

Interview with Hilton Kramer

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Going back to the 1950's, there was a period when I was seeing quite a lot of Lee Bell and his wife Ulla [Louisa Matthiasdottir]. From 1957 to 1960, I lived in the Chelsea Hotel, and Lee and Ulla had a townhouse on West 18th Street. I was spending a lot of time with them, listening to a lot of Lee's lectures! Particularly on Derian, and Hélión. From that period I have a very beautiful small self-portrait that Ulla did. It's hard to believe now, but I bought it out of a show, for, I think, seventy-five dollars. I remember some dealer telling me when he heard about this, "Well, any painting that you buy for seventy-five dollars, it's can't be any good." It's her head, and her hand with a cigarette - very characteristic pose at that time. I was very keen about Ulla's work from the very first time that I saw it. And I think, of course, that she just got better and better. Particularly those landscapes of Iceland are really just sensational, I think. Lee's work, in the beginning, I was a little bit more resistant to, because it seemed to me that it took him a while to hit his stride, so to speak. He seemed to regard every painting as an unfinished painting. There was something about that that bothered me. But, particularly as those self-portraits became stronger and stronger, he really won me over. But in those days I wrote a lot about the early exhibitions of Philip Pearlstein. In fact, I remember Lawrence Alloway, the English critic, when he was in New York, he said — I think it was in print — "Hilton Kramer will only be remembered for writing about two artists, David Smith and Philip Pearlstein. But I was very impressed with Philip's figurative painting. He had, I think, the first show he was ever in was a New Talent show that was selected by a committee on which both Clement Greenberg and Meyer Schapiro served. And they both thought the painting was an abstract painting, but it wasn't. There was a motif, but it was a very expressionist painting. Philip was always very amused by that — that he only got by Clement Greenberg because they mistook this painting for being abstract. But of course subsequently there was no mistaking it - Philip had sort of repudiated abstract painting. I thought he was doing something very important. We sort of had a falling-out later, because — I can't remember any of these dates — but it must have been sometime in the 1980's that a writer named Dan Hofstadter wrote a review of one of Philip's shows for the *New Criterion*. He raised some critical questions about Philip's work of a kind that I wouldn't have raised, and I didn't raise in writing about it. Philip was deeply offended by this review, and he wrote me not one, but *two* letters, accusing me of conspiring to destroy his career. Which I thought was pretty outrageous, considering all the things I had written about him. So we never actually had a quarrel, but I just decided from that point on that I wouldn't write about his work anymore, because once you are accused of destroying a man's career, it makes it impossible to write about his work. So, it's been a long time since I've written about it. William Bailey, I was very keen on, from the very first time I saw his work, I think at Bob Schoelkopf's Gallery. And Bob Schoelkopf himself was a very important figure in the development of New York figurative

painting at that time. He had, if I remember correctly sort of discovered Bailey when he was still at Yale — they were both still at Yale — Bob Schoelkopf taught in the Romance Languages Department at Yale. I think he bought a drawing of Bailey's when Bailey was still a graduate student at Yale. So the connection was quite close early on. I thought and still think that Bailey's one of the best painters around. But I remember being on a panel some years later at the Guggenheim Museum, and one of the other panelists was Peter Schjeldahl. When I brought up Bailey's name, he said, "Oh, that's just calendar art." But he has said things worse than that about Bonnard, so...

Then when Schoelkopf took on both Ulla and Lee Bell, it was very important that the figurative painters got that kind of support from someone who both really understood what they were doing, and loved their work, and was in a position to keep it before the public eye. He made a huge difference, I think.

Do you feel that there is a "school" - or a "group" - of New York representational painters?

