

Photography and Painting
Ex Post Facto.

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Rick Moody

Art is Dead, Long Live Art!

For ten years now, Arthur Danto, art critic and philosopher, has been mounting a forceful and persuasive argument that the history of art has come to an end (see, for example, *After the End of Art*, 1997): that, with Warhol's celebrated Brillo boxes, with Lichtenstein's Pop Art comic strip panels, etc., an epistemological formulation about what art is reaches its conclusion (art is what you name and set apart), whereupon, in Danto's view, art becomes free to pursue its manifold articulations unburdened by history.

In so far as the history of Art in the Modern era has been exactly that quasi-chemical pursuit of the essential defining attributes of art, we have with Postmodernism in fact entered the Posthistorical phase of the history of art. It is a difficult but wonderful time to be alive, nor could anyone, knowing that this would happen, will to have lived at an earlier time.

Though I sometimes feel that these ratiocinations avoid issues of technique (and how



Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled*, 1995, C-print, edition of 6, 101.6 x 177 cm



technique, with its own separate history, may have narratives and reversals and vogues with respect to colour or paint-handling or the necessity of leaving paint behind altogether), and though Danto concentrates mainly on thematic and conceptual articulations of what art is, it's interesting, according to his logic, to see how energetic art has been since its collapse.

One contemporary American photographer, Gregory Crewdson, in his arresting series of *Untitled* images from 1995 and 1996, seems to embody particularly this energy *ex post facto*. Like Cindy Sherman, whose work he departs from and amplifies, Crewdson takes systems of images, media deployments (as in Sherman's film stills), and reconfigures them. In Crewdson's case, at least for me, the system of imagery is all about art history, and all about occupying the space once accorded the art of painting.

An especially satisfying pair of *Untitled* images depend for their particular effects on a red barn. In the first (1995), the all-American barn and its attendant garage exist in the middle ground of the photograph, surrounded by a quarter acre or so of lawn, while in the foreground, in a field of wild flowers, there is a very obviously stuffed red cardinal and an outstretched human arm – an arm with a marbled, corpse-like hue. A length of thorns works its way from the corners of the piece down through the centre, and this tangle is wound about the human arm, which none the less (from beyond the grave) beckons desperately towards the red bird. In the furthest distance, suburban trees, a pair of water tanks, the hint of industry. Interestingly, Crewdson's landscape is completely manufactured, entirely assembled in his studio in Park Slope; the barn a model, the arm evidently plastic (although I have also heard that the body parts in the images actually belong to Crewdson himself). The red barn, in its simulated rural placidity, immediately leads us to a Grant Wood supposition, to a landscape of admirable and coherent Americans, to a landscape of landscape painting. But this desire for framed cultural certainties in Crewdson's work is always frustrated or made to yield again to artifice and simulacrum – what is this body doing lying in this field of thorns? – and thus to the domain of the artist.

A second *Untitled* photo, this one from

shrubs and trees surround the activity), with a series of ropes, a human leg. The leg is covered with ghastly lesions, or perhaps these are spots where the mice have taken time out from labour for a meal. A Lilliputian pun is at the heart of this image, and thus surreal energy is implied, iterated, but in the distant background is that same all-American red barn. The barn of the prior image. The Grant Wood America, the Andrew Wyeth America, the America of fine landscape paintings, then, is permeated, in Crewdson's formulation, with menace, symbolic freight, the possibility of sombre, strange abridgements of conventional logic.

