

Who's Afraid of Realistic Art?

In the wild Sixties, Western art underwent a radical revolution. Together with the rest of 'The Movement', the Artworld questioned its own foundations and values. The artists of the Sixties probed and prodded the very boundaries of art, pushing their adventurous antics ever farther. They broke any and all restrictions and traditional conventions of art. "Anything goes!" was the word of the day. Modern art seemed to go insane, producing spatters, splashes and spectacles which baffled us all. Still, the wild antics of the Sixties were of great historical importance. They showed us something very important about art. They showed us that art cannot, will not, be caged in. By showing us that anything at all can be art, they showed us that art must forever remain boundlessly creative.

That is a fine lesson. However, it raises a new problem. Since nowadays art is boundlessly free, and anything at all can be art, the new problem is *what should be art?* Should an artist paint a picture or go look for an interesting piece of garbage? If he decides to paint, should he paint figuratively, or abstract? Should he seek the timelessly classical, the universally romantic, or the fleeting mundane? Should he go for the heart or the brain? For the past two decades, the Artworld has been offering answers to those questions, and one major trend has been gaining ground steadily. That trend is a remarkable return to figurative painting, and particularly to Realism. Artists have always known that art can show us truths about reality, that words fail to capture. With all due respect to the theories and conceptual explanations offered to us by science, there are still aspects of reality that science cannot explain. These are aspects which one must experience, so as to grasp. These are the aspects realist art tries to embody, so that we may experience them through the experience of the work of art. *Realistic art tries to show us that which science cannot explain.* If we asked "what should be art?", I think that is one very good answer.

The return to realistic art, however, is not a mere step back to "the good ole days". We are now well aware that reality is viewed from different points of view, from different perspectives. Contemporary realistic art shows this very clearly. This is where the current exhibition at the Leonardo Art Hotel in Tel Aviv, comes into play. This collection of contemporary figurative and realist paintings unfolds an enlightening vista before the viewer, a broad look at the various strains and tributaries of contemporary realist art. Eran Reshef immortalizes the grungy underbelly of everyday domestic life, bathtubs and methane tanks. Maia Zer deals with the more easy-going flow of being outdoors, trees, flowers, the sway of branches in the wind, the unfolding of the petals of a flower. Matan Ben Cna'an is holding a dialogue with journalistic photography and the way it seems to reflect political social realities. Aram Gershuni takes a scrutinizing look at reality, attempting to capture the reality of a tin can, but he knows well that simply looking is problematic, so he paints his own self-portrait from behind...

For all the diversity one finds in enterprises such as the Shiff Collection, there are some things that virtually all styles of figurative realistic painting have in common.

Digging deep into the very foundations of figurative art, one finds something that cannot be found anywhere else: the Line. Using a line to draw a figure is not so simple a feat as one might imagine. The line bounds, it defines, it distinguishes between one thing and another. The line is very much like the word, in this respect, for the word also defines an object. But whereas the word defines an object intellectually, the line does so sensually. You *see* it. That is a different opera altogether. We can use words to try and describe the human form, but we use lines to show it. Just as using words is basic to human existence, so is using lines. We find them on cave walls, we doodle on notepads while talking on the phone, we plot shipping routes on drawn maps, and, of course, we try to capture the world around us in works of art. As long as we try to “capture” the truths of this world, as long as we try to “fence them in”, that is “to define” them using lines, figurative painting will always be with us.

The challenge is great indeed. To draw a figure is not merely to present its likeness; it is to try to capture an ineffable truth about it. There are truths that can be explained, like why apples fall to the ground and why the sky is blue. But there are also truths that cannot be explained, like what it means to fall from grace or to feel blue. These truths can only be shown. We try to capture them in art, and show them. It is so fundamental to human experience that drawing has been around since the dawn of civilization. But can art really capture the illusive truths of reality? Some of the artists in the Shiff Collection are trying to answer that question. Some say yes, some say no. Some say it is a matter of looking, some say it is a matter of understanding. Some deal with the issue by carrying on a dialogue with traditional, “classical” art, some do so by scrutinizing photographs. Some are trying to tell us that art should merely ask the question, and not even try to answer it. Whatever the case may be, I think all agree that the basic idea – that art should try to show us that which science cannot explain – is damn good idea.

We hope you enjoy the experience.

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Summer 2012