Well, frankly, I never thought of it as a school. It was not my impression frankly that they thought of themselves as a school. I mean, there was a group of them at the Tanager Gallery to begin with. I think Philip was part of that, and Lois Dodd was, and Bill King. And then Alex Katz came in at some point. But as painters, they were all so different from each other. I think in the case of Philip and Alex more than say, Lois Dodd, even though they were - as Alex once put it - sort of "post-abstract," they took their scale of their work from Abstract Expressionism. They wanted that big scale, but they wanted to keep that scale free for representational painting. In Alex's case, it sort of got bigger and bigger and bigger. And I think he's really doing some of his best painting right now, in those great big

landscape paintings, and sky-scapes, and so on. I think he's really gotten better and better, which, as we know, isn't always the case with artists or with anybody else. But I can't say that I ever really thought of it as a school. I think in some respects, on the contemporary art scene, both today and in recent years, it's more difficult for representational painters to be sort of part of a movement, because, well, for whatever reason, abstract painting seems to lend itself more to it. I mean, when you look back in Twentieth-Century painting, the realists all tend to be realists in their own way. And of course a lot of these representational painters really can't be called realists. But I did try and write about as many of them as I could.

You mentioned earlier spending a lot of time with Ulla and Lee Bell. Was that how you became aware of the figurative painters?

No, I don't think so. I think I came to an understanding abstract painting from my experience of representational painting. Because just as abstract painting comes out of representational painting... I got interested in painting as a kid, because I grew up in Gloucester, on Cape Ann, Massachusetts, which had, for a long time, been a summer art colony - going back to the Nineteenth-Century - Fitz Hugh Lane and so on. Hans Hofmann actually had his first school on Cape Ann before he went to Provincetown. So, beginning in the spring and all the way through the fall, we were just surrounded by artists.

People out on the streets, and at the seashore, painting and so on. And that's how I got interested in painting. Actually, the first modern painting (because most of the painters who came to Gloucester when I was growing up - they were all doing sort of imitation Winslow Homer paintings) — but the first modern painting I ever saw was a Marsden Hartley painting of Dogtown, Cape Ann. I was in high school. It was through another high school friend, James Mellow, who became an important writer. We were great friends from high school days on. He had met a painter named Helen Stein. She wasn't related to any of the other Steins. Helen Stein had been a friend of Hartley's when he painted in Gloucester in the 1930's. So she had one of these paintings, and she invited Jim Mellow and me to come over and see it one day. I just thought it was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen in my life. I still think so, but then I hardly knew what to make of it, but I thought it was terrific. There was never a time from then on when I wasn't interested in painting. I started going to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Which in those days - it was during the 1940's when the war was going on - in those days you could spend an entire afternoon at the MFA in Boston and never see another person, it was so empty. But they never showed anything contemporary. It wasn't until years later that Boston sort of caught up with modern art. Boston was very conservative in the old days. I think, probably, one of things that motivated me to pay more attention to the representational painters than the other critics were doing at the time, was that I sort of shied away from the idea that Abstract Expressionism was the only game in town. One, I knew it wasn't true,

and two, it seemed to me that it was a kind of, somebody was trying to dictate a group mentality about the whole thing. I was on very friendly terms with Clement Greenberg on those days. In the 1950's he was one of the editors for *Commentary Magazine*, and he invited me to write some things for *Commentary*. Both on art, and on other things. And we'd often go to see exhibitions together. It used to - well, it first puzzled me, and then sort of infuriated me - but I remember we once went to an absolutely marvelous show of Edwin Dickinson's small little oil paintings of beach scenes in Cape Cod, and Clem loved them. So I said, "Why don't you write about them?" And he said, "Oh, no. It's not important." And he was clearly very responsive to them. But he clearly had this historical scenario in his mind, and Dickinson didn't fit into that scenario. So there was no question for him; it wasn't something he was going to write about. And I just knew, that was not the way I was going to conduct my own career as a critic. So I think that was probably one of the reasons I began to pay more attention to people like Ulla and [William] Bailey, and Philip [Pearlstein], and Alex [Katz]. Writing about representational art wasn't a program that I set out for myself. I just believed in a more inclusive coverage of the contemporary scene, and particularly when I went to work for the *New York Times*. I went to the *Times* in October 1975, and I felt a big sense of responsibility in terms of how the contemporary scene would be covered in the paper. Because the *Times* had a lot of authority for people. I was in charge of not only what I was to write about, but I was also the art news editor. So I was responsible for what other writers on my staff would be reviewing. So we really tried to

