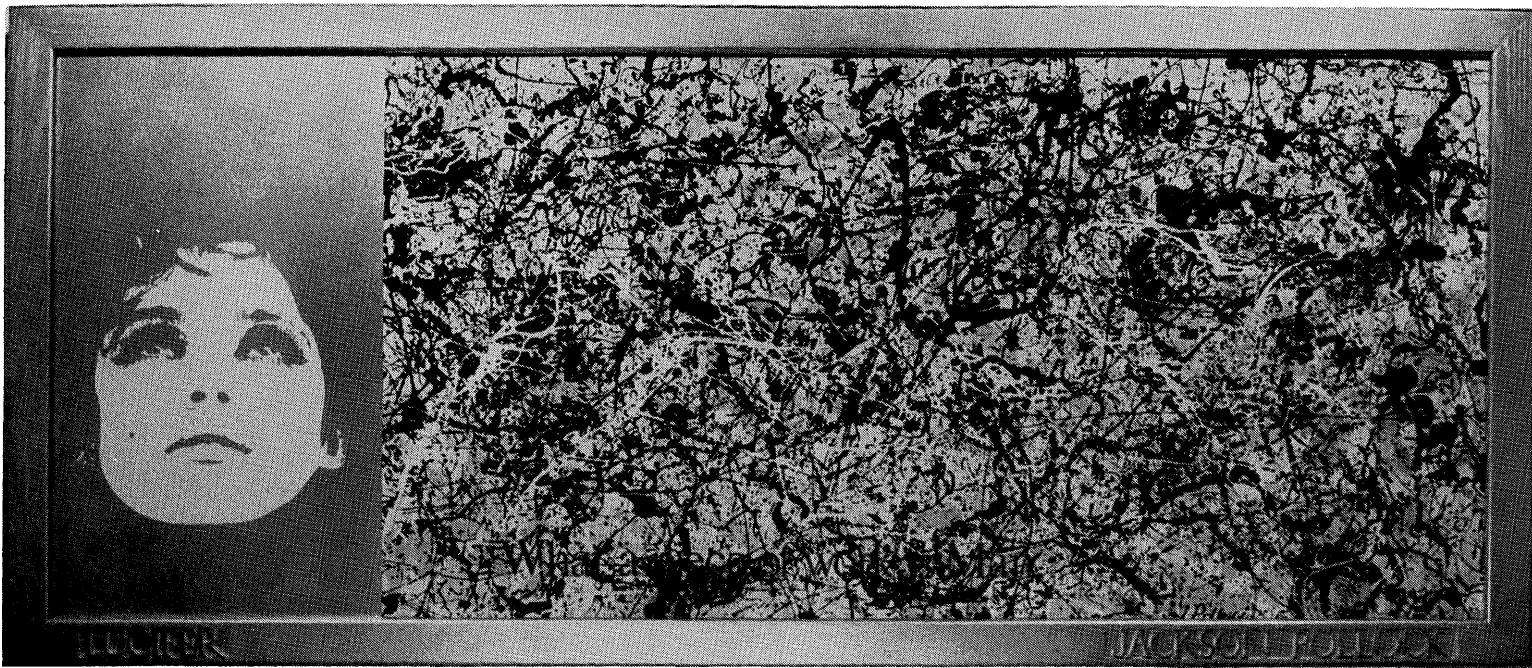
The series began with 'Cherkassy' (a village in the Ukraine), painted in 1987. Grady's previous project, the Pantheon Series, was a kind of modular painting on strips of plexiglass which resulted in works on a mammoth scale once the strips were assembled. The current project is a response to the earlier work in the sense that replication of the size of extant images has replaced replication of the dimensions of extant objects, which he did with plexiglass versions of both NATO aircraft and Warsaw Pact tanks in the 'Pantheon Series'. His new painting seeks parity with representations, rather than the tangible object. 'Cherkassy' also maintained the connection with the military subject matter of the 'Pantheon Series', as part of its importance as a subject stems from the occupation of Cherkassy by the German army in WWII. Of the other work in 'The Small Museum: Part One', only 'Sie sind auf harte Steine gefallen' has a direct connection to militarism, as the Courbet 'Stonebreakers' that is half of the image, was

destroyed in the bombing of Dresden in 1944. The other half, on a centrally mounted oval, is a painting of the bombed-out city centre of Dresden.

