

EXHIBITION ESSAY

Tragic and Timeless Today: Contemporary History Painting

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This exhibition is about a contemporary resurgence of "history painting," a tradition long thought to have withered after the triumph of the avant-garde in the late nineteenth-century. Defined in the seventeenth-century as the noblest category of painting, above landscape, genre, portraiture and still-life, the "grand style" is best embodied in the gravely dignified pictures of Nicolas Poussin and works by 18th-century academic masters such as Jacques-Louis David. History painting is figurative and didactic, drawing its subjects from historical chronicles as well from literature, the Bible and other sacred texts, and classical mythology. Human narratives depicted by means of spare, grandly paced compositions are meant to teach timeless moral truths. Just as Greek Tragedy aimed at effecting a catharsis that would leave the members of the audience better human beings, so history paintings would uplift the consciousness of the viewers.

History painting is by definition a public art; it is meant to go beyond the viewer's aesthetic pleasure and the artist's involvement with his medium. Ultimately, the aim is to inspire worthy behavior through heroic example. The hero is someone "whose noble body sheathed a soul shining with virtue and whose exploits could serve as a model and as an ideal"¹ Grand manner painting emphasizes the continuity of western tradition, especially as embodied in classical mythology and antique art.

Until recently, history painting appeared to be an obsolete category. The commitment to building on the past vanished in the face of Modernism's unswerving orientation toward the future. The very idea of the hero has lost all meaning in the twentieth century. Art, especially painting, has undergone a "privatization" process -- so that the artist's inner vision is celebrated above all else, and communion with the art work takes place in the home of the individual owner. Even museum settings for pictures encourage contemplative aesthetic journeys, and are not meant ultimately to lead outward into the sphere of worldly action. The most compelling mission of art has been the realization of formal purity, expressed by

¹ Walter Friedlander, *David to Delacroix* (Cambridge, Mass: 1952), 7.

abstract means. For the most part, artists avoided treating such extra-formal issues as politics, modern myths and heroes, even art history.

In the present "postmodern" climate, the taboos of earlier twentieth-century art are disintegrating. Just as figuration had earlier returned under the guise of photo realism, so now does didactic public art. The artist's task no longer begins with the tabula rasa -- wiping the slate of history clean in the quest for more primal, profound forms of expression. But rather, seekers after enduring truth through art once again make use of materials lodged in centuries of western literature and art. Artists who had ignored reigning formalist trends during the 1960s and 70s finally gain recognition and an art world context for their work.

This exhibition presents seven artists whose work acknowledges the long-rejected grand manner and seeks its modernization through a variety of styles and strategies. Using methods ranging from the heroic to the parodic, they respond to different aspects of the tradition. Some, including Leon Golub and Nancy Spero maintain its original sociological and didactic intent; ultimately, they want to change the way we live and think. Others demonstrate quieter aims; Milet Andrejevic invokes the noble tradition of Poussin in order to demonstrate continuity between past and present --thereby ennobling our day. The huge scale of James McGarrell's paintings belie their profoundly personal content; he turns majestic Baroque painting conventions upside down in order to express today's psychic instability with sweeping subjectivity.

Modern day history, including acts of war and public violence, race riots, presidential politics and world leadership is the subject of much of this art; clearly the taboo against artists trafficking in politics is gone. Indeed, these "history paintings" are just one sign of artists' growing engagement in current events -- others include Hans Haacke's mixed-media critiques of corporate imperialism and many "deconstructive" responses to the mass media. Yet very few artists present instantly accessible points of view on current events. Satire, parody and deliberate ambiguity maintain a critical distance from the topical subjects. Even Golub, master of the visual critique against war and social injustice, seemingly garbles his message by heroicizing the mercenaries he abhors through the use of grand scale. These intentionally mixed signals are also very evident in Roger Brown's presidential portraits and in Komar and Melamid's invocations of Hitler and Stalin. The artists' shared aim is to provoke the viewer to personally engage with the issue at hand.

Postmodernism does not mark the end of Modernism's selfconsciousness about style. Rather a host of older, "abandoned" modes regain Viability. And Modernism itself is undergoing renewed scrutiny as an "historical event." Seeking to separate the mythology

from the artifacts of 20th-century art, Mark Tansey recreates the metaphorical "triumphs" of the New York School as actual occurrences. On the other hand, Roger Brown -- ever the man-of-the-people -- warns fellow artists against lapsing back into obsolete stylistic modes. Komar and Melamid, since leaving the Soviet Union in 1978 and moving to the U.S., show the same deft ability to imitate recent "American" avant-garde styles as they have demonstrated with Socialist Realism. Nancy Spero collapses all of art history into long paper scrolls. She invokes goddesses from past ages to mourn centuries of injustice and to celebrate the dawn of a new age. Her very choice of fragile and impermanent paper as medium subverts the "heroic" tradition of history painting.

Tragic And Timeless Today is not about a straight-forward revival of a tradition defined by 17th and 18th-century European art academies. All postmodern, these pictures cannot offer simple messages to edify the public. Formalist self-consciousness is irrevocable; no artist can again assume the unified climate of belief on which purely didactic paintings depend. Each artist in this exhibition is profoundly aware that the "meaning" of a picture is determined not just by the choice of subject but by the invocation of particular representational conventions. therefore underlines the fact that history

painting, relying on a long disused, despised set of conventions, has been brought back selectively in the late twentieth century, to achieve its original aims -- to teach, to comment, to ennoble.