give as broad a coverage as we could. When I first when to work there, John Canaday was still the chief art critic and I was the art editor. There was some strain at times, because John was adamantly opposed to everything connected with the Abstract Expressionist movement. He seemed to have a particular horror of Helen Frankenthaler's work, and he often referred to her in print in the Times as "Grandma Frankenthaler," which no editor would permit today. So I once went out of my way, because I've always been quite keen about Helen's paintings, to write a very favorable notice of it and that drove him absolutely crazy. So we didn't have an entirely amicable relationship. Then, when he finally retired, and I took over as the chief art critic, and remained the art editor, I brought John Russell over from London to work as my deputy. Mainly, for one thing, because John was and is a terrific writer, but also he had more sympathy for a lot of things that I frankly did not like. I mean, the whole neo-Dada thing, [Robert] Rauschenberg and [Jasper] Johns and all Pop Art - none of that ever interested me at all. I first met Bob Rauschenberg in 1953, and I always thought that he was a total phony. And when Johns came along with those Numbers, and Targets and Maps, it seemed like a regression back to childhood. And I think that was frankly part of its appeal. It was something that everybody could instantly understand - flags, the American Flag, I mean, I always disliked all that stuff. But John wrote about it in a very serious way, and I thought well, that's the kind of coverage people like the *Times* should have. There shouldn't be a party line, in other words. And I think we succeeded pretty well in that way. But certainly the representational painters were given

a very fair shake in the *Times* when I was there.

Well, obviously you have written about them, but why do think that it hasn't attracted the same critical attention from other sources, as compared to other movements of its time?

Well, I think that one reason is that I don't think it's perceived to be a movement. And, as I've already said, I never looked upon it as a movement. To me, to paint from observed subjects just seemed to me the base line of where painting begins, and then other things develop out of that, including abstract painting. So that seemed to me the normal course of things; it wasn't as if one morning these painters decided to initiate some kind of a counter-movement or something. They were basically in line with the inherited traditions of painting. And I think that's maybe one reason why a lot of other critics just take their work for granted, and don't feel it needs any special attention. I mean, I'm just guessing, but I think that's true. And more and more, I think, in recent years, many critics, I think, shy away from writing about representational painting unless it has some extra artistic subject matter interest - whether it's political, or whether it's about gender, or gay issues or race issues, or whatever. I remember when Julian Schnabel had a big show at Pace some years back and one of the younger critics - I can't remember who it was - wrote the catalogue text, and put out a list in that text, drew up a list of the subjects that painters should be dealing with at that moment - and it was sex, race, all political stuff. And I always thought that was

just totally ridiculous. We had already been through that in the 1930's with all of the Regionalist painting, and Social Realism. I think it had a very bad effect on American painting in the 1930's, and I wasn't all that keen to see it repeated. But journalism is very responsive to subject matter, because it gives the writer much more of a handle on what they can write about. And aesthetic issues are very difficult to write about. The language for dealing with aesthetic issues is very limited. Especially when you write for a big readership like the Times has, you're really required not to be obscure in what you are saying. And, as we know, some critics can be very obscure. I mean, half the time, I have no idea what Arthur Danto is actually saying when I try to read his things. It usually bears very little relation to what I'm looking at in the paintings he's writing about. But I think he's much more comfortable writing about things that aren't really paintings, like Andy Warhol. But I think the fact that realism or representation doesn't constitute a movement - I think that has been a problem, particularly for critics writing for a broad readership. It's somewhat different in the art journals, where there's a more specialized readership, and you don't have to dot all the i's and cross all the t's for the readers of *Art in America*, although sometimes I wish they did! But earlier on, when I was editing *Arts Magazine*, as, indeed, with the *New Criterion*, I always insisted that the first obligation had to be that everything had to be very readable. And I think we've succeeded in that.