The historical turning points represented in Mark Grady's work are perhaps not so much a part of 'big' history as they are part of the strategies and techniques of the 'new' history. These are the histories of everyday life, and all those events that were thought unworthy of inclusion, much less analysis. These 'open system' histories were a French project, beginning with Marc Bloch's 'French Rural History' (1931) and Lucien Febvre's 'A Geographical Introduction to History' (1922). These works then lead to the texts of Braudel, Ariès and Duby, and in England to those of Lawrence Stone. For example: the painting 'Los!' (Go!), depicts an ornamental ironwork window-screen that Grady sees as representative of the Symbolist/Art Nouveau works that Modernism sought to oust (Go!). In 'Life-size/Irony/Still-life/Portrait' he seems to register the transition from the prime importance of the individual, in Raphael, to that of the diminished human in Jenny Holzer's 'Lady Pink', as reproduced in *Vanguard*. In his work, Grady has 'corrected' this, as his Lady Pink here has an isomorphic relation to her actual self. In 'de wereld mod' (The modern world) Grady sees a point of imbrication involving Mondrian, modernity and pop-culture as represented by a moped. The most recent of the six, 'What A Piece of Work is Man', is either more enigmatic or requires more projection, as the juxtaposition of Pollack's 'Lucifer' with a painted version of Warhol's



Sie sind auf harte Steine gefallen, 1989-90. 68" X 108"



sometime star Edie Sedgewick appears at first to yield little; but we sense that the battle between POP and Ab Ex is being fought, again, before our eyes. The replacement of one typology by another, which is a key element throughout this series, is here a key element of one work.

Grady's images register moments of influence, or, more accurately, points of inflection. Although these overlaps are different for each work, he has unified the project by the use of Burnt Sienna throughout. The resulting monochrome becomes a kind of palimpsest, but with the idea that it is the colour rather than some earlier writing that has been erased. This monochrome is the signifier of these works, so I will describe what I see as its meaning. Firstly, it functions as a levelling device via the history that it depicts, as various periods are flattened together in graphic terms. All history is equally distant then, and all events (to refer back to the 'new' history) equally valid, equally worthy of entering the record. It is also reminiscent of sepia-toned reproduction photography, as if we looked at the art of the past through sepia-toned glasses, rather than having Art History 101 or Alinari's pictures do it for us. Then there is the sketch, the cartoon, in which an image precedes the real image, but in these works we see the resemblance to the cartoon come after the fact of the original. So, Grady's monochrome is painting operating in reverse time, having a dialogue with history and the history of photography as it devolves. Historically, there are certain moments that can be seen as representing monochrome at its most useful. Photography at the end of the 19th century, classical architecture as imagined by the 17th century, and as part of Minimalism's attempt to return art to its essential Platonic self. The discovery of classical polychromy in the late 18th century is here turned on its head, as these works query the nature of progress in art and history by their reversion to monochrome.

Whereas Sherrie Levine has made original works by rephotographing and repainting reproductions, Grady's battle with the 'originalness' of the work of art pertains to painting's internal dialogue, which has historically grappled with the attempt to name the locus of meaning in art. In these pictures it is not the concepts of authenticity and derivativeness which fuelled Levine's work

through the 80s, but another proposal relating to subject matter and the interaction of disciplines. In Grady's system, authenticity matters, but not in the way that it does with other appropriators. In Grady's painting, it is authenticity of scale, and the attempt to legitimate certain operative historical values that have been overlooked, and which have operated at key moments that have not been previously defined. An example of this would be the fact that Realism in 19th century painting prefigured the writing of the 'new' history by 75 years, with the 'Funeral at Ornans'. One conclusion that we may draw from this is that much of the concern of painting about painting seems to have to do with it maintaining a distance from the present moment, a distance required to insure its own continuance. When 20th century painting becomes a purveyor of current events, as was possible for Courbet, it will indeed be dead.

