

Photography, Genre and Continuity

Roy Arden

In his somewhat obscure "The Camera's Glass Eye: Review of an Exhibition of Edward Weston" of 1937, Clement Greenberg does much more than lambaste Weston for his modern-style pictorialism. Remarkably, Greenberg offers here a concise prescription for both painting and photography as modernist art. If painting is to progress it must strive for the absolute, expurgating all figurative content in a move towards self-definition. Photography on the other hand, will arrive at self-definition precisely by embracing representation—it is free to take up the traditional tasks which painting must abandon. Even the most important job of traditional art, the history painting, is now left for photography. Greenberg cites Walker Evans as an exemplary modern art photographer, finishing his review with the moral: "let photography be 'literary'."¹

Whether one agrees with Greenberg's prescriptions or not, it is clear that painting has largely moved away from its traditional functions and that photography increasingly assumed those functions, both in the fine arts and the popular media. Beginning with the Realists, the important work in painting seems to have been accomplished in progressive steps away from the "high" genres. Portraits and landscapes, rather than battle scenes preoccupied the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. Cézanne and the cubists advanced their art through the lowest of the genres, the still life.

The system of genres which ordered the representational enterprise of painting previous to the modern era was subject oriented. A picture's worth was firstly tied to its subject matter rather than its mode of execution. At the top of the hierarchy were history painting and mythological scenes, below them were portraits, followed by landscapes and lastly, the still life. The further from a direct depiction of human drama, the lower the rank of the picture.

While photography did assume the task of history painting it did so largely through the photojournalistic model. Of course the pictorial conventions of photojournalism largely derived from the preceding tradition of painted representations, but this was rarely overtly acknowledged. Instead, a purely photojournalistic, which is to say a purely photographic aesthetic, was pursued as an antithesis to the retrograde conventions of "fuzzy" pictorialist art photography. With some exceptions, it was predominantly in the cinema that the painted prehistory of photographic representation was openly explored and exploited before the 1960s. Perhaps it is due to the false start of pictorialism, that it took until the conceptual art movement of the sixties for artists to examine the continuity between the the worlds of the painted pictures of the past, and the photographic pictures of the present.

The recent return of the history painting within contemporary painting has been widely discussed, especially with regards to the *Oktober 18, 1977* suite of paintings by Gerhard Richter of the possibly murdered Baader Meinhoff prisoners in Stammheim prison. Since Rauschenberg, Warhol and the pop artists, through Polke, Richter and Kiefer, to contemporary artists such as Cady Noland, this "new history painting" has

almost exclusively relied on the journalistic photograph for its image. It seems that directly painted representations of historic events are either still taboo or simply too difficult to manage. Meanwhile, through the sixties and seventies a profusion of photographic activity emerged from the ground-zero of conceptual art. This work explored photography's potential for art in ever more novel ways. Out of this freedom of approach came some serious new art that employed photography to make representations which did not owe as much to the restrictions of established fine art photography as to the continuous history of representation.