You've mentioned some names already, but maybe you can tell me who you think some of

the strongest of the New York figurative painters are.

I think right now Jane Freilicher is one of the strongest painters around. I think Alex [Katz] is. And Jane Wilson. Freilicher and Wilson tend to be both landscape painters, though they both painted figures too. Earlier on, I haven't seen any of her more recent work in a while - Helen Miranda Wilson, I thought when she was doing those tight landscapes, I really thought those were marvelous paintings. Then she turned to do some more some more mystical, symbolic things, which I frankly don't understand, so I've never written about them. Lois Dodd, I think, is really at the top of her achievements now. The show she had in Maine, I guess it's about two years ago, called "Women Working." That was, because I live part of the time in Maine, I had occasion to see that show, I think altogether, five times. And it just got better and better. I was really crazy about it. And my wife who has a very good eye for painting, she just couldn't get enough of it either. It was kind of like going back and seeing a movie over and over again. And every time we went, you could see from the people in the gallery responding to the paintings, it was quite different than most shows with people standing around - they're sort of silent and solemn. But everybody had a smile, and people were really enjoying this show; it was tremendously captivating. And as painting, it was just fantastically inventive from picture to picture, and even from one area of the canvas to the other. There was just so much going on. Every time you went back, you'd see more and more. So I would put Lois right up there, at the

moment. There's a very interesting painter in Maine also named Elizabeth O'Haverty. I've seen two shows of hers. I saw the first one about two and a half years ago, and she does mostly interior scenes of figures, and it's a combination of painting and collage. There's a chair in a room; it might be cut out of a magazine. But it's part of the figure and particularly the light emanating from the lamp is painting. She's really an enchanting artist; I actually bought a painting out of her last show, about a year ago. I think it's called *Madame La Concierge*. It's a concierge seated and there's a lamp and then behind her is a pigeonhole for mail - it's the entrance to a hotel - the reception desk. It's just an enchanting painting. I don't know that she's ever shown in New York. The first show we saw, a couple years before that, the show had almost entirely sold out by the time we got to see it. And we had never heard of her; nobody's heard of her! I think if she were shown in New York, she would be quite successful. Who else? Well, I thought Paul Resika's recent show at Salander O'Reilly was quite terrific. And a big surprise to me, because I'd never seen Resika's figurative paintings before. The way he kind of adapted himself - taking things out of Matisse and giving them a wholly different format, and so on, I thought was really terrific.

How have your perspectives changed over the years about some of these painters, if they have?

Well, I'm not sure they have. I actually write less about new work than I used to. Because of all the years both at *Arts Magazine* and at the *Times*, I was obliged to write about everything as it came along. I still do some of that at the [*New York*] *Observer*, but I've kind of stepped back from doing a lot of that right now, because I think the public gets something from Mario Naves writing about those shows, because he's younger, and he's more in tune with some of this younger generation of painters. He's more in tune with their work than I am, frankly, and I think he writes about it better than I would. I tend more to write about museum shows now, and things in which I have a really serious interest from the past. I mean, there are exceptions. I've known Jane Freilicher's work for a long, long time, and I've always thought it's very good, and I just think she's developed an amazing authority. When I first saw her work, and I first saw Fairfield Porter's work, I thought she had been influenced by Porter. And then, Porter once explained to me that it was actually Jane Freilicher who had influenced him. And of course when I first wrote about Porter in the *Times*, it was just a few months after I had come to work for the *Times*. I came there in October 1965, and I think it was either January or February 1966. There was a big Porter show that I devoted a Sunday article to in the *New York Times*. One of my colleagues at the *Times* was one of the chief book critics, Elliott Freemont Smith, who was a very well-known figure at that time. He had been at the *Times* much longer than I was. That piece appeared on Sunday. Monday morning he came into my office and said I was making a terrible mistake. It was going to ruin my career if I went on writing about old fogies like

Fairfield Porter. He said, "You should be writing about Andy Warhol or Frank Stella."

