

"The War on Terror; Abstract Painting in Today's World"

There is no such thing as the "War on Terror." Obviously, we are all terrified of *terrorism*. But a "War on Terror" is a metaphysical, psychological, technical, and ontological impossibility. "The War on Terror," as such, is an absurd diversionary tactic that allows us *not to address* real issues. We all know this in our bones because terror has been with us since the beginning. It was there in the caves, on the steppe, across the savanna, and on the tundra. We will bring it with us to our graves.

After September 11 everyone said that, "Everything is different." This is exactly wrong. After September 11 everything simply became *more of what it already was*. Before September 11 America tended toward unilateralism, now it's more unilateral; we burned a lot of fossil fuel, now we burn more; Islam hated us, now they hate us more. Painter Charline von Heyl recently described the disconnect that many of us are experiencing thusly, "While almost everything in the outer world feels messed-up our inner lives aren't altogether messed-up." That sums up the art world as well.

One of the more annoying ideas afoot in the art world these days is that for art to be "political," whatever that means, it has to be figurative and have "political subject matter." This is exactly wrong. Case in point: Recently, the curator of Marlene Dumas' upcoming Museum of Modern Art exhibition, the otherwise excellent Connie Butler, responded to one of my public hissy-fits about the overestimation of this latter-day Neo-Expressionist, by saying, "Dumas has been making portraits of terrorists." This was meant to suggest that certain subject matter exempts art from criticism or questioning when, in fact, this subject matter is not only predictable and generic, and in that sense utterly conservative, its perfect fodder for a culture in disconnect.

All I want to say about this is: Painting has the ability to change lives and the world, if not directly then by osmosis and incrementally. No one has believed the cliché that "Painting is Dead" since at least the Nixon administration (except maybe the scolds at October Magazine). Yet the art world has a new version of this idiotic notion, namely that Abstraction is somehow ineffective, frivolous, or irrelevant.

In fact, abstraction is an extraordinary invention and an enormously powerful tool in art's arsenal. And let's face it: *All art is inherently abstract*. All art is an infinitely weird, amazingly radical thing that structures a galaxy according to its own rules. Every painting, every work of art for that matter, regardless of whether or not you label it "abstract" or not, is its own theory of the universe. It is a world unto itself. To say that only figurative art can address the issues of our time is not only just another perversely erroneous diversionary tactic, and laughable, anyone saying this must be told to "Go away. We can't help you anymore."

In his eloquent essay, "Vermeer in Bosnia," Lawrence Weschler reports that Antonio Cassese, a distinguished Italian jurist serving on the Yugoslav War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague, would sometimes go to the Mauritshuis museum after hearing continual testimony about Balkan atrocities. There, he looks at what are among the two most beautiful things ever made, Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, 1665-66 and his *View of Delft*, 1660-61. He does not do this because these things are "merely beautiful;" he does this, Cassese says, because these paintings were "invented to heal pain;" "they radiate a centeredness, a peacefulness, a serenity ... and are a psychic balm." In other words, when we look at art we're not only looking at it we're also looking into and through it, into and through the paint, pigment, canvas, or whatever to something else. You're not only seeing yourself and the mind of the maker; in some metaphysical but organic way you're seeing the group mind, and even all the minds that have ever lived. You're seeing a static object that has thought and experience embedded in it, a changeless thing that changes through time. Of course, some art does just deal with so-called formal issues. But even this art does more than that.

In the days just after September 11, painter Gaylen Gerber reported the "small victories" he felt going to the Art Institute of Chicago and simply "looking at shiny plastic furniture from the '60s and 70s that," as he put it, "in some way, maybe because of its superficial and ultra clean look, made me feel a little better."

Gerber was experiencing the ways in which art tells you things you don't know you need to know until you know them. He was in touch with how art can be "a vacation from the self," in critic Peter Schjeldahl's words, or a journey to it, how its a system for mapping, reflecting, prospecting, and creating consciousness. Art is a region where protocols are invented or suspended and things one doesn't understand change one's life. That's why Gerber's shiny chairs cut through the gloom, a ceramic pot can vie for greatness with the Sistine Ceiling, and the Vietnam Memorial channels a nation's remorse even though it is based on the one thing that most Americans purport to loath: Abstraction.

Art is often political when it doesn't seem political and not political when that's all it seems to be. Neither Andy Warhol nor Donald Judd made overtly political art. Yet both changed the way the world looks and the way we look at the world. That's because art creates new thought structures. Art does far more than only meet the eye. It is part of the biota of the world. It exists within a Holistic system.

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