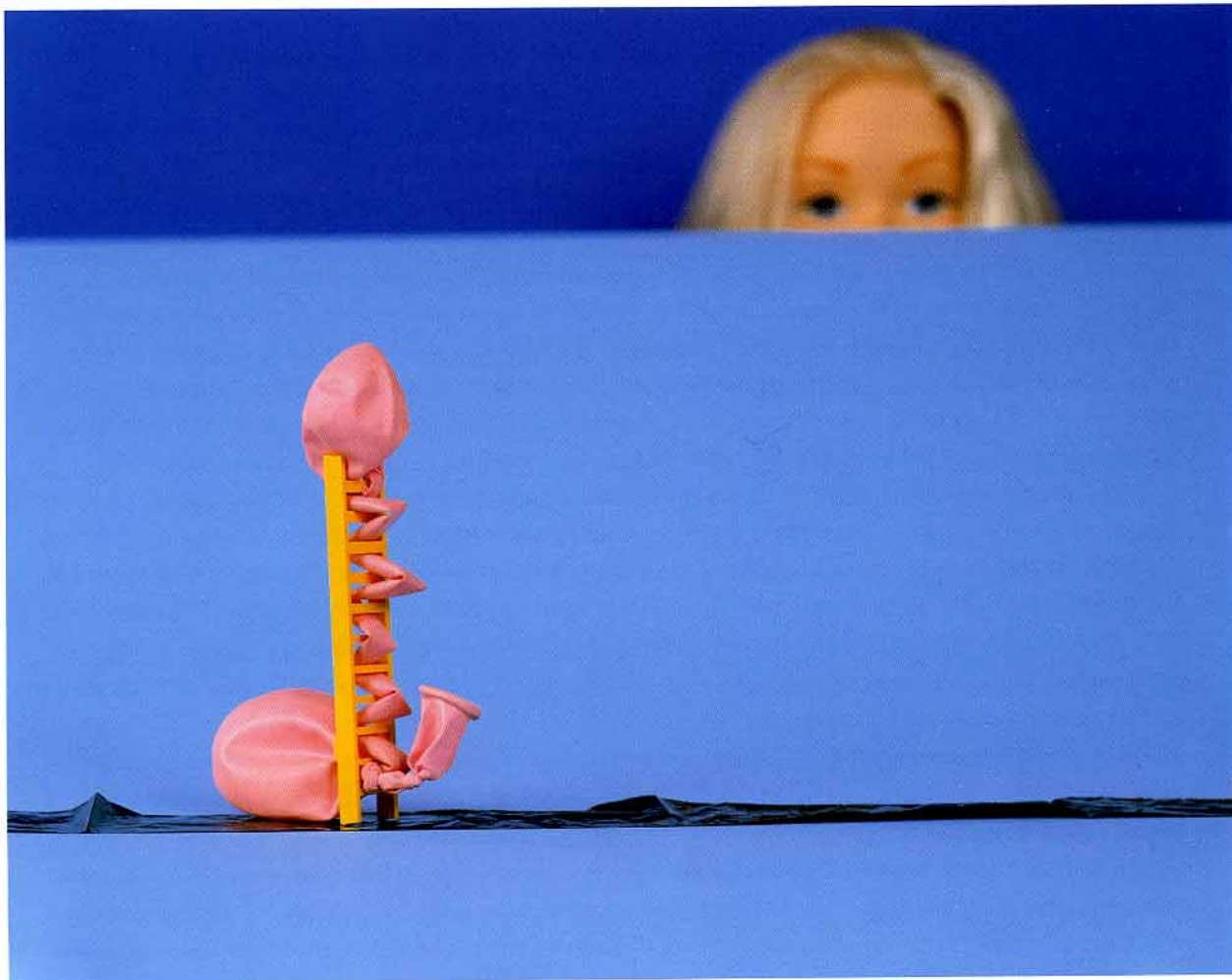
The most accomplished proponents of this art photography include Gilbert & George, Cindy Sherman, Clegg & Guttman and, most relevant to this exhibition, Jeff Wall. These artists with their large coloured pictures, blew away the constraints which held art photography hostage and introduced the photographically produced *tableau* as a form which could assume its place in the museum in dialogue with the painted *tableaux* of tradition. One of the chief characteristics of this new art was its reanimation of genre as an inescapable condition of representation.

Jeff Wall's retrieval of the history painting has probably been the most clear and significant recognition of what Thomas Crow has referred to as "the Persistence of Genre."² Wall's influence on younger Vancouver artists may be more pervasive and deeper than at first it might seem. By opening up the notion of a photographic revival of genre, he has given visibility to potential developments which may, or may not, follow his own particular direction but which nonetheless stem from the same theoretical base.