That was the hot stuff. Well, I did write about them, but not in the way Elliott approved of.

It really took a while to understand that Fairfield Porter was a major artist. Even as much as I really admired and loved his work, and I actually once, when I really could not afford it, I actually bought a small still life of Porter's at Tibor de Nagy, which of course I still have and love. But it really was not until his big retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston a few years later and on that occasion, I actually said in the piece I wrote about it for the *New Criterion*, I came to see how a painter I had long admired and had praised in print, nonetheless, when I saw the Boston show, I realized I had underestimated how important his achievement was. I mean, when I saw that whole retrospective, I was really bowled over by it. And it had an amazing response in Boston. It opened to the public on a Sunday afternoon, when there was a big snowstorm in Boston. The Museum of Fine Arts staff, I think most of the curatorial staff, also thought that Fairfield Porter was old hat, and they weren't expecting any kind of a big response. They expected so little, that when the show opened, and crowds of people turned out, they didn't even have enough staff in the cloakroom to collect all the coats. It turned out to bring out one of the highest attendance levels the museum had ever had for a show. So, there were a lot of lessons out of that Porter retrospective. Of course, the scandal was that we could never get any of the New York museums - I mean, under pressure, the Whitney, when Tom Armstrong was director, did an abridged version of the show that had been in Boston. But it had sort of

been forced upon them by one of their trustees who collected Porter's work. Because they had so little faith in the importance of the work, they painted the walls all these bright pictures to hang the pictures on - yellow and pink and so on. Which was just awful. It was just terrible. I can't remember the name - there was a curator at the Whitney at that time... Well, there was a collector who lived on Fifth Avenue maybe two blocks from the Whitney Museum. He kept badgering Tom Armstrong to either come to see his collection of Porter's or to send someone from his staff. So Armstrong sent this young curator, whose name I can't remember, blessedly. It was the collector who told me this story: after the curator had looked at any of these Porter paintings, any of which you would die for, he said to the collector, "I'm afraid it's all too tame for us."! So when they did finally do an abridged version of the Boston show, they really made sure it wasn't going to excite anybody. Which I really thought was a scandal. But Porter's reputation certainly survived it. And I think he has finally been seen to be a major artist, also a terrific critic, into the bargain.

Who do you think some of the other important critical voices on New York representational painting have been?

Well, I think earlier on, both Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, when they were writing, they had very close friendships with a lot of those painters. That has its downside as well

as its upside. Peter Schjeldahl is kind of a mixed blessing as I see it. When a critic writes as stupidly about Bonnard as he has, it's hard for me to recover any respect for him. But he has written some reasonable things, otherwise. I don't think there's a lot of good criticism now about anything. The *Times* is just almost a dead letter office these days. I mean, Michael Kimmelman is a disaster. Grace Glueck is the only one writing for the *Times* who really seems to look closely at anything. Everything else in the paper is just treated as a trend or a novelty. You never see any *Times* editors at a museum opening or a gallery opening. It's just totally remote from them. It's really left to the writers to set their own policy. For me, it was a terrific advantage, because I was basically able to do what I wanted to do. But with other people, I think it's just proved to be something of a disaster. I mean everybody in the gallery world tells me how disappointed they are. The Sunday art page used to be the most widely read thing in the entire art world of New York. Now, people almost don't bother, because they've never heard of the writers, they've never heard of the so-called artists, it's just all novelty stuff. It's created a huge void, I think, in serious writing about art. I think probably the most important critic writing about figurative painting at the moment is Jed Perl. But his articles in the *New Republic* are spread out - they're like every two months or something like that. He doesn't write every week. Which I thought he was going to, because he had been writing for the *New Criterion*, and he was certainly, for a while, in every issue. He wrote very well, I think. But he seems to write less and less. I haven't actually seen Jed in a long time, so I don't know what he's up to

now.

Do you think there have been various moments at which some of these painters we are discussing have received a critical or public imprimatur?