Grady's reconsideration of these events that interface between art and history reveals another way of working with titles as aphorisms. 'They have fallen on hard stones' is in fact a German saying, but Grady's use of it is much softer than Jenny Holzer's advice in art, while sharing a level of irony with that found in the work of Vancouver photographer Don Gill. This irony permeates the work called 'What a piece of work is man', as the text acts an overlay on a Jackson Pollack painting which, in its new monochrome state, looks more like a dendritic photomicrograph than an expression of a perceptual or psychological breakthrough. The story behind 'Cherkassy' is extremely convoluted. Grady's appropriation is from a painting by one F. Kohler, dating from the 1890s. The original was part of an exchange exhibition between Dusseldorf and Milan in 1943, which happened to be the same time that the German army was being driven out of the village of Cherkassy by the Russians. In the picture there is a valley that resembles an excavation for a mass grave, but in the original it could only have been read as part of a pastoral scene. The German losses at Cherkassy could have filled the valley, which was deep in snow when 80,000 soldiers were driven from the town. In 'Life-size/Irony/Still-life/Portrait' two images used for the cover of *Vanguard* (the defunct Vancouver art magazine) have their scale corrected. The Raphael portrait is here identical with the original, and the Jenny Holzer 'Lady Pink' is identical with the size of Lady Pink. And 'de wereld mod' reveals the strange relation between

Mondrian's attempts to deconstruct the essence of pictorial form in his search for spiritual truth, and the newspaper page layouts his pictures resemble, with each ad space having its own box.

Mark Grady makes history paintings. He works with the idea of the fragment as a metonymic signifier. As with much of the best art of the late 20th century, he has undertaken an analysis of the world of subjects. Abstract Expressionism, the painting of enlarged details, is an art historical moment of these fragments. In representational work, the subject has grown into the *new extended subject*. Much of the best critical work now made reads: 'this society is morally bankrupt, and I'm going mirror that back to you'. In this metonymic exercise the work of art becomes that which has often been claimed for it – a sign – as did the work required to produce the work. In this universe of signs, meaning is exegetical meaning, as well as emotional meaning, and if isolated elements become symptomatic, then we have truly returned to the original meaning of semiotics – as a 19th century medical term describing the diagnosis of the body based on an interpretation of symptoms and wounds.

These works operate at a point that combines historical events, art historical events and contemporary visual art practice. That is their domain, and as such these three areas combine to form a way of keeping art out of the dead ends of history. Grady revives obscure moments, like James Joyce collecting bus tickets and menus to recycle in 'Ulysses', he enters his object or event into a work of strange complexity. Each painting is elaborately, and self-reflexively, framed. The frames are themselves signifiers, not only of a previous cultural moment, but also of Grady's critique of frame conscious art that allows the internal form, rather than the subject, to dictate the nature of the container.

So, the painting, or shall we say, painting itself, is in the chair, the lights are directed at it, and the questions begin: Who are you? What do you know? Where are you from? Where were you on the night of...? What were you intending to do here in our place? Why do you exist? Explain yourself!

– Bill Jeffries

Biography

Mark Grady was born in Liverpool in 1952 and has lived in Vancouver since 1966. He graduated from Emily Carr College of Art in 1982. His exhibitions include: 'Two Portraits' at Gallery t.o.o. in 1989. 'Dialogue' (with Julie Duschenes) at the Or Gallery, 1988. 'One Gold Piece' at Artspeak Gallery, 1986. 'Art About Issues' at the Surrey Art Gallery, 1986. 'The Pantheon Series' at Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, 1985 and at Main Exit in Vancouver, 1983.

Work in the exhibition

All works are oil paint, oil glaze and acrylic paint on canvas.

Cherkassy, 1987
4'X10'

Los!, 1987
(2 copper plaques adjacent to painting)
5'X7'

Life-size/Irony/Still-Life/Portrait, 1987-88 variable size according to installation, picture elements: 37"X29" and 26"X20"

Sie sind auf harte Steine gefallen, 1988-89 68"X108"

de wereld mod, 1989-90
48"X87"

What a piece of work is man, 1989-90
47"X109"

Acknowledgements

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