The artists in this exhibition all developed their aesthetic programmes in Vancouver. This city has never had a very impressive tradition of painting, it therefore felt natural for many artists to begin their artistic work in mechanical media like photography or video. Yet, as artists they were tied to the history and traditions of art and so could not step over the velvet rope of autonomy into the culture industry. It is now possible for the work of Wall and his colleagues to be taken for granted as a foundation or context for addressing the important questions of art with the tools of new media. It is from within this art-historical scheme that I see the work of the artists in this exhibition emerging. It is significant—in ways that I hope will become apparent throughout this text—that this work deals with the still life, the lowest of the genres. For as previously mentioned, it was the early moderns' investment of serious content into the still life that signalled the end of the genre system for painting and the beginning of its spiral towards abstraction.

In his excellent study of the still life *Looking at the Overlooked—Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Norman Bryson characterizes Dutch still life as quintessentially rhopographic in its concern for "low-plane reality":

What makes Dutch still life so unique is the symmetry between this anonymous, self-effacing technique and the particular range of possibilities afforded by rhopographic painting. Rhopography works against the idea of greatness: while human beings may be capable of extraordinary heroism, passions, ambitions, it leaves the exploration of these things to others, and against megalography it asserts another view of human life, one that attends to the ordinary business of everyday living, the life of houses and tables, of individuals on a plane of material existence where the ideas of heroism, passion and ambition have no place. The Dutch painters of still life are true to this rhopographic scale of values in that they make no



Damian Moppett, *Ladder*, 1996



Damian Moppett, *Untitled (Roma)*, 1996



Damian Moppett, *Untitled*, 1996

of still life and history painting. As previously noted, history painting held the highest position in the hierarchy of genres whilst still life held the lowest; their respective functions could not be more different. Guston refuses his protagonists the lofty stage and proscenium of history and sends them to the puppet-theater. The compression of history painting's human drama into the closer frame makes the characters larger—but comically, rather than heroically so. This is a device of an existential consciousness, the important dramas are now internal, no longer played out on the political stage, the battlefield or the landscapes of ancient myth.

Moppett's narratives are not as serious as Guston's, with their tenor of moral anguish. While Moppett likewise entertains the megalographic within the formal space of the rhopographic, his narratives are not ones into which we can project ourselves. We remain on the outside, looking in on a miniature slapstick world. We are offered no moral or existential catharsis. Instead we are to be amused as we peer in like nickelodeon customers, for only a brief respite from our world. Moppett's *tableaux* are a refusal of seriousness that may be read as cynical subversion rather than serious tragicomedy. Yet, the artist's goal is clearly a strange beauty. His aesthetic hopes to find this beauty in a fictional, psychotic realm and thus his art is more about a unique, personal expression than the humble depiction of low-plane reality that characterized Dutch still life.

In his most recent works Moppett turns directly to the representation of the *informe*. All untitled, but collectively referred to by the artist as "Office Blobs" these pictures are carefully composed "accidents": non-specific materials, perhaps plaster, insulating foam and adhesive rubber, and banal objects like cigarettes, thumbtacks and pencils, are gathered together in *tableaux* with pointless narratives. These things are all new and clean, they are devoid of the pathos of the organic. The colours and their combinations are suggestive of states of nausea but are once removed from the body and its functions. These pictures embrace a sea-sick cynicism reminiscent of Magritte's *vache* period, but as bloodless cartoons outside of history. Need we no longer decipher an absurd or nauseous picture as an index of historic circumstance or have such pictures become permanent, mannerist tropes? Such a conclusion might only be symptomatic of a view that has mistaken the present order for an eternal nature. Moppett's colours and technique appear to be derived from the commercial image. His choice of the still life, the throne room of the commodity, especially leads us to interpret his pictures as reflecting the conditions of late capitalism.

Howard Ursuliak

Unlike Moppett and Wood who both construct their fictions in the studio, Howard Ursuliak prefers to work in the everyday world. His "discovered" still lifes utilize the model of the photograph as indexical document. It is possible to view his photographs as a kind of anthropology concerned with a marginal economy and lifestyle. Pictures such as *Untitled (boxed snacks)* (1994), that are part of a series which examines corner grocery stores, would seem to reinforce such a reading. Yet his allusions to the history of proto-photographic painting, manifest through studied composition and attention to light and colour, inform us that he intends his pictures as art rather than journalism or social science.