I would say certainly that's true of Porter. And I think with Jane Freilicher - these recent shows at the National Academy, that really gave her, in the eyes of the public, a tremendous boost. Both selecting that work from the National Academy's own collection, and her own work. Both those shows were so terrific. Of course I think more and more institutions should have artists selecting exhibitions. The Museum of Modern Art did that a few times years back. I remember Ellsworth Kelly did a show, and I think Chuck Close did a show. And just give them the run of the museum's entire collection to put it together. That's what Jane did at the National Academy. And every one of those shows that I've seen that are curated by artists always have an extra aesthetic edge to them. But of course there's a reason why museums don't like to do that. But I can't say that just at the moment among living artists, I don't think you could pinpoint sort of two or three leading figures. If there are, I'm not sure who they are. One of the problems right now is that painting itself seems to be becoming more and more marginalized on the contemporary art scene. There's so much video, and so much installation art, and so much other stuff. More and more photography. And I think that's a part of the problem too. And that's a problem for

abstract painters as well as for figurative painters. The art institutions, the museums, the universities, and the interests of the media all converging in a direction that has the effect of marginalizing painting itself. Of course, I think that has the makings of a disaster. I don't think it's a disaster yet, but if that momentum continues in that direction, I think it's going to have a very deleterious effect on painting.

Tell me more about that: what kind of relevance do you think representational painting has today?

I think it has the same relevance to people that are open to it, that it's always had. It gives you a very important alternative way of understanding the world you are living in. And a way of appreciating the world you're living in. And I think that that's something painting has always done, from the beginning of time. It's no different now than it was with the cave painters. I think of painting as a kind of mode of thought - that it actually is a way of making a judgement about your experience of the world. And to me it's just as important as poetry or any of the other arts. The whole media mentality has a lot to do with what's happening now. Because television and photography is easier to understand, you don't have to give it the kind of sustained attention that painting requires. I think that's why it appeals to a media mentality. I've never chalked up any statistics on it, but I say that for the last ten years, there's been far more writing about photography in the *New York Times* art

columns than there has been about painting. I have very mixed feelings about that, because I really introduced photography to the Sunday art page, because it was never written about on the Sunday art page before. In fact, they didn't even have anybody who wrote about photography. There was always a man named Jake Deschen who wrote a column called "Camera Notes." It was basically information about cameras, but then he would put in a few lines about an exhibition. But early on in my career at the *Times*, there was a big [Henri] Cartier-Bresson retrospective at the MOMA, and I wrote about it, because I do think he is a great figure. It was one of the few times when one of my editors - in this case it was the Sunday editor - called me in and said "Why are you writing about photography?" He said, "You know, we have a whole staff of guys that do that." But he didn't stop me, he said, Well, if you're the art editor. But he thought it was just a waste of time. Well now I think it's a waste of time too! - but they're not writing about Cartier-Bresson; they're writing about other stuff.

Some people might say that making representational painting is "conservative." What do you think about that, and why do you think it's been seen that way?

I don't think of painting in those terms. Some representational painting you could say is more traditional in its aesthetic loyalties to something out of the past than other painters. But I think one of the reasons people sometimes think of painting as being conservative is that political conservatives have generally a total misunderstanding of modernist art. They think it threatens their values or something, and I think it's because they don't understand it. I've actually just been asked to write something about that whole question for the *Wall Street Journal*, which I'll probably do in the next few weeks. But that has to do with a misunderstanding of modernism, because for a lot of political conservatives, when you talk

about modernist art, what they're thinking of is really Dada - which of course, is very anti-bourgeois and very anti-social and so on. Or some of the more bizarre writers of Surrealism. But Matisse is one of the most bourgeois artists in the history of the world. Picasso was sort of the archetype of the bohemian artists, and Matisse was almost the archetype of the bourgeois artists. And Picasso made a lot of rude jokes about Matisse for that reason. He always referred to him as either "Dr. Matisse," or "Professor Matisse," because he wore glasses and so on. But I don't think there is any reason to... I mean, if Matisse is bourgeois, than we have a lot to be thankful for!

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