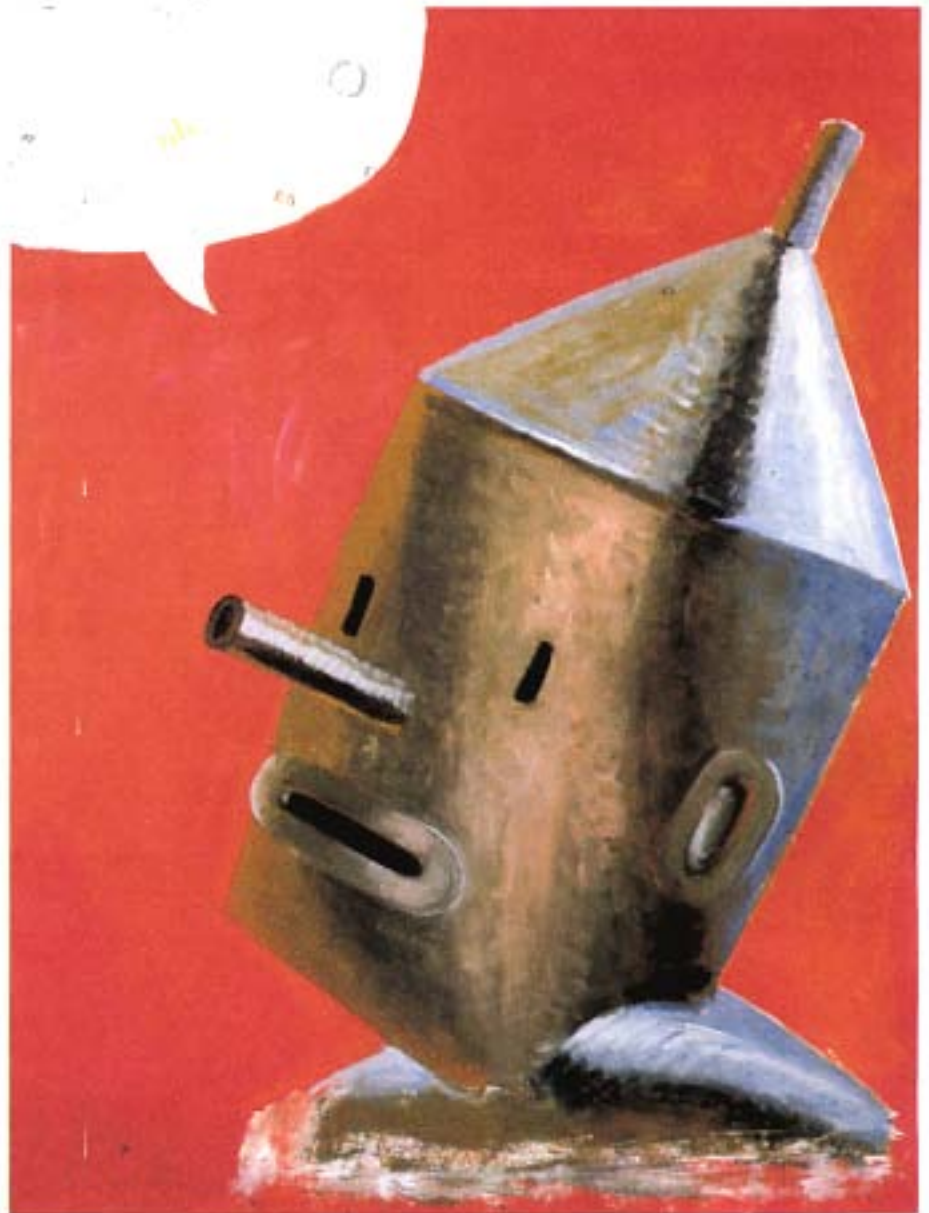
An equal and opposite generic imposture is evident in the work of one of America's most interesting younger painters, Julia Jacquette. In multi-panel paintings like *Against Mine* (1996), Jacquette affixes stylised renderings – against backdrops rich in paste colours – of high-calorie, artery-hardening menu items from our national cuisine: pancakes, ham w/pineapple, peaches 'n' cream, chocolate-covered cherries, etc. These renderings are then captioned with texts that are noteworthy for their simplicity and their longing: 'I Dreamt You Pressed Your Lips Against Mine', 'I Want to Know What it is Like to Taste Your Mouth', or 'When I Think of Your Exquisite Body My Knees Go Weak'. The conventional critical reaction to these paintings (and this reaction again leaves our issues of technique: Jacquette paints in unusual and demanding media – gouache on paper, enamel on wood) locates in them a fascination with questions of body image, and with the way in which a woman's desiring is often, in mainstream cultural formulations, paired with images of, for example, really fattening foods. This is all true and appropriate to the work, and Jacquette has made the point herself in interviews, responding to questions about her politics: 'Feminism' is an underlying theme and motivation for me. The line I always repeat... is that person is political'.

For me, however, what's crucial to *Against Mine* and *To Suck Your Fingers* (1997) is the relationship of the paintings to photograph. Unlike many of her peers in the '90s, Jacquette can draw with extraordinary facility, and yet her recent paintings use this facility in the service of a refraction of commercial photography, in particular the commercial art that we might have encountered in an

the work of conventional photorealistic painters, Jacquette also calls the dominance of this photographic imagery into question through juxtaposition. So these paintings, in their devotion to poetic narratives of longing (Jacquette is a pretty good writer), in their reverence for and defence against a commercial photography that is all but completely empty of any meaning save a mercantile one, exhibit a kind of exhaustion with the traditions of painting, with the commonplaces of medium. Like Gregory Crewdson's photographs, they reach outside their domain in the search for source material.

Historically astute American painting still abounds, sure. When the need for its comfort overtakes me, I find myself still drawn to the sober, unsentimental abstractions of painters like Stephen Westfall and Tom Martinelli, or to the psychologically rich portraiture that Elena Sisto has been showing lately (her 'Tin Man' series of images, for example, brings a genuine wisdom for character to that beleaguered *Wizard of Oz* personage). But more and more I find that forms of visual art, since the end of art as Arthur Danto has assiduously mapped it, have forsaken their historical imperatives. The old high art really doesn't exist without a little low. Collapsing these distinctions, high and low, nature and technology, painting and photography, enables an art-world fusion, in which much energy is released. (The same vitality has been true of literature, too, whose authors have been dead now twenty years. Since Roland Barthes said so.) Live it up. An ending is always an inauguration.

Gregory Crewdson is represented by The Lubing Augustine Gallery, 130 Prince Street, New York 10012.
 Julia Jacquette is represented by Holly Solomon Gallery, 172 Mercer Street, New York 10012.
 Elena Sisto will be showing in September at Littlejohn Contemporary, 41 East 57th Street, New York 10022.



Elena Sisto, *Tin Man*, 1996, oil on linen, 101.6 x 76.2 cm

